



The Needs of Readers

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IN 1344 Richard de Bury wrote in *Philobiblon*, "Whoever therefore claims to be zealous of truth, of happiness, of wisdom or knowledge, aye even of the faith, must needs become a lover of books."¹ About six hundred years later the editor of this issue of *Library Trends* in considering the needs of readers wrote: "Reading satisfies certain basic human needs—how to do particular things, and certain urges—to laugh, to be excited, and to be reverent."² Can we then accept the recent recommendations of the Public Library Inquiry that the more frivolous requirements of readers be left to commercial libraries and that service to the less educated portion of the population be passed over in order to concentrate on the educational demands for which funds are not now sufficient to supply completely? What is the responsibility of a library to the scientist or statesman who may want to read an amusing novel or a detective story?

Mortimer Adler, who in his intelligence and enthusiasms may be looked upon as a modern reincarnation of the Bishop of Durham, analyzes in a lecture called "The Parts of Life" man's five daily requirements:

1. His physical needs to be supplied by food, sleep, and bodily health.
2. His livelihood expressed by the work which earns him his living.
3. Play which brings necessary relaxation from work.
4. Leisure to exercise his mind by contact with other minds and their expressions through the ages.
5. Lastly, his need to reach out to God—which is probably what de Bury had in mind when he wrote "aye even of the faith."

All of these daily needs can be satisfied if one is a lover of books. Physical health and work certainly profit from knowledge and zeal for the truth. Happiness results from play and from leisure fed on the

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The Needs of Readers

humanities. Faith gets help from all the other four—truth, happiness, wisdom, and knowledge.

It was certainly in the expectation of helping the entire citizenry in all their daily needs that the public library was founded in the United States. In July 1852 four men who had been appointed by the mayor of Boston to study a suggestion that tax money be appropriated for public library service presented a report which J. H. Spera,³ Dean of the School of Library Science of Western Reserve University, calls "the first real credo of the public library . . . [which] still stands as the best single statement of the relation of the library to the social order." According to the report, the people who would profit most from a public library are the members of the arts and professions—architects, engravers, musicians, engineers, and followers of any branch of science or literature. These readers could then be supplied with information needed in their work which they could ill afford to buy for themselves. Consequently, reference collections which would be continually at hand for consultation should be the first concern of the library. But, at the urgent instigation of Professor George Ticknor of Harvard University, the revolutionary idea of duplicating popular books for circulation was included as a secondary responsibility. Accordingly, "the pleasant literature of the day" (meaning chiefly entertaining fiction) was to be made freely and readily available to Bostonians "when fresh and new, the only time when it is greatly wanted."

About one hundred years after the adoption of Ticknor's innovation, the same needs of readers were identified in reverse order at the fifty-fifth annual meeting of the California Library Association by Walter Yust,⁴ editor of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*: ". . . people must read . . . for emotional release and for information. . . . You can't make reasonable judgments unless you have the privilege of knowing something about the things you're judging."

Between these two pronouncements a long shelf of volumes about the needs of readers has been published, and the subject has been discussed from one aspect or another at every annual meeting of the American Library Association. In these discussions librarians have been almost as eloquent on what should be withheld as on what should be provided; for, like many missionaries, the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century library trustees and administrators were strict disciplinarians. Yet Richard de Bury⁵ had warned against this attitude: "For man is naturally fond of two things, namely, freedom from control and some pleasure in his activity; for which reason no one without

reason submits himself to the control of others, or willingly engages in any tedious task."

Most of the students who have tried to determine the needs of readers within a library agree with *Philobiblon* that liberty and enjoyment are paramount. These in turn are dependent on a congenial atmosphere and on pleasing arrangements. What desk attendants must do to achieve this atmosphere is set forth in a pamphlet prepared by a staff committee of the Minneapolis Public Library called *Patrons Are People; How to be a Model Librarian*.⁶ This ubiquitous first desire of readers for harmonious setting has caused F. N. Jones⁷ of Ohio University to observe: "Anything large or small to make the inside of the library more eye-catching, more inviting, is worth doing."

The Graduate Library School of the University of Chicago has worked systematically to bring the methods of business and of science to bear on the readers' problems. Members of its faculty made surveys of the Cleveland and Chicago public libraries in 1939 and 1940. These recognize that a prerequisite for effective library service is a generous and well-organized collection selected by librarians who know books and the communities to be served. In his appraisal of the Cleveland Public Library Leon Carnovsky⁸ expressed the public's desire for modernization of the central building and for more branches to provide equal service in all parts of the city. Carnovsky assisted C. B. Joeckel,⁹ then Director of the Chicago school, in the survey of the Chicago Public Library. Cards were sent to a thousand borrowers in Chicago asking for comments about their library, but only seventy-three replied. The chief shortcomings noted by the respondents were the inadequate book stock and the inaccessibility of certain branches. Joeckel's first recommendation was the familiar one of the improvement of the climate required for good service. This was to be achieved through training the staff in courtesy and through the utilization of color, space, and light as is done in modern department stores. Book collections were to be improved through the maintenance of a large and accessible "Popular Library" in addition to four departments with reference and circulating materials in the social sciences, technology, fine arts, and adult education. Joeckel also advocated the introduction of a program of training to produce a readers' advisor for every branch, and, as had been recommended in Cleveland, the enlargement of the system of branches.

