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Journal of Librarianship and Information Science 2011 43: 46

DOI: 10.1177/0961000610390992

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The importance of pleasure reading in the lives of young teens: Self-identification, self-construction and self-awareness

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Abstract

This paper reports on a research study investigating the role of pleasure reading in the lives of 12–15 year old residents of an eastern Canadian regional municipality. Pleasure reading was found to fulfil three broad functions: it enhanced academic performance, social engagement and personal development. In conclusion, the study confirms that teens, like adults, unconsciously use pleasure reading as a means of everyday life information seeking and the reasons for personal salience identified in the foregoing discussion have a strong developmental theme: in their pleasure reading, teens gain significant insights into mature relationships, personal values, cultural identity, physical safety and security, aesthetic preferences, and understanding of the physical world, all of which aid teen readers in the transition from childhood to adulthood.

Keywords

adolescents, everyday life information seeking, pleasure reading, reading behaviour, youth

Introduction

Cullinan (2000) points out that we do not know the factors which make a difference in establishing lifetime reading habits or the factors which influence a reader's choice of reading materials. She acknowledges that an understanding of these factors could help schools and libraries plan more effective programmes. Nitecki (1986: 229) concurs, stating:

In the voluminous technical literature of information science, little attention is given to reading processes...The primary mission of librarians is not to teach patrons how to read, or what to read. Rather it is to acquire reading material and to provide the most appropriate access to it, access that is based not only on an understanding of patrons' reading needs, but also on the assumption that one of the basic functions of reading is to facilitate a continuous development of the ability to think.

Wiegand (1997a, b) agrees with both Cullinan and Nitecki, and points out that recreational reading has too long been ignored by the library and information studies community in favour of research into information and information seeking.

This article addresses this gap in the published research by reporting on a recent study of junior high school students, aged 12–15 years, in an eastern Canadian regional municipality. Previous research (Children's Literature Research Centre, 1996; Fasick et al., 2005; Maynard et al., 2007; National Endowment for the Arts, 2007; Niewenhuizen, 2001) has consistently found that reading for pleasure increases throughout the childhood years until the age of 12–13, at which point it begins a decline that usually lasts throughout adolescence. This study seeks to develop a rich understanding of the role of reading for pleasure in the lives of young teens, aged 12–15 years, the age at which this frequently observed decline in reading begins.

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Literature review

Educational performance and pleasure reading

As *To Read or Not to Read* (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007) notes, cognitive psychologists and educational theorists have frequently sought to clarify the nature of the relationship between reading for pleasure and other aspects of educational performance. The report writers quote a 1998 article by Anne Cunningham, University of California at Berkeley, and Keith Stanovich, University of Toronto, entitled 'What reading does for the mind':

Reading has cognitive consequences that extend beyond its immediate task of lifting meaning from a particular passage. Furthermore, these consequences are reciprocal and exponential in nature. Accumulated over time – spiraling either upward or downward – they carry profound implications for the development of a wide range of cognitive abilities (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007: 68).

During the early elementary school years, several researchers have found a positive correlation between achievement on reading tests and amount of recreational reading. Fielding et al. (1986) found that reading as little as 10 minutes a day had a positive impact on reading test scores. Students in the 90th percentile spent five times as long reading as children in the 50th percentile and 200 times as long as children in the 10th percentile. Greaney and Hegarty (1987) and Watkins and Edwards (1992) found similar correlations and concluded that more able readers spend more time on independent reading and that their overall academic performance is related to their reading skills. Krashen's (2004) meta-analysis of in-school free voluntary reading programmes found that free voluntary reading can increase students' scores on standardized reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, and writing tests. These studies clearly demonstrate that students become more proficient at what they practise: regular readers have better vocabularies, better reading comprehension, better verbal fluency and better general knowledge than non-readers (Krashen, 2004; Stanovich and Cunningham, 1993).

