

Hell's Bibliophiles

The Fifth Way of Looking at an Aliterate

BY JOHN G. RAMSAY

The word “aliterate” has an edge that puts me on edge. I don’t find it as frightful as “amoral,” but the two words affect my fear gland in much the same way. They both invite me to worry about a void. An amoralist is someone who lacks sensibility, who doesn’t care about (or even recognize) distinctions between right and wrong. An aliterate is usually cast as someone who doesn’t care about what others write, and is therefore suspected of being lazy. Definitions of amoralism are careful not to speculate about the origins of this void, but they highlight deviation from a commonly accepted norm of caring about ethical distinctions. The aliterate, I’d suggest, faces the same tacit accusation of deviation from a culture that considers a literate life as normal, desirable, and good.

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A first way of looking at an aliterate is through the eyes of cartoonists. Aliterates are always good for a laugh in sophisticated literacy circles, such as in the pages of the *New Yorker* magazine. For example, you might recall William Hamilton's 1994 cartoon depicting a grandmotherish figure in a bookstore saying to the clerk: "It's for a young woman in the generation that knows how to read but doesn't feel like it."

Then there's Arnie Levin's take on the daily dilemma of reading for busy adults. A guy is standing outside a bookstore with his guardian angel whispering in his ear, "Read the book!" And at the same time a horned figure with a pitch fork is whispering in his other ear, "See the movie!"

Other cartoonists invite us to chuckle about the cultural gulf between readers and non-readers. Warren Miller has a middle-aged couple walking through a vacant apartment with wall after wall of empty bookshelves. The woman is asking the real estate broker: "Holy cow! What kind of crazy people used to live here anyway?"

A famous quote by Mark Twain captures the bewildered frustration of the literate as he gazes at the aliterate: "The man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who can't read them." His point is that aliteracy is a chosen form of illiteracy, and therefore borders on being a self-inflicted handicap—a radical rejection of literate and literary culture and the recorded wisdom of the ages.

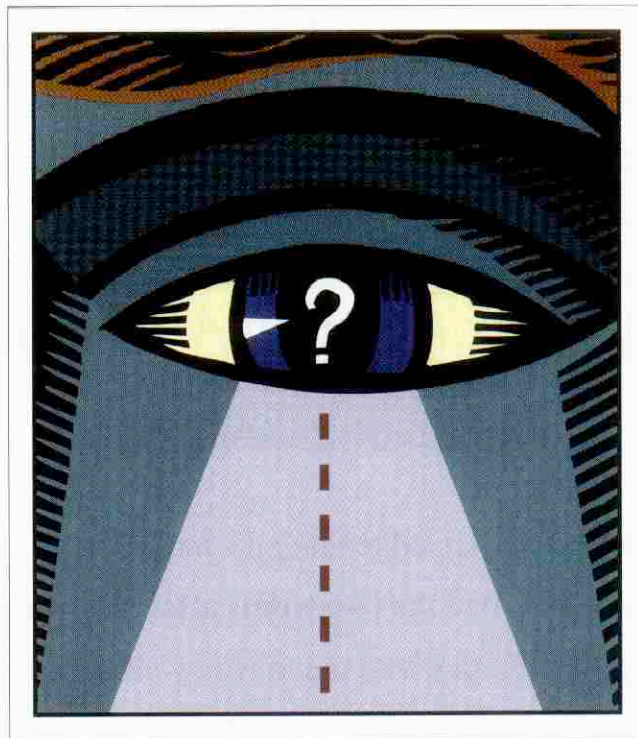
The very word *aliteracy* is a charge of indifference, self-absorption, or insularity. It is fashionable now to suggest that words "have an agenda," and I think aliteracy certainly does. It is clear that aliteracy, the word, has a *credenda*—a set of doctrines to be believed in as articles of faith. There are two ele-

ments in this belief: 1) that a wonderful gift—the ability to read—is being wasted, and 2) that such a waste is both baffling and—as with any wasted skill or talent—morally charged.

These are the particular assumptions about aliteracy that I want to question here. Does an aliterate really think of reading as a wonderful gift? Do aliterates feel a sense of bafflement too? Are they wounded by the indignation of the highly literate? What can we learn if we think about aliteracy as a complicated cultural question, rather than simply a knee-jerk accusation of deficiency? And how can we harness what we learn to help us approach the many students we encounter who

appear indifferent to reading?

