

Confessions of a Promiscuous Reader

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Please accept my thanks for your kind invitation to speak to you today and for your presence at this event. I am honored by both.

Having entitled my presentation today “Confessions of a Promiscuous Reader” I am obviously tipping my hat to our recent guest, the arch-librarian Nancy Pearl, the author of *Book Lust* and *More Book Lust* for adult readers and *Book Crush* for younger readers. But I am also playing with two words in the title; both “confessions” and “promiscuous” are polyvalent conveying a variety of denotations and connotations.

My talk today not only alludes to Nancy Pearl and the love affairs that we have with books, but also to the seventeenth-century English Puritan poet, John Milton, whose ringing endorsement of a free press, *Areopagitica*, includes this: “Since therefore the knowledge and survey of vice is in this world so necessary to the constituting of human vertue, and the scanning of error to the confirmation of truth, how can we more safely, and with lesse danger scout into the regions of sin and falsity then by reading all manner of tractats, and hearing all manner of reason? And this is the benefit which may be had of

books promiscuously read.” In other words, Milton says, we arrive at truth only by examining all views, “books promiscuously read.”

So “Confessions of a Promiscuous Reader.” First, that word “confessions.” In common parlance it means admission or acknowledgement of fault, error, vice, sin, or weakness. I will admit to you that I am not merely a bibliophile but a bibliomane, book-crazy, a book addict, a codex junky; I confess that I am powerless over books. I have given away (usually to public libraries) more books than most people will ever own. As Henry Ward Beecher asked, “Where is human nature so weak as in the book store?” I have bought second copies of books having forgotten that I’d already owned the first. I once bought a seventeenth-century German manuscript of Latin Catholic hymns (hand written and hand bound presumably by a Bavarian monk) simply because, well, that would be nice to own. When I visit a city for the first time, I usually visit its signature library: San Francisco’s new public library, Chicago’s Newberry Library, Yale’s Sterling and Beinecke Libraries in New Haven, the British Library in London, the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris, the library of Trinity College in Dublin, the library of Trinity College Cambridge.

But “confessions” also has another denotation and a positive connotation. It can mean an expression of faith or belief. So, for example, we speak of the different traditions within Christianity as distinct “confessions.” Or the traditional statements of doctrine that are frequently employed in Christian worship, the creeds, are also known as “confessions of faith.” Part of my purpose today is to offer you an expression of my own faith in

books, in reading. Now some might say that I'm just preaching to the choir. However, the choir needs to be preached to, not to convert them but to renew and to revive them. In a society in which many leading indicators of reading are on the decline, this choir becomes discouraged and disheartened. And in a time when we hear a great deal about the end of print literacy and the rise of multimedia, this choir might understandably lose faith in books.

And the news about reading in America isn't very good. According to the 2004 report issued by the National Endowment for the Arts and entitled *Reading at Risk*, the percentage of Americans reporting literary reading has declined from 57% to 47% over twenty years, with literary reading by men and literary reading by 18 to 34 year olds showing the steepest declines.

Moreover, in addition to playing with the word "confessions," I am also turning over the word "promiscuous." Sex sells, of course, and I wanted a title that might get your attention. But my love affairs with books (yes, "affairs" – I am not a faithful book lover) are sensuous experiences. I love the feel of books as I hold them and stroke them, I love the smell and sound of books as I riffle their pages, I love the look of books in disciplined orders on shelves or lying languidly on my bedside table.

Will electronic technology replace the codex paper book? Recently, my college's interim vice president for information technology with great excitement gave me a Sony Reader handheld electronic book device asking me to review it. It has the dimensions of a

book, though it is heftier. This book device allows you to download dozens of books into the device's memory. I can report to you that it is like kissing your lover through a screen door. It does not permit underlining or marginal notes; it does not permit you to stick mementos into it that you or the next reader will discover later; it does not permit you to riffle pages or quickly skim or quickly consult endnotes or other critical apparatus. It might be useful for downloading your summer entertainment reading but not for learning. And its cost prohibits your being careless with it or sharing it with another. But most important, it doesn't feel, smell or look like a book. I have known books, sir, and you are no book.

However, in addition to its sensual sense, "promiscuous" can also mean casual, random, indiscriminate or diverse. This is Milton's sense of the word in his phrase "books promiscuously read." I was fortunate to grow up in a house of promiscuous readers. My parents had wide-ranging tastes and our home was, more than most, filled with books and music, while the dinner-table conversation included national and world events (gleaned from reading) and ideas. My father told me that his love of books began when his older sister would take him to the public library where he remembered enjoying those big Windsor chairs that seemed to have been the standard issue for American libraries in the first half of the twentieth century. My own young literary tastes were more narrow—volcanoes, airplane disasters, and fossils (including dinosaurs, naturally)—which troubled my father who finally picked out a book on Amerigo Vespucci to broaden my reading. I never read it, of course. In fourth grade a book club allowed us to order and to purchase (for very little cost) our own books. The first book I ever selected on my own

and owned with my own money was a cheap paperback copy of James Hilton's 1936 fantasy novel *The Lost Horizon* which brings a hijacked group of Europeans into the valley of Shangri-La.