The international *Reading for Change* Report (OECD, 2002: 19) provides similar findings:

[I]mprovement in reading literacy performance relies not just on improving cognitive skills but also on increasing their engagement in reading...Not all of engaged readers come from privileged homes, and those from more modest backgrounds who read regularly and feel positive about it are better readers than people with home advantages but weaker reading engagement. This strongly suggests that there is much that schools can do to bring students into this virtuous circle [of reading engagement], regardless of their home background. Since cognitive skills and reading motivation are mutually

reinforcing in this process, rather than being alternatives, schools need to address both simultaneously.

This correlation is also noted by Bussiere et al. (2001) in their analysis of Canadian youth's performance on the international PISA test of reading, mathematics and science¹ in which the researchers note that Canadian teens' enjoyment of reading and amount of time spent reading have a more powerful positive impact on their reading literacy scores than does high socioeconomic status.

Usherwood and Toyne (2002) found that subjects themselves recognize the value of reading in improving their literacy skills. Adult participants in their focus groups acknowledged that pleasure reading has an 'instructive' role, providing them with practical knowledge as well as improving their literacy skills.

Social reasons for pleasure reading

In her article summarizing research on the connection between pleasure reading and literacy, Cullinan (2000) observes that voluntary reading can lead directly to increased social engagement:

Voluntary reading involves personal choice, reading widely from a variety of sources, and choosing what one reads. Aliterates, people who have the ability to read but choose not to, miss just as much as those who cannot read at all. Individuals read to live life to its fullest, to earn a living, to understand what is going on in the world, and to benefit from the accumulated knowledge of civilization. Even the benefits of democracy, and the capacity to govern ourselves successfully, depend on reading.

Faulkner (2002) and Eyre (2003) note that pleasure reading can play a vital role in preparing young people for adult roles in the information society. In its 2007 report on American reading trends and habits, *To Read or Not to Read*, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) (2007) identifies several professional and social advantages associated with reading for pleasure. Employers rank reading and writing as top deficiencies in new hires: whereas 63 percent of employers rate reading comprehension as 'very important', 38 percent of employers find high school graduates 'deficient' in this skill (pp. 79–80). Good readers have more financially rewarding jobs whereas less advanced readers report fewer opportunities for career growth.

The NEA report also concludes that good readers 'play a crucial role in enriching our cultural and civic life' (pp. 86–89). Committed readers are three times more likely than non-readers to visit museums, attend plays or concerts, or create artworks of their own. They are also more likely to play sports, attend sports events, or do other outdoor activities. Young adults aged 18–24, whose reading rates are the lowest for all adult age groups, are also showing declines in cultural and civic participation. Non-readers are less likely

to volunteer or do charity work than committed readers. While no definite causal relationships can be made between voluntary reading and social engagement, the NEA report speculates that 'good readers, and not only literary ones, enjoy [the] privilege of understanding and appreciating the outlook of others while enlarging their own identity. Perhaps because of this active empathy, they contribute in measurable ways to civic and social improvements' (p. 90).

Personal reasons for pleasure reading

Closely related to pleasure reading's role in encouraging external social engagement is the role of pleasure reading in enhancing internal personal development. Aidan Chambers (1973: 122) succinctly expresses the commonly held view that, 'In the end, it is always better that children read something than that they read nothing at all...Wide, voracious indiscriminate reading is the base soil from which discrimination and taste eventually grow'. Although most researchers who have investigated personal reasons for pleasure reading have focused on adult readers rather than children or teens, these studies provide significant insight into the role of reading in personal development.

Checking out the Books, University of Sheffield researchers Toyne and Usherwood (2001) conducted 30 focus groups to explore these questions and identified several personal reasons given for recreational reading including escapism, relaxation, practical knowledge, self-development, self-knowledge, and aesthetic pleasure. Focus group studies conducted by Taylor (1999), Twomey (2003) and Glenn (2004) in their investigations of adult fiction readers and reading groups confirm Toyne and Usherwood's findings that adult readers read for a variety of reasons ranging from escapism and relaxation to self-discovery and self-empowerment, and that reading fulfils an important function in their lives. Moyer (2007) used a combination of surveys and interviews to explore the relationship between educational and recreational outcomes in adult reading for pleasure. Her findings describe four categories of educational outcomes deriving from pleasure reading: people and relationships, countries, cultures and history; life enrichment; and different perspectives. In all these studies, readers implicitly acknowledge Birkerts' (1994: 91) statement that '[fiction reading] plays a vital part in what we might grandly call existential self-formation'.

