

On the edge

Born to be wild, perhaps, but not literate.

From the desk of the Library Provocateur

To someone who started raiding the adult fiction collection at the tender age of nine, it came as a shock to learn that humans were never *gasp* born to read. Born to be wild, perhaps, but not literate.

But how could this be? I read the labels on jam jars at breakfast if the newspaper is late. I've even been known to read the local equivalent of the Innkeepers Act (peeling behind the door) if without a book at 3am in a foreign hotel.

How can reading be unnatural?

In her fascinating book *Proust and the Squid: The story and science of the reading brain*, cognitive neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf argues that the invention of writing, and thus reading, barely two thousand years ago, compelled our ancestors to substantially rearrange their brains – a process only made possible by the inherent 'plasticity' of that wondrous organ: the brain's inherent ability to make new connections.

With this physiological rearrangement, and the capacity of writing to capture and communicate a seemingly limitless array of ideas, came new ways of thinking – opening the door to a vast intellectual workshop that humans have yet to fully explore; and for which both teachers and librarians like to think they hold the keys.

Fully two millennia since the first Sumerian etched his shopping list in wet clay, the majority of us still don't find the related processes of reading and writing easy to master. Wolf is right – reordering our primal brain for literacy does not come naturally. I won't belabour the point with random quotes from the library's photocopier manual, which I still personally believe was authored by a team of great apes working under extreme duress, and with very blunt pencils.

There is hope however. Evidence gathered by educational researchers over many decades confirms that the earlier we are exposed to reading as children, the easier it is for us to learn to read and write effectively – to become functionally literate. Furthermore, quality does trump quantity – getting the basics of spelling and grammar right (and right) from the start is critical.

Not too many years after the Sumerians, or possibly the Chinese, introduced writing to the world, my parents signed me up at our local public library. Wonder of wonders, the Children's Library had books – lots of bright and appealing books, attended by pleasant staff who still looked young enough to be our grandmothers and who encouraged us to read.

The desire to nurture new generations of readers is still, I believe, at the heart of professional librarianship today. And if it's not, it should be. In our Brave New World of online gaming, social networking, and the library as 'third space', I fear that libraries are afraid to be libraries (collections of books), and thus run the very real risk of becoming nothing at all – a funky irrelevancy.

I believe we should not – indeed must not – lose sight of one of the core reasons for libraries and librarians: to nurture and support a love of reading in people of all ages, and from all walks of life. Without access to a vibrant local library, what becomes of the child growing up in a home without books? Schools can only do so much to fill the void.

I freely admit to being a library junkie. Whenever I'm in another city or town, I always make time to visit the local public library, and from it I invariably learn much about its community. In Australia, public libraries vary considerably according to the makeup and relative fortunes of their local communities. As a rule however, the majority still appear to share a common mission – to nurture reading as both a skill and a pleasure.



My worry though, as I see more libraries subtly downsize both adult and children's book collections in favour of new media, is that this mission is being quietly eroded. And I fear that once the rot has set in, it will quickly undermine all that libraries stand for – philosophically and practically. Libraries, as we still know them now, will quickly disappear – leaving in their stead pale shadows of something intangible and thus inconsequential. Libraries will become the Ghosts of Something Useful and Good.

For those who think I'm being a fuddy-duddy or worse still, luddite, take the example of one State Library's self described "program for children under 8 years, available online or onsite". Take a child to the physical manifestation of this 'program' and you might as well be visiting a hamburger chain for all the incentive children are given to engage with the written word, let alone read! A few books are kept as props – one guesses for story time – but even these are downplayed in favour of questionable online games.

Compare that approach to the State Library of Western Australia, where the Better Beginnings program has been in operation since 2004. Better Beginnings takes the lessons of Wolf and others at face value and provides parents with the raw materials and encouragement to read to their children from an early age. Every parent with a newborn baby is eligible to receive a free reading kit which includes a board book – for some babies, the first book they will ever experience.

A 2009 study of Better Beginnings by Edith Cowan University shows what can be achieved, and what is at stake for libraries if we lose our way and forget our mission. Prior to Better Beginnings, 14% of parents reported reading to their children – after receiving the free reading kit, this figure climbed to 85%. Even more startling, after receiving the kit, 94% of parents reported that they or someone in their family had shared a book with their child in the past week.

In all of this, there is also a substantial payoff for libraries. The Better Beginnings data showed the number of children registered as library borrowers increasing from 4% pre-program to 23% post-program.

In a world increasingly prepared to countenance stilted computer game plots as acceptable reading for children, especially boys, I believe libraries must stand firm and continue to provide a higher quality alternative. I'm not saying every child under five should be able to recite Shakespeare, but let's give them the raw materials and encouragement to start doing what doesn't come naturally – reading – and do it well. We owe them at least that much.

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