

A Good Read

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Albert Pyle

There are good Sunday afternoons and there are Sunday afternoons that bring up unhealthy thoughts of pitching oneself into a live volcano the way unhappy Japanese lovers used to do. May still do.

One of the clever and inventive ways my father found to turn an otherwise perfectly good Sunday into a leaping-off-the-rim-of-Mount-Fuji-regardless-of-the-soaring-cranes-and-fragile-cherry-blossoms-Sunday was to turn over to one of his sons the duty of reading aloud to his aged and incapacitated father. At a certain age, I became eligible for that duty. I am with you today because there were no volcanoes nearby at the time.

I tell you this because we are going to discuss reading and books and the future of libraries and I want you to know how resilient is the desire to read and how one can endure the dark side of reading and come out in favor of the printed word, and how the printed word will almost certainly survive the ambitions of Google. But first I have this splendid opportunity to let you know, among other things how horrible it was to read the Chicago Tribune and the Christian Century in the mid-century and I will not waste it.

My father and his sister were convinced that my grandfather, a long-retired geometry teacher, was keen to hear not only the news of the day but also the news of the world of mainstream Christian theologians, so if you had the reading-to-Grandfather duty, you were in for an hour of right wing editorials and elevated musings about whatever was gnawing away at the collective conscious of America's clerical types as they were laid out in the Christian Century.

I hope that you will not find it excessively unkind of me if I point out that my grandfather, whose life prior to incapacitation in his ninth decade was pious and dull, was paying no more heed to the words than I was. He was, I believe, ignoring the drone of editorials as he marked off the hours until he could at last join Euclid and Pythagoras to talk about something that really interested him.

If you pick up the Tribune now you will find a healthy normal newspaper, but half a century ago the Trib was the mouthpiece for Colonel Robert McCormick, a tyrant somewhere to the right of Tricia Nixon who was herself famously described as being to the right of Genghis Khan. Colonel McCormick, who detested Easterners and foreigners, believed in featuring his favorite candidates and causes in the news section of the newspaper as sort of a warm up to the editorial page. The watchword in the Tribune stylebook seems to have been that it is impossible to be too turgid or too long. Tribune articles went on forever in their turgid way, and the effect, for this reader, was to bring on a state of wooziness not to be exceeded for some thirty-six years on another Sunday afternoon reading Henry James aloud in the overheated library of a dear friend, coincidentally in her ninth decade and, like grandfather, blind, but way more fun. On that afternoon this reader actually fell asleep while reading aloud. It is a profoundly odd experience.

Yet I would still rather read than breathe. I continue to believe in the indestructibility of the pleasures of reading, particularly of reading books, and I am not worried about the fate of reading in the current millennium.

The organizer of this evening's readings sent to my attention an article from the New York Times, a journal every bit as capable of drifting into seas of dullness as the mid-twentieth century Chicago Tribune or the revered Henry James. The article in my mailbox was all about Google's plan to scan all the books of four or five gigantic libraries into its seemingly boundless memory, and the effect the project would have on the world as we know it and what it will mean for books and reading and writers.

I suppose it would be wise to do a little explaining to the anti-technological wing of the Literary Club, a proud and feisty subgroup if ever there was one. Google is - and I don't know why this hasn't been formally recognized by the Encyclopedia Britannica - the eighth wonder of the world. Perhaps it is because the Encyclopedia Britannica was swallowed by Google shortly after Google made a snack of the Oxford English Dictionary and several fat thesauruses, and Google thinks it immodest to publicize its fabulousness. Google is the search engine that knows all and sees all. If you find, as you dress for the Anniversary Observances next month, that you have lost all track of your shirt studs, you have only to go to Google and type in "mislaidd shirt studs" and Google will tell you where to look. Actually it will give you several hundred thousand places to look, but somewhere in the first twenty or thirty answers you will find the correct place which is in that shallow drawer under the shaving mirror where you have already looked several times but not in the correct little velvet box that has a way of snapping shut on that tender membrane between your thumb and forefinger.

Kevin Kelly, the Times reporter assigned the Google piece, was unable to disguise in his writing his admiration for Google's hugely ambitious plan, the implementation of which requires shipping thousands of container loads of books to - you guessed it — China, where they will be fed book by book into page flipping scanning machines by tireless Chinese persons, taking jobs away from all those Americans who expected to be flipping pages until retirement, which will effect the transmogrification of every single word from ink on paper to digits in memory. Every word, every book.

Or, almost every book, I hasten to assure the anti-technological wing, here, whose feathers may be already ruffled by the very mention of Google, that those books will not include the papers of the Literary Club. It is my understanding that the papers of the Literary Club are safely sealed from the outside world and the prying eyes of the dreaded general public. The only possible leakage could be if someone had been so careless as to send one of the bound collections to a repository other than the Cincinnati Historical Society where the ladies at the desk have perfected the art of keeping the general public, including Google, away from the collection. It is possible that some thoughtless member might have accidentally let one of those bound collections slip away to one of the five libraries being eaten alive by Google. But that is unlikely, isn't it? Every bit as unlikely as copies of a successful paper being handed out by trusting members to other trusted members and thence being given to a member of the general public without the permission of the author. Such things just never happen. Right? Not to worry. All of our papers are perfectly safe.

If you want to worry about something, you could worry about the great mixing of all books into one book and one book into many books that comes about when printed works are digitized and blasted into the expanding universe of the internet. Kevin Kelly's New York Times article seems to think this is a wonderful thing, bringing about new understanding of everything even though the events of this still young century have already proved that we cannot yet make sense of the stuff we think we know ordered the way we meant to order it.

Mr. Kelly further spends a great deal of time raking copyright law over the coals. He firmly believes that the best possible thing for any bit of knowledge, any bit of writing, really, to be out there free for all to have so that we may all think about everything in the world at no cost. He is far from alone in this belief. Every single person in the world who has an i-pod music playing device, which would basically be everyone in the world except for the Literary Club and the College of Cardinals, believes that every single bit of music should be downloadable at no cost to the listener. Mr. Kelly does not believe anything should be protected by copyright because nothing can any longer be protected, and further seems to believe that everyone, including writers whose incomes currently depend on it being necessary for you and me to pay \$24.95 to buy a book, is going to love the great teeming ocean of words and thoughts no longer separated by page and board, no longer distanced by that pesky \$24.95.

I think Mr. Kelly is wrong. I think books will be around a while. They will not be replaced by audio books, certainly not for those of us who can read much faster than we can listen. They will not be replaced by any of the gadgets that have already been invented to put a page on a screen because books are not gadgets. Books do not break down. They do not short circuit. If you are eating a Philadelphia cheesesteak sandwich while you are reading and you dribble grease onto a book you have only to turn a page and the grease is gone.

And a book is inviolate. What Mr. Kelly seems not to understand is that for those of us who read books as well as screens, it means a great deal that the book one picks up at bedtime is the same book one picked up the night before. There is no drift and no adulteration. What one reads is what the author wrote or, more accurately, the publisher published. It will be the same in a year or in ten years. Just like the bound volumes of our own papers here which sit safe and sound here on our own shelves, however unsearchable they may be.

Books, the real books that you hold in your hand, will be the necessary proof to which readers will have ultimately to return to see what was meant by a writer before his writings entered the great boundless ocean of thoughts and ideas that in its wireless way washes this very room at this very moment. And they will still be a pleasure to read.