Radway's (1983) study of women and the romance novel pioneered ethnographic research in popular fiction. She conducted a series of detailed interviews with readers of romance fiction living in a rural community in an attempt to determine the role of reading in their lives. Radway used psychoanalytic theory to explain why these women, as a consequence of their social and material situations, found romance reading pleasurable. She discovered that reading was qualitatively different from the women's usual activities, because it was the sole pursuit which they did for themselves alone. In

additional to emotional fantasy, romance reading provided a declaration of independence, a minor rebellion against their usual roles as housewives and mothers. Romance reading thus offered the women in Radway's study a psychological escape from the restrictions of patriarchal marriage.

In her study of adult readers, Ross (1999: 785) states, '[R]eaders bring to the texts their own individual concerns and interests, which act as a filter to highlight those aspects of the text that speak to their concerns. Readers play a crucial role in enlarging the meaning of the text by reading it within the context of their own lives'. This view of reading as a transaction between reader and text strongly echoes the model of reading espoused by Reader Response theorist, Louise M Rosenblatt (1978: 43–44):

The concept of the transaction with the environment provides the model for the process in which reader and text are involved. Each becomes in a sense environment for the other. A two-way, or better, a circular, process can be postulated, in which the reader responds to the verbal stimuli offered by the text, but at the same time he must draw selectively on the resources of his own fund of experience and sensibility to provide and organize the substance of his response. Out of this the new experience, the literary work, is formed.

Elkin et al. (2003: 14) emphasize the powerful personal and developmental functions of reading in the lives of children and teens:

Reading may compensate for the differences of growing up and complex ways of living: the story can have the psychological value of showing children that someone else has been there before them; they enable teenagers to move forward in experience to consider what lies ahead, to contemplate experiences as it were 'by proxy' before encountering them directly. Story heightens the readers' awareness, shaping the raw material of life and so organizing even that which is sad or painful into satisfying experience. In particular, reading offers intellectual credibility, identity, subversion, being part of the crowd, comfort, the opportunity to be alone.

Objectives

The research study discussed in this paper examines the role of recreational or pleasure reading in the lives of 12–15 year old residents of an eastern Canadian regional municipality. The study as a whole was guided by three key research questions concerning the pleasure reading habits of young teens:

1. What role does reading for pleasure fill in the lives of young teens (aged 12–15)?
2. What are the main barriers to reading for this age group?
3. What are the main motivators to reading for this age group?

This paper describes one particular aspect of the broader study: the importance of reading for pleasure in the lives of these young teens.

Methods

Data collection consisted of a series of focus group discussions with a total of 68 12–15 year olds, held at nine junior high schools in an eastern Canadian regional municipality. These junior high schools were randomly chosen from the regional school board directory of schools. Within each of the selected schools, one class each of Grade 7, 8 and 9 students were randomly chosen to receive invitations to participate in the research study. All students volunteered to participate; they and their parents/guardians were given a written information sheet and signed a consent form prior to the discussions. The number of volunteers per school ranged from 7 to 12 students. All focus groups consisted of both male and female participants, although females predominated: 70 percent of participants were girls and 30 percent were boys.

Focus groups were chosen as an efficient data-gathering technique and offered several distinct advantages when compared to other strategies. Most importantly, the interaction between participants increased the range and complexity of ideas expressed, and the group forum allowed for detailed discussion and also for creative thinking as respondents bounced ideas off each other. Furthermore, participants provided their own checks and balances, and extreme views tended to be weeded out. The open-endedness of the questions allowed for richer responses, and also provided the moderator the opportunity to probe for further information and to take the discussion in new directions, whereas the semi-structured format gave the moderator enough control to ensure all research questions were addressed. Lastly, the focus group structure appeared to be highly enjoyable for participants themselves.