A second way of looking at an aliterate is through the eyes of the International Reading Association (IRA). This literacy organization, interestingly, views aliteracy with a rather cartoonish quality. The IRA's *Literacy Dictionary* defines aliteracy as the "lack of the reading habit in capable readers." This definition encourages us to think about literacy as essentially a work-ethic problem among skilled readers. The IRA locates the problem within individuals, who, as the



definition suggests, have no one to blame but their weak-willed selves. The circularity of the aliterate's logic seems lost on the IRA: If these non-readers would only get into the habit of reading, then they'd have the habit of reading, and wouldn't squander their capacity.

Reading professional Larry Mikulecky coined the term aliteracy in 1978. The original formulation included an intensifying phrase: "Lack of the reading habit; especially, such a lack in capable readers *who choose not to read*." Mikulecky underscored the theme of wasted capability by insisting that it is a willful wasting, rather than mere casual apathy. He then went

on to put a new spin on Twain's point. He wrote: "Aliteracy may guarantee continued, lifelong, functional illiteracy."

So definitions matter—they carry both credendas and agendas. Try this thought experiment. Suppose the IRA's definition of aliteracy were the following: "An aversion to reading among weak readers." How would that definition change the questions we ask about our students who have a fragile attachment to texts? I would begin by asking: 1) How did these kids learn to dislike reading in the first place? 2) *Which* of their reading skills seem to be overmatched by the texts we ask them to read? These are questions that can move us along in a way that the IRA's implication of sloth cannot. If we're going to make progress on understanding the mystery beneath the superficial indifference we see in our classrooms, we're going to have to defuse this 23-year-old credenda about aliteracy. We are going to have to put a different set of faces on aliterates. And we are going to have to challenge our culture's mental models of what aliteracy is and how it works.

A third way of looking at an aliterate is to look in the mirror and try to understand it from the inside out. This is not an easy thing to do. Once we are literate it is difficult to sympathetically recall what it was like to be indifferent to the power and beauty of words on a page. Our ears know that there is a difference between the mocking snickers that cartoons provoke and the nervous laughter that mirrors elicit.

If we are going to help our students, we must think of these differences between us, the literate, and *them*, the aliterate, as bridgeable differences of degree, rather than as insurmountable differences of kind. To do so, it may be useful to resurrect a remote state of mind—an aliterate chapter in our own lives. I say "chapter" because we need to remember that to grow up in any literate culture is to be coerced into caring about reading.

In the long career of any reader, there are many moments when

we feud with the text, and it is important to understand these feuds rather than to dismiss the feuders as possessing low and irredeemable intellectual status. Getting a glimpse of the aliterate within can be an important first step toward working well with fragile readers in our classrooms. Try another thought experiment: What aliterate chapter do you recall in your own life? What was it about? How did you move out of it?

I began high school as an avid reader, but I read with the same ear I used to listen to sporting events on the radio. I read to hear the *voice*, the official play-by-play of a

contest on a field I could only imagine. For me, reading was listening to a game broadcast on a faintly received station. Consequently, I would fiddle with the tuner, then the volume, and eventually the voice of the writer came in louder and clearer. I assumed that my job as a reader was to absorb the action, and to learn who won and lost. The goal of reading, so I believed, was to identify the heroes, the goats, and the final score.

I was pretty good at this "sponging the events" kind of reading, and it gave me a chance to hone the skill of reading for multiple-choice tests: a) plot; b) character; c) setting; d) details. I sailed through the summer reading exams administered during the first

week of school each year. I gloated while my buddies struggled to recall what actually happened in *Teahouse of the August Moon*.

Recall, I could do, but if the task required a kind of reading more subtle than a sturdy memory could furnish, I was sunk. As a high school senior I tried to write an extra-credit essay about several of J.D. Salinger's characters to no avail. I turned in nine pages of inconclusive ramblings about Franny, Zooey, and Seymour Glass. Then I prayed my teacher would reward the sincerity of my sweat. He didn't.

And so in December 1969, I stood shivering in a snow-

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storm, a frosh in a reading rut, hitchhiking home for the holidays to await my first grade report from college. I had been unable to pierce any meaning from three of my textbooks—psychology, biology, and statistics. I didn't have a study skills problem. I had tutors in bio and stat. I had dim, surface-level understandings. But I could not read for comprehension. I hated reading the stuff, often falling asleep in the library without a memorized definition to my name.