A study of readers' habits and interests was made in 1948 by Field and Peacock, Associates, as part of the survey of the Los Angeles Public Library¹⁰ conducted by Lowell Martin, Dean of the Graduate

The Needs of Readers

School of Library Service at Rutgers University, and by Carnovsky. The survey comprised 1,600 interviews of 63 questions, 1,000 of these being from a random sample of the city. These showed that less than half of the members of the adult population in a large city in southern California read a book or part of a book during the week preceding the interview. Only 31 per cent of those interviewed had been to the public library in the preceding year, and of these 76 per cent had obtained what they wanted in their last visit. Suggestions for improvement of the library's services included provision for parking, 14 per cent; greater quantity of nonfiction, 12 per cent; extension of hours of opening, 11 per cent (main library open daily except Sundays 10:00 A.M.-9:00 P.M.); additional staff, 4 per cent.

The most extensive and scholarly study of public library services made in the first half of the twentieth century is the Public Library Inquiry conducted by the Social Science Research Council and financed by the Carnegie Corporation. It comprises seven volumes published by the Columbia University Press and five mimeographed reports to the director of the Inquiry on finance, mass media, music, work measurements, and the users of public libraries as compared with the users of other sources of information. The last emphasizes who the readers are rather than what they want. The volume of the Inquiry most directly concerned with readers' needs is the *Library's Public* by Bernard Berelson,¹¹ who was Dean of the Graduate Library School of the University of Chicago when the book was published in 1949. Here Berelson utilizes the findings regarding who uses the public library, why, when, and how which had been obtained for the Inquiry by the Survey Research Center of the University of Michigan. The investigation showed that about one-fourth of the books read in the typical American community come from a public library, and that the majority of the public library's readers are the younger and better-schooled members of the community. These readers may be further divided into five large groups, the largest of which comprises students who want publications not supplied by their school or college libraries. The next group, numerically speaking, includes the housewives and white-collar workers who desire light reading. Then come the members of business and industry who seek information on any one of a multitude of specialties ranging from airplanes to X-rays, and these are followed by the ambitious young men and women who want vocational information. The smallest of the five categories is made up of serious-minded workers and culturally alert men and women who continue to read and to learn throughout their lives.

Children under fourteen number a third of the library's users. In Number 5 of the *Planning for Libraries* pamphlets of the American Library Association¹² the school librarians have analyzed the needs of their youngsters. Children, like adults, want above all else a congenial library area with a librarian as streamlined as her surroundings. In it must be a stock of books such as Lillian H. Smith,¹³ director of children's work in the Toronto Public Library, describes in her recent *The Unreluctant Years*. Her standards are those of Walter de la Mare,¹⁴ who said, ". . . only the rarest kind of best in anything can be good enough for the young." Paul Hazard is more specific:

Boys and girls want books where truth and justice triumph in the end. The bandit may be a sympathetic character but the police must win out—unless we are able to invent a particularly delightful and virtuous bandit. . . . They do not like self-pity or ill-fated women who never manage to get cheered up, or gloomy dramas. . . .

Boys and girls demand, in no uncertain terms, to be told about modern inventions. They almost scorn people who still go about in automobiles instead of airplanes. . . .

. . . The finest and noblest of the books intended for children tell of heroism.¹⁵

Next to the children in the number of demands made on our libraries are the young people in their teens whose requirements are often met in junior and senior high school libraries. The needs of high school readers are clearly defined in two works in the same series, *School Libraries for Today and Tomorrow* and *The Public Library Plans for the Teen Age*.¹⁶ These studies agree as to the requirements of adolescents, but different methods of fulfilling them are proposed for each type of institution. More than any other age group, the "teen-ager" craves de Bury's "freedom from control" and "some degree of pleasure and activity." Children take these two rights for granted, and adults realize that every member of a society must accept certain controls and engage "in many a tedious task." The "teen-ager," on the other hand, cares for little other than his own interests and those of his group. Young people require a shining, up-to-date library and the newest books to supplement their courses of study. The school librarian must use the vocabulary of the students and give them a part in selecting books, writing reviews, conducting discussions, and planning exhibits. Visual aids are vital. The comparatively few public libraries which have "rooms for youth" find that circulating collections

The Needs of Readers

of fine music recordings are the best bait they can employ. The number of such rooms is not larger because many librarians believe that special services for "teen-agers" should be given by the schools. The strongest argument against so doing is that if no effort is made to attract young people to the public library many of them will cease to read after they leave school. The resulting loss to society as well as to the individual is expressed by Hazard¹⁷ when he says: "How many human beings, bound to workbench or plow, imprisoned in studio or mine, give up reading after the joyful period of their first leisure is over! Or else they read newspaper accounts of accidents, suicides, crimes and wars."