Meyers et al. (2007: 317) note that, when conducting research with youth, focus groups provide all of the advantages listed above, plus further advantages specific to the age group:

Group discussions can decrease individual anxiety and reduce the response pressures and cognitive load associated with individual interviews. By discussing issues with peers, the participants can be reflective, which facilitates the sharing of tacit knowledge. Most importantly, focus groups serve to decrease the authority of the adult moderators, placing them in a unique role between the child and the adults with whom they interact at home and school.

Structured questions were used to permit the cross-comparison of responses between groups. All focus group discussions were tape recorded, but confidentiality of respondents was assured, and the names of individual students, schools, or school districts were not identified on the transcripts. Pseudonyms are used in all reports of focus group

discussions but their language is reproduced without any grammatical corrections.

Transcripts were imported into QSR NUD*IST for coding and analysis. Overall, analysis proceeded using a grounded theory approach in the manner of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Glaser (1992) in which data central to the focus of the inquiry was gathered through a series of focus group discussions, and themes emerged from the data itself, through a process of inductive analysis. QSR was used to assist in shaping understanding of the data, to create categories out of the data, and to link and explore these categories to form and test theories ‘grounded’ in the data. The qualitative phase did not begin with any a priori hypotheses or speculations about the likely outcomes of the focus group discussions.

Results

During focus group discussions, participants were initially asked to identify their frequency of reading for pleasure. Active readers (those who read for pleasure weekly at a minimum and who considered pleasure reading a preferred leisure activity) accounted for 85 percent of participants while reluctant readers (those who read for pleasure less often than weekly and who did not consider pleasure reading to be a preferred leisure activity) accounted for only 15 percent of participants. Participants were asked to reflect on the reasons why they choose to read for pleasure rather than engaging in another favourite leisure pursuit. Many teens were able to articulate clear reasons why they find pleasure reading a rewarding activity, and their responses closely echo the findings of Radway (1983), Toyne and Usherwood (2001), Glenn (2004), and Moyer (2007), particularly in terms of the teens’ personal reasons for pleasure reading. In other words, the young teens who participated in this study read for pleasure for many of the same personal reasons that adults read for pleasure: to be entertained, to pass the time, to relax, to exercise their imaginations, and so forth, as will be delineated and discussed below. Furthermore, the teens in this study also articulated clear educational and social reasons for reading for pleasure which strongly reflect the particular developmental needs and interests of this age group.

Educational performance and pleasure reading

1. To improve overall literacy or thinking skills. Many teens readily acknowledged that pleasure reading is part of the ‘success spiral’ and recognized that teens who read for pleasure will likely enjoy greater success in school by developing their general literacy skills including reading comprehension, vocabulary, and verbal fluency. While no teens indicated that this was the *most* important motivator for their reading, a large number indicated that it was an important secondary factor in encouraging their reading habit, thus supporting the findings of Toyne and Usherwood

(2001) who also observed that adult research participants recognized the value of reading in improving their literacy skills. The following quotations from focus group participants illustrate their observations about the role of reading in improving their educational performance:

- Josie: If you read a lot then you know more words and you know how to spell them, too.
- Nicola: Just reading itself can help you. Like a fast reading skill can be useful, having good reading skills means it's not a pain to study.

Some teens describe the positive role of reading for pleasure in helping them overcome disabilities. Julian, a struggling student who admits to reading difficulties, remembers the positive effect of his elementary school's book buddy programme in strengthening his self-esteem as a reader:

- Julian: I wish we still had Book Buddies. We did in elementary school. In grade 6, I had a Book Buddy in grade 1 or 2, and he couldn't read so I would read to him or we would try to read together. We did that once a week. I really liked it. It made me feel like a good reader. I was proud I could help this younger kid. The elementary school is just across the street from our junior high. Why can't we still go there and read aloud to littler kids?

Two other teens, Tanja and Karen, discuss how reading has helped them overcome specific disabilities:

- Tanja: English isn't my first language; sign language is my first language. So I read at home because it helps me with my reading skills. School is all about books and reading and English. I read fiction and nonfiction. ... What I usually do when I pick up a book is to figure out words from context. I read the sentence before and after and try to figure out what the word means. It's kind of like a word game, figuring out what it means. ... Yeah, books are really important to my life and they will be really important in my future because I want to become a veterinarian so reading is going to be really important for me, so all the reading that I'm doing now, the better reader I am it will really help me in university when my English has to be good.
- Karen: I couldn't actually start reading until I was in grade 3. It was really hard for me. It would take me ten minutes to read a page, I was so slow, because I had dyslexia. But I really loved reading. It was a lot of work for me.