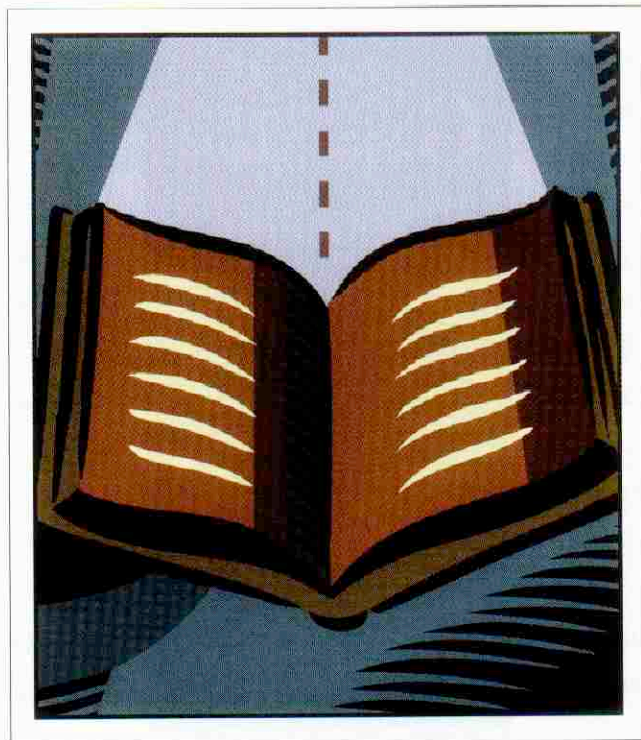
What happened next saved me. I was offered a ride east on Interstate 80 by two women from my college who were deep in conversation about how thoughtful people read books. They were talking animatedly about one of their friends, an intellectual maverick who had written all of her end-of-semester papers about different aspects of a single book—Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. My first reaction was a mixture of outrage and awe. Could you really get away with that sort of thing in college? The dean of students was on my case for tossing a few water balloons, while something like this was going on?

I had never met anyone with this level of literary audacity. But in my dense and plodding way, I began to imagine how she might read. I'm convinced it was the Salinger fiasco, coupled with the frustrations of my first semester, that made me an especially attentive eavesdropper that night. I sat staring out the back seat window, listening in amazement, hungering for a way out of a literacy limbo that I couldn't even name. I listened as they celebrated the craft and sheer nerve of their friend: "And then in her political science paper, she wrote about how McMurphy undermines the authority structure of the hospital." I remember thinking: "So this is it. This is how you do college. This is how you read."

I'd like to report that my academic performance improved dramatically during the spring semester. It didn't. What did happen, though, was that the eavesdropping episode pushed me beyond the broadcast model of reading that had served me for good and ill for so long. In its place was the vague outline of constructing a tool box—reading as the gathering of useful objects to think, talk, and write with. This was what the maverick seemed to be doing with *Cuckoo's Nest*—stripping it for ideas and values. Then she used what she found to illustrate, elaborate, or cast doubt upon some other set of ideas and values in an entirely different course. It sounded daring and scary.

I couldn't wait to try it.

I was also struck by the passion that the maverick felt for Kesey's mind, the world that he had invented. That spring I began to dwell on the strange and private business that transpired between readers and writers—the silent courtship of reading. I started to notice who was reading whom, and to wonder about what was going on between these couples as they strolled hand-on-binding across campus. And I began to wonder if I, too, could profitably read those books.



Last year I taught a senior seminar on the personal essay. In it, I asked my students to write about their careers as readers and non-readers. I had never given this assignment before, and did not know if we had enough mutual trust for serious reflection and candor. Would my students be willing to trade on private memories to enter a conversation about what reading had meant to them? This is what I learned.

They remembered fondly the rites of passage that comprise our reading lives—finishing an entire chapter in a day, and

binge-reading a single author, like Gary Paulson or Roald Dahl. They also remembered being infected, and having their imaginations fully inhabited, by particular books like *Anne of Green Gables*. One young woman wrote, "At one point, Anne explained the significance of her name being spelled with an 'e' at the end; with an 'e' the name 'Anne' had elegance; without it, 'Ann' was plain. My own middle name Ann had no 'e' and became burdensome, and I begged my parents to allow me to have it changed."

I was pleased to find a common theme that I call the thirst for significant reading. The idea is this: If you're going to ask me to invest the time in reading in the first place, give me something weighty, important, or even troubling. One young woman wrote of discovering James Baldwin at Carleton, and linked it to the memory of her parents smuggling Marxist books into Taiwan when she was a child. She wrote: "Over the past four years I have gotten to know Baldwin as an artist-sociologist who I find more eloquent and also more profound than anyone else I have ever read. He renewed my faith in the novel and underlined my demand for piercing analysis. When I think about my parents disguising books in clothes to go to Taiwan, and myself hiding books in the frame of my backpack in Ireland, that is the weight I want to everything I read." I was glad I had not read this daunting challenge when I was designing the syllabus.