Perhaps even better than surveys of libraries in achieving an understanding of what readers want today and what they may want in the future are the investigations being carried on by a wider and more practical assembly of workers with books—the publishers, owners of bookstores, authors, and teachers. The Public Library Inquiry includes a volume, *The Book Industry* by William Miller,¹⁸ which describes changes in publishing policies in the last decade. Partly because of increased costs of production, the best-seller has come to be considered the only ore worth the mining. Distribution has become complicated and difficult because of the competition from book clubs and paper-bound "slicks," and because of the pricing practices of department and dime stores. Unfortunately, the extension of popular education has not raised the standards of reading for, as Ernestine Rose¹⁹ comments, "a phase of democracy on the way up is mediocrity." Instead of book buyers demanding substance and authority as they did in the era of the stout brown and maroon volumes of Herbert Spencer, Huxley, and Darwin, many now prefer pictures and tabloids. It seems likely that soon only the university presses will accept manuscripts replete with social, political, or economic profundity or freighted with the findings of scientific research.

In the hope of understanding and combating some of these tendencies, the American Book Publishers Council arranged a conference on reading development in January 1951, the findings of which stress the importance of authoritative books in our society.²⁰ Their continuance deserves the sustaining efforts of big business, of educational foundations, and of institutions of higher learning, just as the products of manufacture and medicine receive aid and support from large national corporations. Long-term case studies should be undertaken to uncover the motives, gratifications, and effects of reading, and investigations which would study national, community, and individual tendencies

should be conducted. With the information obtained thereby, publishers could determine the probable audience for different kinds of books, the best outlets for books now without a market, and most important of all, how to raise the status of reading.

Early in 1954 the Columbia University Press published a book with a sympathetic understanding of the needs of readers; this is *The Public Library in American Life* by Ernestine Rose, who recently retired from the New York Public Library where she had built up a remarkable community center in a branch library in Harlem. In the Foreword to this work Lyman Bryson, who has done more than any other individual to promote good reading by radio, admits that public libraries have fallen far below their possibilities, for there are still twenty-four million people in this country without any sort of public library service and the annual median expenditure for library service is but eighty cents per capita. Our libraries, Bryson believes, should demand more in order to become decisive agents in our culture because free minds are more important than money. While not often recognized as a publicist, the "librarian . . . is a keen hunter after the varying interests and needs of the public," and the ablest librarians take a firm stand against censorship. "The librarian's purpose is to stir the public mind with the thoughts of many, to offer alternatives, to expand perspectives and widen the choices."²¹

The greatest of all needs of readers according to Miss Rose is the freedom to choose as it has been prescribed by librarians in their "Bill of Rights." In her book Miss Rose endorses the *National Plan*²² and the *Post-War Standards*,²³ and she considers our paramount duty to be the development of adult education with all that the words "adult" and "education" imply. She also urges the improvement of education of librarians so that they may be more closely associated with beneficial activities in their communities. Miss Rose believes that collections of books should be made available in convenient, small centers, and she describes the widespread possibilities of the Library Demonstration Bill, larger units of service, regional catalogs, and bibliographic centers. On the other hand, Miss Rose challenges the Public Library Inquiry's recommendation that the library because of lack of funds should cease to supply entertainment and should concentrate on service to the better-educated group. Miss Rose believes that both popular education and the preservation and interpretation of scholarship are vital. She tells us that "the paths tend to merge and the fields of interest to overlap, so that instruction slips into pleasure, or the recreative becomes educational, and it is quite impossible to

The Needs of Readers

guess what type of person will find either in a given piece of literature.”²⁴

The most successful librarians have been those who have learned, not who their readers are, but what they want. They have developed and expanded their libraries to meet all possible of the expressed needs of their users and to bring more users into the unfamiliar but wide-open doors. Although the members of the dominant group of active users of a library probably are from the better-educated half of the citizenry, the people who fill the reading rooms daily are not as a whole an intellectual lot. In the forum on the Inquiry which Lester Asheim directed at the University of Chicago Library Institute in 1949, this profound truth was voiced, “The library’s public is a select group, but it makes use of material which is not particularly selective.”²⁵ This applies to members of the various age groups, to persons who live on the “south side of town,” to members of a given trade or profession, and to you and to me. At a certain time of the year, or on a certain hour of the day, each of us needs a different kind of reading to suit a particular mood or demand. Not all of a person’s reading is or should be in pursuit of information. One of the loftiest professors of the California Institute of Technology often asks for a mystery “with blood on the front page,” and Abraham Lincoln delighted in reading Artemus Ward aloud. Edward Radenzel pointed out “that the American public is not a well-informed public, but a half-informed public.”²⁶ Our libraries have the opportunity and the obligation to supply Americans with the other half.

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ALTHEA WARREN

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