

YOUTH, BOOKS, AND GUIDANCE

By MARGARET A. EDWARDS



The older I get, the more I marvel at the readiness of the human mind to believe what is obviously false. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, we believe that if we can just find it there is a short cut, a simple solution to most complex questions.

"Never fear, 100's here" says the woman in the TV commercial and we see the girl with bad breath, after obtaining a bottle of 100 has not only won back the man who had dropped her but is leading him smiling to the altar. And we believe. The unlucky little wife who served her husband's boss pie with a tough crust found out about Crisco, asked the boss back to dinner, served him pie with a flaky Crisco crust and her husband got a promotion. And we believe. I see on TV that if I wash dishes with Ivory Snow people who look at my hands will think I am a teenager. And though these commercials cost, on an average, \$22,500 a minute enough women believe to make them pay off. And though none of these women, as a result of their purchases gets back a lost man or wins a promotion for a husband or fools anyone about her age, they still believe. They never lose faith in the short cut the simple solution.

The public and school library have the same faith in a short cut. We have in our keeping the accumulated knowledge, wisdom, experience, culture recorded by the human race since Gutenberg. This is a sacred trust to which we can be faithful only if we pass it on to each succeeding generation. But passing it on is very difficult involving as it does a knowledge and love of all kinds of people, the art of salesmanship, wide and constant reading and dedication. So we take the short cut of making books available of putting them on shelves and leaving it up to the masses of people to borrow them if the notion strikes them though we know most of them have no conception of the joy of reading nor of the wonderful books we have and that they will live and die unaware of the happiness and fulfillment books might have given them.

Because the promotion of reading is such a highly professional, difficult activity we work ever more diligently to convince ourselves and the public that we are top notch librarians because we are expert technicians. We answer enquiries for information we classify, catalog and shelve books, we facilitate storage problems with microfilm, we make it possible for patrons to xerox material. We have instant regional reference service and we are going into computers. All this is good and performs the very useful and necessary service the public wants and should have. Yet most of it can be done by college graduates without library school degrees, as it requires technical rather than professional training. The promotion of reading which is every bit as important as the retrieval of information is still in the horse and buggy stage of progress. We operate very much as we did in the days of Melvil Dewey. Beyond handing out a few booklists and setting up displays, we do very little to sell the idea of reading. Even the American Library Association makes no attempt to get a highly professional program on TV to inspire people and send them to libraries all over the nation to borrow books they have seen dramatized.

No one believes more implicitly in the short cut to librarianship than the high school and public librarians who serve teenagers. We want our young people to inform and enrich themselves in our libraries. So we set the stage with colorful furniture, pretty draperies and pots of flowers. We give them booklists and show them films and play records but we seldom walk up to individuals to suggest a book we have recently read which they might thoroughly enjoy. Just as Crisco, 100 and Ivory Snow will not solve my personal problems, so color, easy chairs and audio visual materials will not do for young people what reading will. There is no short cut to the promotion of reading. The truth of the matter is that if we want young people to read books, we will have to read them ourselves and master the art of influencing them to read. We librarians need to look our problems squarely in the face and attack them with energy and dedication.

What are our problems? One big one, for which we are not basically responsible is that, according to a government report, one fourth of the nation's students have significant reading deficiencies. This may be remedied, for the Commissioner of Education has set the goal of assuring that by the end of the 1970's "no one shall be leaving the schools without the skill and desire necessary to read to the full limits of his capability." If he should be able to accomplish this, even in part, librarians will probably be more responsible than anyone else for seeing that, after students acquire the skill to read, they then have "the desire necessary to read to the full limits of their capability." Teachers will also be responsible, but the desire to read is often easier to stimulate in an informal atmosphere free of assignments where a friendly, well read librarian can share the pleasure of reading with an individual.

Our greatest challenge is that, for the salvation of this nation, young people with their awakened social consciousness balance their desire for change with understanding. Too many of them are activists without a cause. They know that democracy has lamentable failings but they do not know of its strength and its basic concern for the individual and his rights. They know our generation has a thousand sins but they do not know anything else about us. They plan to tear this world down but have no workable plan for building a better world on the ruins. Hopefully, some of them read and many of them have the capacity to absorb ideas in books. Books with something to say are IN with many of them, but librarians in general are OUT. As a profession, we do not turn young people on.