There were strong counter-themes in these essays as well. One was about reading slowness, time pressures, and similar frustrations. One student began her essay with: "I have a visual kinetic failure: an inability to translate written words directly from sight to comprehension. For me, the extra step involves *saying* the words either out loud or silently to myself. This makes me a dismally slow reader, and skimming or speed-reading is virtually impossible. Perseverance saw me through, but I began to associate stress and rush with reading. The

thought of books left a bad taste in my mouth."

Another student was even more viscerally expressive about being a slow reader: "In high school I learned to hate books. I resented them. These objects that used to hold so much excitement now promised it but did not deliver. They discriminated against me because I was not speedy enough to read them cover to cover while still understanding their meaning."

These students drew a sharp nostalgic distinction between the leisurely joy of reading during their childhoods and the high-stress, low-learning "assigned reading" of high school and college. One young woman wrote: "I miss my life when

books were wonderful and I resent having been made to feel like they are a chore." One young man wrote: "I'm always cautious about assigned readings. To a large extent teachers have a good idea of what types of literature are appropriate for students. However, in my early years, that was not the case and many works were lost upon my unfocused and impatient pint-sized brain. I read because it was assigned for class."

The last quote captures the uncertainty that many students feel about their futures with books. My students knew that their frustrations with my assigned readings would be behind them in a couple of weeks. But they didn't know quite what the future

would hold. One woman wrote: "I have wanted to be a writer all my life but being so discouraged about reading and my struggle with writing essays in high school sufficiently deterred me. I am not a writer. I am not a reader. But I will read and write all my life, in spite of the clock (which is ticking), and because of my adopted belief in the hallowed, elusive benefits of books."

I came away from these essays heartened by the passion my students feel for their reading lives. But I was saddened by the disconnect between those lives and the assigned readings of high school and college. I recommend asking this reading-

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career question widely and then trying to decipher the answers by course and department. We have a lot to learn from both the joys and exasperations of our students, but next time I will ask this question up front as a short diagnostic, rather than at the end as a graded assignment.

Notice how the definition of aliteracy would change if it were written to describe the experiences of some of my students. Instead of the “lack of the reading habit,” it would be more accurate to talk of the “loss of the reading habit.” Instead of “in capable readers,” it would make more sense to say “in slow and frustrated readers.” Instead of “who choose not to read,” it would be more truthful to write “who choose to read despite feeling enormous stress, confusion, and pressure.” This is the fourth way of looking at an aliterate—from the struggling reader’s point of view.

When the African-American essayist Gayle Pemberton was in her first year of college, she heard a talk given by Ralph Ellison. Ellison had fallen out of favor with some black militant students and during his presentation they jeered him. Pemberton felt ashamed that she could not come to Ellison’s defense. She writes: “I was several years too young and underread to take on the battle.”

Underread—what a fabulous word! Webster’s Third International defines it as, “To read with less than full or due understanding, appreciation, or alertness.” To take this definition seriously is to understand what the ultra-literate share with the allegedly aliterate. We are all underread. We are eternally underread. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. Underread suggests bridgeable differences of degree.

Here’s my concluding suggestion: Build a course about the long and complicated journey of the reading life, and they will come. My own version of this course will be titled *Hell’s Bibliophiles*. I’ve borrowed the title, you won’t be sur-

prised, from a Michael Maslin cartoon. It depicts a group of rough-and-tumble guys browsing in a bookstore, gently caressing the classics and the new releases. They are all wearing motorcycle jackets that have “Hell’s Bibliophiles” written on the back.

The joke is a play on the cliché, “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” But beneath the joke, Maslin implies an interesting question: How do we do this? How do we recruit *gangs* of readers? How do we reach students with an attitude, students aligned against literate culture, and convince them to make their peace with it and us? I’d teach this course as a freshman seminar, and the course description would read something like this:

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“Hell’s Bibliophiles. This course is intended for students with a bad attitude about reading. It will be conducted seminar-style and will require you to disclose how it was that you learned to dislike reading. This is not a remedial reading course, though it might remedy whatever loss you may feel for having fallen out of love with reading. You’ll be required to read personal essays, short fiction, and poems about growing up in a culture that coerces you to place a high value on literacy, and a low val-

ue on literariness. You’ll have to write short personal essays in response to the readings and discussions. You will be expected to contribute to the building of a community of readers, or be willing to argue why such an activity would be a waste of time.”

In teaching this course, my fantasy is to portray Attila the Hun in a Frank Cotham cartoon. The cartoon depicts Attila returning from a raid with loot, turning on his horse and calling out to his followers: “Did anyone plunder something good to read?”

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