2. To clarify vocational goals. Whilst many researchers have noted the role of pleasure reading in improving traditional literacy skills including reading comprehension, vocabulary, and verbal fluency, no previous research has explicitly explored the connection between pleasure reading and the

clarification of vocational or career goals. In this study, some teens noted that their experiences as readers and the creative act of reading itself had inspired them to consider creative careers as writers or directors:

- Roslyn: I just realized that I read a lot when I was a kid and I read a lot now and I love writing, I love writing a lot. Maybe I should be a writer!
- Tabitha: I read the book *Flipped* and it would have one chapter from the girl's point of view and the next chapter would be from the boy's point of view, so it kept flipping back and forth. After I read it, it was really inspiring and now I always want to know how different people think. Now maybe I understand more about how boys think. It has also made me want to be a writer, too.
- Isobel: I read books on film-making because I want to make films when I grow up and the books give me lots of good ideas. I'll always keep those books because they are real, they aren't going to change. The one I really like is *Girl Director* and I've read that about 30 times. I don't usually reread books but I keep rereading that one. I'm pretty much addicted to that book.

In addition to the teens who indicated that the creative act of reading for pleasure had encouraged them to consider future careers as writers or film directors, several other teens commented that reading for pleasure had also helped them develop or formulate future vocational goals, either by providing important general knowledge or by expanding teens' vocational horizons, making them aware of new career possibilities.

- Maribeth: To get a job, I want to be a vet, and if there's an animal and a disease, you would have to read to find out what to do. You'd need to be a good reader to figure it out. You also need to know about animals, so I read lots of books about animals.
- Catherine: I was so interested by the book on sharks that I read when I was younger that now I want to be a marine biologist.
- Mandy: I want to be a teacher or a psychologist, so I know that I'll be spending a lot of time reading, too. Reading helps me understand people and why they do the things they do.

Social reasons for pleasure reading

1. Understanding of the world. Many teens stated that their pleasure reading had helped them to understand events of past history or current social issues:

- Laura: I'm reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* and I like it because it gives you a sense of history, of what went on before. I also like reading *The Chicken Soup for*

the *Teenage Soul* books. They're a mix of everything, little stories and advice, and they give you a sense of other people's opinions.

Jessica: I read a book in grade 7 about the Holocaust. It was called *Greater than Angels*, I think. It was about this girl and her family and they all got split up and sent to concentration camps and at the end of the war, she was the only one left alive. It was very sad.

Emily: *Number the Stars* really made me like reading more because it's a really good book. I loved the characters and I learned something about history.

Ruth: I recently read the book *Night* by Elie Wiesel and I also read *Parvana's Journey*. *Night* was about World War Two and he, the main character, was in a concentration camp. The other book is about a girl 14, the same age as me, who was growing up in Afghanistan. Both books had really good morals and made me think about living in other times and places. I learned something about life from both those books.

2. Social conscience and empathy. Many teens commented that their pleasure reading had played an important role in their developing sense of social conscience and ability to connect imaginatively with others:

Matt: I read a book a while ago called *The Glass Castle* and it's about people who don't have a lot of money and are struggling to survive and it made me think that I have stuff that I might just throw away that could be really important to someone else. It made me think of some things I just take for granted.

Mark: I don't read for life lessons, but I read for background knowledge. I like reading science fiction, about different kinds of future societies. Sometimes these societies seem to be really different from today, like I just read a book in which the criminals are the good people, the heroes, and it made me think about the people we call heroes and criminals. What makes one person good and one person bad? I think reading science fiction really makes you think about your values because you read about societies where the values are very different. It can be as useful as reading history.

Adam: I read *Can't Get There from Here*. It's about homeless people and it made me think of homeless people differently. I'd never really thought about them before and this book made me think about why they became homeless and what their lives must be like. It really changed my ideas.