After I graduated from my Catholic elementary school, I used the cash gifts that I had received to buy remaindered books, including the Modern Library edition of the complete works of Francois Rabelais, the bawdy satirical adventures of the giant king Gargantua and his son Prince Pantagruel. Why did I buy (and voraciously read) this translation of the sixteenth-century French writer? Perhaps because his name was already familiar in our home. My parents' music tastes were also promiscuous, and they had spent a weekend in the mid-1950s in New York City where they saw the original Broadway production of *The Music Man*, whose soundtrack album was frequently played in our home. You may remember that Meredith Wilson's innocent musical was the story of a romance between a traveling con man, "Professor" Harold Hill, and the librarian of River City, Iowa, Marian Paroo. The town's deceased benefactor ensured that the town would inherit the building but that, because he knew its censorious citizens, Marian would inherit the books in the building. In a song called "Pick a Little, Talk a Little," the old women of the town gossip: "He left River City the library building but he left all the books to her. Rabelais. Chaucer. Balzac." So I spent the summer before high school immersed in a carnivalesque French Renaissance text. And here I think I discovered the imaginative power of books to represent life in all its complexity, to poke fun at sacred institutions and people, and to break out of the earnest sentimentality that is the hallmark of much American literature with its requisite moral seriousness and uplift. I wouldn't get

quite the same anarchic tingle again until I read Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* for a graduate course and again a few years later when an adolescent of my acquaintance lent me Daniel Pinkwater's *Lizard Music*, a book allegedly for juvenile readers.

Promiscuous reading also treasures browsing with its attendant serendipitous discoveries, whether it be in a book store or among a library's stacks. I have no particular nostalgia for card catalogs and appreciate the advantages of Boolean searches, however, when I work in most special collections like those of the Mariners Museum, Swem Library, the Beinecke Library, the Library of Congress or the British Library, I do miss being able to enter and browse their stacks. Several summers ago I spent a month in residence at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, Norfolk, England. Every Wednesday I researched in the Dean and Chapter Library of Norwich Cathedral, which had been founded by the first Norman bishop Herbert de Losinga in the twelfth century. This library uses an interesting (and typically premodern) system of arranging books in the stacks. Over the passing years, new bookcases have been added and the newest books occupy the newest bookcases, while the oldest books occupy the oldest bookcases. In other words, the books in Bookcase A have been in the library's collection the longest, while those in Bookcase R have been added recently. Within a bookcase, books are then arranged by size, with duodecimos on the top shelf, decimos below them, octavos below them, quartos below them and folios and elephant folios on the bottom. If that wasn't enough to encourage browsing, the library's card catalog necessitated it. Books were identified by bookcase letter and shelf number; then you were on your own to find it. The catalog presented its own challenges. My research concerned seventeenth-century

connections between East Anglia and New England, and the card catalog included drawers arranged chronologically by century, alphabetically (I thought) within a century. However, I noticed that some cards in the seventeenth-century section appeared not in alphabetical order, a problem that I pointed out to “sub-sub-librarian” Brenda and asked her if she wanted me to rearrange them. She became distressed: “Oh, dear,” she said, “He developed a complex catalog system, so there’s probably a reason that he put them in that order.” To which “sub-librarian” Tom overhearing us added, “Yes, and he has been dead for years so we can’t ask him.” I gathered that the un-named “he” was a predecessor, the eternal librarian who must not be named in whose honor they can never be more than sub-librarians. If we cannot understand the catalog system, it is we who fall short, not the cataloger.

Earlier I suggested that there was plenty of bad news about reading, but I also want to point to some reasons for hope. Certainly Potter-mania reminds us of the power of printed books to engage imaginations and to bridge generations. A bibliophile would have to have a heart of stone not to be touched by those television images of children and parents lined up at bookstores for the midnight-hour release of the latest and last book in the Harry Potter series. Here is another observation, though more local and anecdotal: When I teach the survey of early American literature course at Thomas Nelson Community College, one of the project options that students have is to visit a rare books or special collections library (such as the Virginiana rooms in Hampton and Newport News, the Mariners Museum, or Swem Library), search for a book, manuscript or other textual ephemera published or produced before 1870 and write about it. Over the years I

have found that this is one of the more engaging projects for students precisely because it brings them into physical contact with a relic that links the student to the American past. Holding a copy of Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* printed in his lifetime not only permits the student to touch something (to them) ancient and to have a tactile experience of a distant material culture, but it also evokes the possibility that Jefferson himself might have held this book before sending it to a neighbor or correspondent. Using a print or digital facsimile does not have the same thrill.

And why should my students' positive reactions to this project be surprising?
Milton said it nearly four hundred years ago:

For Books are not absolutely dead things, but doe contain a potencie of life in them to be as active as that soule was whose progeny they are; nay they do preserve as in a violl the purest efficacie and extraction of that living intellect that bred them. . . . And yet on the other hand, unlesse warinesse be us'd, as good almost kill a Man as kill a good Book; who kills a Man kills a reasonable creature, Gods Image; but hee who destroyes a good Booke, kills reason it selfe, kills the Image of God, as it were in the eye. Many a man lives a burden to the Earth; but a good Booke is the pretious life-blood of a master spirit, . . . treasur'd up on purpose to a life beyond life. (*Areopagitica*)

The same National Endowment for the Arts report that brought us the bad news, *Reading at Risk*, also offers us some hopeful data: Literary readers are more than twice as likely as non-readers to perform volunteer and charity work and to attend performing arts events, almost four times as likely to visit a museum, and almost twice as likely to attend a sporting event. Although these are correlations not causalities, reading is apparently good for society.

I believe in books. I believe in their power to amaze, astonish, confound, vex, perplex, comfort, sting, entertain, delight, terrify, sadden, inspire, and inform. I believe in the power of reading, of slow reading, to take us outside of our narrow narcissistic presentism into suspended time and time past. I believe in the power of reading to induce ecstasy, literally from the Greek, *ex-histanai*, to be placed outside of ourselves.

And you, dearly beloved, are the priests, ministers, imams, rabbis, guardians, acolytes and apostles of this faith in books. It is your task to preserve and to present books, in season and out of season. Never weaken, never tire in that mission. Dark ages have come and gone, over and over again. Books remain. Barbarians of all political, religious and ideological stripes have gutted libraries and burned books. However, history has buried and vilified the barbarians, not the books. Books endure.