The WILSON LIBRARY BULLETIN for September 1969 explored the relation of the public library and reading to today's youth in a series of articles. One writer said, "Student attitude, concerns, and priorities have flexed much further in a positive social direction than have the operating values and procedures of the institutions in which they have been housed." But a young activist, a campus organizer, puts his finger on what is surely our greatest failing. He writes, "When I think of libraries, I think of social theater. I think not so much of the massive problems of acquisition, categorization, storage and retrieval, which must be very much at the heart of your professional concerns, but rather of the formats of learning that libraries present, the potentials for interaction they allow The problem with libraries as I see them is that they allow only two categories of behavior. If you know what you want, you go in and get some help. If you don't know what you want, but just about anything will do, you go in and quietly browse. If you find yourself somewhere in the middle in that noisy, confused, irascible, fitty and starty stage where you think you've got an idea but you're not quite sure you

can explain it and that's not it but maybe this sounds right—I'm not sure though and WOW—then to go to the librarian for help is often to feel you've committed an anti-social act. That's the one that puts me—and I think my generation—in a bind." This boy is saying what I have been saying—that far too many librarians feel their service to youth is done when the books have been put on the shelves. The young person may ask a question if he must but he is supposed to help himself with reading unrelated to assignments. Certainly the librarian is not seeking out confused and bewildered young people and taking the initiative of offering help.

Why does the librarian such as the young activist encountered make the uncertain seeker for the right book feel he has committed an antisocial act? Because the librarian cannot communicate with youth. He is out of sympathy, out of touch, offended by the appearance of the young person who does not look like a "gentleman." The librarian is for the establishment and afraid. Yet despite all the rebellion, the raucous music, the sexy dancing, the tragic use of drugs, this is the best generation we have ever produced. They are responsible more than any other group for turning the nation against war. They have made a shambles of the hard materialistic philosophy of the past generation; they have actively promoted tolerance and the brotherhood of all men. They have taken an active role in politics and demanded social reform. They have pressured people in authority and power to rethink their philosophy and justify their decisions and actions. The librarian who scorns them probably wore a long skirt over a long corset, was a little lady who respected adults and minded the rules but all the same qualified herself for the list of those who never would be missed.

A second reason for the librarian's response to the confused seeker for the right book is that he really cannot help the young adult and his only defense is to brow-beat him. As long as we put all our energies into the retrieval of information and do not read enough books, as long as reference work and supplying materials for assignments occupies all our time, as long as the readers' advisory service is not fully as important as the informational services; we will be unable to serve youth or old age or anyone else as they should be served.

Not long ago scientists operated in their field without any feeling of social responsibility. They made scientific discoveries and gave them to the public who took them for whatever uses they saw fit. Today, scientists worry over their social responsibility. Should the formula for biological warfare be released? Were they right to give man the atom bomb and its ever more powerful successors? If human beings can be created in a test tube, is it well for man to know how?

Librarians in the past have also operated as collectors and dispensers of information without feeling any special obligation to the public beyond answering the questions of those who came to the library to ask. But lately, we too are beginning to realize we have a responsibility for the intellectual and ethical concerns of man. Can we sit behind our desks and not care that technology and technicians may take over our society? Should we be deeply concerned with the persisting and baffling questions of man's existence and his relations to his fellows? Can we afford to be ignorant of what the best minds have thought and written about these questions? And do we have any obligation to interest the public, particularly the young, in reading of these matters? Again, I say the biggest problem youth faces today is the need to decide what should take the place of

the things they would destroy. Young people need ideas. The book may not be the whole answer to their problem but it is the best source of ideas so far invented, and it is our contribution.

Gandhi left youth a profound and original suggestion for abolishing war. Nehru, his disciple, in *TOWARD FREEDOM*, tells how he endured nine years of imprisonment for going against the establishment and what it meant to dedicate himself to his people. Camus' belief in mankind, Claude Brown's interpretation of the ghetto with its crime and poverty, James Joyce's revealing account of the need for self realization in *PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN*—all these and hundreds of other books have something to say to youth about the matters that concern them. Yet all this relevant philosophy, understanding, wisdom may remain imprisoned in books on shelves unless the librarians who have read them take them down off the shelves and put them in the hands of young people. They say that when a tree falls in the forest there is no sound unless there is an ear to hear. So, when an idea is put into print it is nothing but print until it penetrates a mind. The wisdom of the ages stored in books is not wisdom unless the books are read.