Many teens were very sensitive to the role of reading in helping them to understand their own inner worlds of feeling and emotions and their personal reactions to the external world, making them more compassionate and empathetic.

Roslyn: I think that when kids read more they become more compassionate. I don't know, I've just noticed that people who read are likely to be compassionate and kids that don't read can be really uncompassionate. When you're reading a book you often relate to a character.

Maya: [Reading is] almost like a guide. Reading tells you what people can be like so if you're talking to someone like that you know how to relate to them better. Reading helps you make connections with other people and people who read can do that better than people who don't read at all.

Catherine was reminded of how her pleasure reading had led her to greater empathy for the elderly, especially her own grandparents.

Catherine: I read the book *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom and it was about an old guy who came down with some disease. He was a teacher and one of his students started spending time with him and they became friends. It made me think of my grandparents and how I should call them more often and spend more time with them and appreciate them more.

Angus felt that his reading had helped him understand the impact of his behaviour on other people and try to control his tendency to be aggressive, especially to his younger brother.

Angus: I've read stuff about bullies so now I think of that when I feel like pushing my brother around and I try not to do it.

3. Empowerment. Some teens felt that their reading for pleasure had given them more than information and insight; it had empowered them to have strong beliefs and to act on those beliefs in the future. Kyesha, an African Canadian teen, stated that she frequently reads books about slavery and racism to help her understand discrimination and ways to fight it. Maya made a similar observation when describing her interest in books about the Holocaust:

Maya: I think [reading is] really fun and interesting. I like reading biographies and learning about life in other times, that's really interesting. It gives you a guideline to your life. I also love reading about people of other cultures and different things... I read a lot of Holocaust books like *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Night*, *Number the Stars* just because I'm Jewish and I'm really interested in that history. I've read a lot of those books and I know that I'll reread them in the future. I find it almost empowering to know about that history and to think about how you can change the world and how you can help. ... Sometimes I read a really good

book I find it changes me and then a few months later I'll read it again and I feel the same way again, it changes me again. It puts me back in that place.

4. Guidance and cautionary tales. Several teens noted that they had learned about the dangers of high risk behaviours through their pleasure reading.

Josie: *Go Ask Alice*, that was a very good book. It showed what can happen to you if you do drugs.

Darcy: *A Million Little Pieces*, it shows what can happen if you take drugs or if you have to go into rehab. ... Books that I read have given me ideas about what I don't want to do. Most of the books I read are about drugs, I don't know why, but books have shown me not to be an alcoholic. I don't want to try drugs or anything. Books have kind of warned me off.

Nick: I read a book but I forget the name. It was about a girl whose father was an alcoholic. If you read that book and your parent was an alcoholic, it could teach you how to handle it.

Personal reasons for pleasure reading

In focus group discussions, teens expressed five primary personal reasons for pleasure reading: to be entertained, to escape (from their routine lives or from particular problems), to relax, to enhance their imaginations, and for personal reassurance. These findings confirm studies by Taylor (1999), Toyne and Usherwood (2001), Twomey (2003), and Glenn (2004) in their investigations of adult fiction readers and reading groups and by Radway (1983) in her study of female adult romance readers. All of these prior studies indicated that recreational readers read for a variety of reasons ranging from escapism and relaxation to self-discovery and self-empowerment, and that reading fulfils an important function in their lives.

1. To be entertained. Many teens referred to the entertainment value of reading as the most important (and most self-evident) reason for choosing to read rather than indulging in some other recreational activity.

Alysha: I just like reading because I enjoy it. Sometimes you start a book and it's really good and you get really interested in it.

Isobel: I read because it's fun! Why would I do anything else? I like it, so why not? It's entertaining and fun.

For many teens, the reasons for reading are so transparently obvious they appear to need no further explanation.

Some teens comment that they choose to read when they are bored or when there is 'nothing else to do'. Roslyn, an avid urban 12-year-old reader, states that she is never without a book.

Roslyn: Sometimes when I'm incredibly bored, I always have a book. I don't feel right if I don't have a book on me. Even when I go to the library I take a book [with me]. It's like instant entertainment.

