

Books and Those Who Read Them Are the Real Endangered Species

In the February 2021 issue of *Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture*, Professor Mark Brennan declares, “My students look at me in amazement when I tell them I read 8 to 10 hours per day. I look at them in amazement when they tell me they play video games 16 hours straight.” Brennan then went on to wonder if his book reading habits qualify him for “endangered species” status.

Two weeks after I read these words, my sister, her husband, and my friend John came to celebrate my birthday with me. All of us are over 60 years old.

During the several days that they were here, I offered them a DVD player and some movies I own for their amusement, but they rebuffed me each time, saying they preferred to read the books they’d brought with them or something from my personal library. For three to five hours every day of their visit, they sat with a book in hand, absorbed and whisked away by the story. When I passed through the room while they were reading, I realized once again that few sights move me more deeply than a human being engrossed in a book.

But are readers like these becoming “an endangered species?”

Maybe not endangered, but the American Academy of Arts and Sciences has [reported](#) our reading habits are waning.

As of 2017, Americans spent an average of almost 17 minutes per day [reading for personal interest](#) (as compared to almost three hours watching television and 28 minutes playing games and using computers for leisure). The average is down about five minutes since 2003.

Younger Americans (ages 15 to 44) spent, on average, less than

10 minutes per day reading for personal interest.

The article points out that college graduates read more than those with a high school diploma, but even then, only 55 percent of those with advanced degrees had read a novel or a short story in the past year, while about half had read some historical work.

Meanwhile, a majority of American students in the fourth and eighth grades failed to demonstrate reading proficiency at their grade level. In studying tests conducted between 2017 and 2019, the National Endowment for the Arts [found](#) that reading scores had once again fallen. With so many of our schools shut down by the pandemic in the last year, we can expect those scores to dip even further.

The Academy report also points out that this decline in books and reading, along with competition from online outfits like Amazon and from electronic books, has brought about a closure of brick-and-mortar bookstores. Between 1992 and 2016, the number of these stores had fallen by about half. With the pandemic having shuttered small businesses across the nation for so long, we can speculate that even fewer bookstores exist today.

Despite these grim findings, many Americans remain readers. Most of my relatives usually have a book going, and visiting sites like goodreads.com shows that millions of people are still interested in books, some of whom track their reading and finish dozens of books every year. In my local library I see lots of children, many of them homeschoolers, leave the building with bags and backpacks stuffed with novels, histories, and biographies.

Whether we read e-books or prefer hard copies, tackling a novel, biography, or other books bestows enormous benefits in our age of jittery distraction. Reading certain books forces us to concentrate for longer periods of time than we do while sprinting from site to site online. Books like

Dostoevsky's [Devils](#) or Lance Morrow's [God and Mammon](#), both of which I'm in the midst of reading currently, demand the employment of certain analytical skills and close reading that I don't practice when skimming through online articles.

In the article mentioned at the beginning of this piece, Professor Brennan mentions his frequent visits to the university library, where the students poke at their electronic devices and ignore the books around them.

Our library serves as a giant study hall, with stacks of musty books squeezing out valuable study space. I joke with my students in class, 'I could remove all the books from the shelves and burn them on the library steps. No one would notice. Then we could replace the stacks with more study spaces!' They laugh. Then they ask me why the school doesn't do that. I cry.

Ray Bradbury, author of *Fahrenheit 451*, once wrote, "You don't have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them."

When we make readers of our children, when we ourselves read books, we help keep our culture and our civilization alive.

And here's more good news: We might even have some fun along the way.

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Dear Readers,

Big Tech is suppressing our reach, refusing to let us advertise and squelching our ability to serve up a steady diet of truth and ideas. Help us fight back by [becoming a member](#) for just \$5 a month and then join the discussion on Parler [@CharlemagneInstitute](#) and Gab [@CharlemagneInstitute](#)!

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