I read the other day that McLuhan is reconsidering his earlier obituary for the printed word and that he has said, "The book is a very special form of communication. It is unique and it will persist." What a relief! It worried me when he posed in front of a wild psychedelic background on a TV special and explained that in this new day, science and technology will give us our ideas on films which will often be viewed by the population en masse and that the outmoded custom of holding a book in one's hand and moving one's eyes over a line of print, bringing them back and repeating the process is for the birds and will become obsolete. I wondered how I would plan to spend the evenings after working on the farm all day. In preparation for the day when science and technology will take over, I look at the TV program for tonight. The main attractions are: *THE VIRGINIAN*; *THE COURTSHIP OF EDDIE'S FATHER* (The fine print says Eddie is teased by his classmates because his father is dating the teacher); *THE BEVERLY HILLBILLIES*; The Wednesday Night Movie, *A GUIDE FOR THE MARRIED MAN* (comedy about a philanderer who tries to teach the art of infidelity to one of his friends); etc. With this plethora of riches, I can only hope science and technology will leave the Off switch on my TV set. They say that when TV replaces the book the offerings will be better. But all the surveys prove that people want exactly what TV now offers and they do not want programs with intellectual or cultural appeal. But suppose this problem is solved and instead of the menu listed above, tonight we explore the ocean floor. This is going to be fine with all kinds of fish, a study of the mineral resources under the ocean and a tour of a sunken gallion. I do not mean to be difficult but tonight I am not in the mood for exploring the ocean depths. I want to be moved and inspired, as I once was when I read a book called *THE FIXER*. I am not interested in having my evenings' entertainment planned for me nor in looking at a film, with all the rest of America, at a time set by the powers that be.

Marshall McLuhan's short cut to the cultivation of the mind is not going to work. Television cannot do the job and it would be impractical to borrow films for individual use. They are too expensive and could never cover the range and variety of subjects and ideas to be found in books.

The greatest good of reading is not so much knowledge as wisdom. Wisdom is the result of experience and of thinking on it. Here in the book is the accumulated experience

of people from Homer to Eldridge Cleaver. Unlike the film, the printed records people have left, the things they have said, can be absorbed and pondered on and questioned. One can stop and turn back to read certain passages over again until the mind accepts or rejects them. Something beautiful or moving can be returned to and even memorized. Books can open up for the reader his inner distance and teach him to understand the human heart or, as Kenneth Rexroth said of Don Quixote, the reader "discovers what he is really like by discovering that other people are like himself and that he is like them." Someone has said, "The ideas of others can be absorbed without reading but at a rate so much slower. People have crossed this continent by mule back but a plane gets there faster."

I do not mean to attack the librarian's use of films. Today, many of them are highly artistic and have something to say to all of us, but particularly to the non-reader. They are excellent teaching devices and there is no reason why an idea is better in print than on film. But we must remember that when a teenager leaves school, he will have little opportunity to view films and he will have to be where there is a group if he does see one. By using films as a short cut to enrichment and neglecting to promote reading we are shortchanging the youngsters. We are inclined to give up too easily. We must not despair of getting books into the hands of more and more youngsters and sharing with them the pleasure of reading. Like Avis, we should try harder instead of going overboard on AV which is an adjunct to, not a substitute for reading. It seems to me school librarians have jumped overboard when they call their libraries media centers. One of them explained in a state library bulletin that this would change the image of the library. When we librarians wish the faculty and students of our schools to think of us primarily as efficient operators of media centers instead of dynamic ambassadors of books and reading, do we not, by implication, cheapen our image?

As for the public library, if we wish to do more for youth than put books on shelves and answer questions when asked, it is essential that one person on every staff who likes teenagers and is not afraid of them be the liaison between them and the books. This person is technically known as a young adult librarian.

Where there is no such person, I find in practically all the libraries I go into over the country that the librarian is seated peering into a file of cards on his desk or reading unless he has to get out of his chair to answer a reference question. If a young person in need of help with an assignment waits a little while in front of the librarian's desk, the librarian looks up, fixes the teenager with a steady stare and asks, "Yes?" The nervous teenager presents his problem as best he can and the librarian with his thumb still marking his place in the card tray asks, "Have you looked in the catalog?" in a tone of voice that implies the youngster is pretty dumb, not to say inconsiderate, not to have searched the catalog more diligently before disturbing our librarian. There is no interest in the teenager's problem nor in him as a person and because of this, there is no possibility of the librarian turning this teenager into a reader. It would never occur to the teenager to ask the librarian for a good book to read any more than it would occur to the librarian to suggest one. Under this system, we are lucky that only a fourth of the teenagers complained when the University of Maryland Library School surveyed the Baltimore-Washington Metropolitan District. They come into our libraries not knowing one author from another, unaware of the books that would change their lives and furnish them with the inspiration and mental awakening they so need. They are not even aware of their latent interests. If they happen to come to the library at all, they

go down shelf after shelf becoming more and more confused until they select a book by its title, which is quite likely not to be what they really wanted and certainly not as satisfying or as meaningful as a title the young adult librarian might have suggested. I have said before that we run our libraries like Helpy-Selfy supermarkets. You put it in the basket and we check it out.