In contrast, Joshua considers reading a 'fall back', something to do when there's nothing interesting on television, and Maribeth reads on weekend mornings when she has 'nothing else to do'.

Joshua: I read when I'm bored, if there's nothing on TV, then I'll read.

Maribeth: In elementary, my parents wanted me to read half an hour a day, and I got used to it, so even though I don't need to do it anymore, I still do. I do my homework and then I read for half an hour. And on the weekends, I'm bored in the mornings, so I'll read.

2. To escape. Some teens comment that they specifically rely on reading as a means of escaping from their problems.

Catherine: I'll read if something bad is happening in my life and I want to go into somebody else's life. It's like an escape.

Cal: Sometimes I read a book, when my grandmother was sick in the hospital in two days I was able to finish three large books and they were really good. It kind of distracted me. I was at the hospital for 3 or 4 hours a day.

Cal's ability to be absorbed in his reading helped him through a difficult time in his life. Kate, aged 15, predicts that books will always fill this role for her.

Kate: Actually I think that [the importance of reading] is really true. When I'm older, if something happens and everything falls apart, books will always be there no matter what happens and it's just a really comforting feeling knowing that you can read anything. And there are so many different kinds of books: motivational books, ones that are about teenage girls that are going through life. You can sort of connect with it and it makes you feel better.

Margie and Nicola note that they rely on reading for pleasure, not to escape from particularly sad or difficult life moments, but to escape from the routine pressures of their lives.

Margie: I also like to read because you can get away from things. You don't have to worry about your project that's due in a few days or things like that. It's like being in a different world.

Nicola: It [reading] also kind of like relaxes me sometimes. If I'm really stressed about something with school, it's a way to get away from it, just a way to get away.

In contrast, some teens (much like the adult female romance readers in Radway's pioneering study) enjoy the opportunity to escape not from the problems but from the very 'ordinariness' of their lives through the medium of reading, as Ashley, a rural 12-year-old, relates.

Ashley: I like reading books about people, but not real people, not people like me. I like reading fantasies about princesses and stuff. It's more fun than real life. Books like *The Princess Diaries* can be good, too, because that's [about] an ordinary girl sort of like me who becomes a princess. That won't happen to me, but it's fun to read about.

3. To relax. During focus group discussions, many teens spoke about their favourite time to read, noting that their days are very busy with school, homework, and structured activities such as sports. Teens frequently read before bed because this is when they have free time and also because reading relaxes them and helps them to unwind before falling sleep:

Ruth: I read at night usually because it slows your mind down so you can get to sleep. It helps me relax. At night I like to read less interesting books because that really makes me tired. Boring books are good at night.

Kathleen: I have to read before I go to bed. I'm always hyper before bed and reading calms me down.

4. To enhance the imagination. Several teens viewed reading as a creative act, describing the way that they actively participate in the creation of the story through their imaginations. As suggested by reader response theorists, the reader is actively engaged in constructing meaning as he or she selectively expands the meaning of the text in the context of his or her life.

Andrew: I like to read all the time because it just opens up a whole new world to us. You get to use your imagination instead of on TV where it's all just in front of you. It's much more creative to me and it's more interesting.

Several teens described the fact that they feel that they are 'in control' when they are reading: they have the freedom to imagine a character or scene in the way they want and are not constrained by someone else's conception.

Jessica: When you're reading, no-one else is putting ideas in your head. You can think what you want about the characters and stuff, you can imagine them.

Isobel: It's like I'm the director [when I read] so if I want something to change I can change it in my mind.

Margie: Like sometimes if I try to read really fast I may mix up the words and think a character's name is something different and if I like that name better I may just call them that. If it says in the book that they are blonde but I've been picturing them with brown hair, I don't really care, I just keep picturing them with brown hair.

5. Reassurance. For many teens, pleasure reading can be reassuring, making them feel better about themselves and their own lives. The following exchange between two rural teenage girls demonstrates the role of reading for pleasure in affirming the girls' sense of personal identity. Through reading books and magazines, and by talking about this reading with peers, the girls overcome their feelings of adolescent awkwardness and inadequacy:

Karen: It's a book I just read a few days ago. It's called *The Earth, My Butt and Other Big Round Things*. It was just really funny and the main character in the book was a bit like me, I thought. I could really identify with her and with her problems and what she did to solve them.

Victoria: I like funny books like the Georgia Nicolson books. They are really funny but she also does things like I do. She likes boys and has trouble with her parents. I'm doing some of the same stuff as her and reading about her life is interesting. It makes my life seem more fun. It makes me think I'm not so bad, not so stupid as other people!

Conclusion

This exploratory study confirms Ross' (1999) studies of adult fiction in which she found that readers frequently reported a circular relationship between themselves and the text: readers often choose a book for pleasure and then find in it insights related to themselves, their lives, and their problems. In other words, 'Readers choose books for the pleasure anticipated in the reading itself but then, apparently serendipitously, they encounter material that helps them in the context of their lives. In effect, these avid readers reported finding without seeking' (Ross, 1999: 785). The present study strongly supports the concept that teens, like adults, unconsciously use pleasure reading as a means of everyday life information seeking and the reasons for personal salience identified in the foregoing discussion have a strong developmental theme: in their pleasure reading, teens gain significant insights into self-identification, self-construction, and self-awareness, all of which aid them in the transition from childhood to adulthood.

This study also strongly supports a reader-response approach to teens and reading. According to reader-response theorist Louise Rosenblatt, readers pay attention to the referential meaning and the associative meaning of words (the images, feelings, attitudes, associations, and ideas evoked by words). The reader's creation of meaning from a text is an active, self-ordering, self-correcting process. The text acts as a stimulus, encouraging the reader to formulate a hypothesis about what the text means, but no text can guarantee the type of response evoked. The text does not control the reader; readers make choices as they read texts:

As the reader submits himself to the guidance of the text, he must engage in a most demanding kind of activity. Out of his past experience, he must select appropriate responses to the individual words; he must sense their interplay on one another; he must respond to clues of tone and attitude and movement. He must focus his attention on what he is structuring through these means. He must try to see it as an organized whole, its parts interrelated as fully as the text and his own capacities permit. From sound and rhythm and image and idea, he forges an experience, a synthesis, that he calls the poem or play or novel (Rosenblatt, 1938: 183).

In Rosenblatt's model, since no text can guarantee the type of response evoked, the reader's stance will determine what the reading yields:

The reading of a book, it is true, has sometimes changed a person's entire life. When that occurs, the book has undoubtedly come as a culminating experience that crystallizes a long, subconscious development. In such cases, the book usually opens up a new view of life or a new sense of the potentialities of human nature and thus resolves some profound need or struggle. The probability of any particular works having so profound and transfiguring effect cannot, however, be predicted or planned for. It would result from the convergence of a great many intangible factors. The possibility that literature may offer such inspiration should, nevertheless, make us eager to stimulate our students to roam freely through a great many types of literary experience (Rosenblatt, 1938: 188).

Thus, to a large extent, the reader response approach allows us to bypass the high/low culture dichotomy in favor of a theory of reading that emphasizes the role of the critical and engaged reader. Active critical reading can take place with any text as stimulus; thus, reader's stance is more important to the reading experience than the inherent quality of the text itself.

Note

1. The OECD initiated the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) to provide 'policy oriented international indicators of the skills and knowledge of fifteen-year-old

students. PISA is a collaborative effort among OECD member countries to regularly assess youth outcomes in three domains: reading literacy, mathematical literacy, and scientific literacy – through common international tests' (Bussiere et al., 2001: 10). Reading literacy is defined as the ability to understand, use and reflect on written texts in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate in society.

Acknowledgements

This research could not have taken place without the participation of many junior high school students. I am very grateful that they agreed to be part of this research and I would particularly like to thank those who volunteered to participate in focus group discussions. I would also like to acknowledge and thank the principals of each of the participating junior high schools for their interest in and support of this research. This research project was generously supported by a Dalhousie University Faculty of Graduate Studies Research Development Grant and by an Atlantic Provinces Library Association Memorial Grant.

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