A well trained young adult librarian knows the art of salesmanship. He never pushes too hard but sets young people at ease so that they seek him out for his friendliness, his wide knowledge of books, his uncanny ability to find the right book for the right person, and his obvious pleasure in talking about the books one has read. The teenager who has just read "a big one" needs to talk about it with someone who has read it so he can clarify his ideas and shares his enthusiasm.

Just any staff member cannot work successfully with teenagers. In the first place, adult or general assistants cannot spend the necessary time reading in this field and still be prepared to serve other patrons. Some staff members do not really like teenagers; a few are openly hostile and others do not have the special type of personality that enables them to establish the rapport with adolescents that will set them reading. The young adult librarian should make school visits and give book talks that would start the kids walking to the library for the titles talked about. He should set up displays in tune with the interests of young people. He should make book lists and think constantly of ways to advertise books and reading. He should win the confidence of parents and teachers and stand in the community as an authority in his field and a friend of youth.

The public library has slept longer than Rip Van Winkle. In the midst of today's social crisis, our readers' advisory service operates very much as it did in the '80's and '90's. With the exception of the juvenile department, our book stock, our staffs and our services are directed to middle aged, middle class people — when they are no longer in the majority. Macy's department store which once followed the same procedure now directs its advertising to the 25-year-olds. Merchants, political candidates, even the police are paying more attention to youth. The movie industry is well aware that over half their patrons are under thirty. This and the response of young people to THE GRADUATE have had an impact on movie making. The churches realize they may die if they do not attract youth. But the public library is still oriented to the middle class, middle aged adult, making little or no special provision for teenagers and not particularly concerned that there is a strong body of support for the idea that all the reading needs of high school students be supplied by school libraries. Though this would deprive young people of access to the public library's vast treasures, it would leave the staffs free to serve quieter, more conservative, older people. If the public library allows this to happen, I hope I am alive to organize my fellow golden agers to come daily to the library and stand by your desks, now that you have more time to listen, and tell you how bad our arthritis is getting, show you pictures of the grandchildren and tell you over again how we just can't seem to remember a thing any more.

Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that with the pressing needs of big cities, some city councils are wondering if libraries are essential. This question might not arise if we were working effectively with the Commissioner of Education to see that teenagers have the desire necessary to read to the full limits of their capacity; if we were really mastering the art of introducing reading to the deprived and disadvantaged:

if we were out on the streets winning friends and influencing people to read. If we do not win the affection and respect of today's youth who are deeply concerned for social problems; if we do not convince them that we too are concerned and have a contribution to make, they may grow up unconvinced that our present type of activity is worth supporting when people are hungry and ill housed. The library must serve youth better. We must reassess our priorities in the light of this day in time and have the vision to plan for tomorrow. It can be done. St. Exupery said, "A rock pile ceases to be a rock pile the moment a man of vision contemplates it bearing within himself the image of a cathedral."

(EDITOR'S NOTE) Margaret A. Edwards' new book, *THE FAIR GARDEN AND THE SWARM OF BEASTS! THE LIBRARY AND THE YOUNG ADULT*, recently published by Hawthorn Books, 70 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York, 10011, \$4.95, is available at a 20% discount to librarians who wish to order it.

REPORT FROM PRESIDENT (Cont'd.)

arrangements and exhibits committees headed by Mary Frances Crymes and Arial Stephens. This was the second convention for which they did such yeoman service.

All committees during the past biennium have worked very hard and several will soon have tangible results to place in your hands. The Education for Librarianship Committee, headed by Dr. Gene Lanier, has prepared the fourth edition of *Library Education in North Carolina*. The Constitution and Codes Committee, Stella Townsend, Chairman, has the newly revised constitution ready. The North Carolina Library Association Organization Committee, headed by Marjorie Hood, will soon complete the revision of the Association's handbook, now that the constitution has been revised. Jeannette Trotter, Chairman of the special North Carolina Books Committee, wrote Mrs. Council that the members had prepared a list of publishers who regularly issue North Carolina materials. This list will be published in *North Carolina Libraries*.

The newly appointed committees, which will be listed in the next issue of this journal, will be facing a challenge to continue and extend the work of their predecessors.

Miss Mildred Mullis, Chairman of the Scholarship Committee, will continue to receive applications for both the North Carolina Library Association and the Ruzicka scholarships until May 1, 1970. If you know of anyone who would be a likely candidate, please suggest that he get in touch with Mildred. Her address is Post Office Box 548, Morganton, North Carolina 28655.

These next two years should be busy and productive ones for our association and for the library profession. We invite you to participate actively in all of our plans.

Sincerely,

EUNICE QUERY

President

N.C.L.A., 1969-1971