

The Reader and the Librarian

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Washington Library Association Annual Conference
Kennewick, WA April 2007
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The text below is a revised version of a paper presented at the 2007 WLA Conference as part of the program: *Beyond Information: Reading for Pleasure, Discovery, and Personal Growth*.

Abstract:

This paper explores the experience of reading from the reader's perspective, drawing on research conducted by Louise Rosenblatt and Catherine Sheldrick Ross. Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading is described and contrasted with contemporary library practices, and these different approaches serve to exemplify the poles of what she calls the efferent-aesthetic continuum. Library educators and practitioners tend to reside at one end of the continuum and emphasize goal-oriented searching with pre-defined needs and specifically articulated questions; at the other end we encounter the complex cognitive, emotional, imaginative, associative and experiential transactions that engage pleasure readers. The medium of the book is briefly examined, as are the purposive skills that can emerge from the practice of reading for pleasure. To better serve readers, the largest body of library users, it is incumbent upon the library profession to understand the detailed processes and characteristics that constitute the reading experience.

We are here to talk about the experiences of the reader – the engaged interaction between reader and text. Perhaps because libraries have such longstanding ties to books and reading, the activity of reading itself seems to have become “the elephant in the room” so to speak. We take reading for granted to such a degree that we sometimes fail to recognize anymore its unique qualities and features. This is my small attempt to redress this oversight.

In this presentation we will look closely at the reading process and the just-short-of-miraculous evocation of black marks on paper into the life, experience, emotions, and understanding of the individual reader. I ask that you set aside any expectations that I will deliver some kind of quick fix for your libraries or services. Rather, I hope simply to enlarge the frame within which librarians tend to see reading, and to emphasize the often overlooked role of the reader.

Part 1: The Reading Experience

Survey after survey confirms that between 70 to 80 percent of library users say they come to libraries specifically for books. An article by library educator and print culture advocate Wayne Wiegand, mentions one recent survey noting this 80% figure.¹ The OCLC *Perceptions* report, published to significant fanfare in 2005 – a full 10 years after the advent of the World Wide Web – finds that people so strongly associate libraries with books and reading that, in the words of the report, “there is no runner up.”²

Wiegand’s article notes that what so many readers find so compelling is the opportunity to be fully immersed in a narrative or story; and though we tend to think of stories as fiction, a variety of narrative non-fiction also appeals to readers. In order to explore the attractions of the book and the experience of reading in more detail I would like to turn to the work of Louise Rosenblatt.

Louise Rosenblatt and her Transactional Theory

Louise Rosenblatt was a researcher, theorist, and educator who for 40 years conducted research on both naïve and experienced readers. She began publishing her ideas in the late 1920s, and she is a seminal figure in what later came to be called reader-response theory. Her thinking has stood up well to the test of time and, though she was a pedagogue herself, her writings are uniquely suited to the world of public librarianship by virtue of her concern not only with how people *should* read but, equally, her concern with how they actually *do* read. Her focus on the particular aspects of the experience of reading makes her work an ideal place from which to understand the powerful relationships our users establish with books. Best of all, for anyone who has ventured into the thicket of literary theory, she writes with great clarity, rationality and insight – and in ways that are completely approachable and accessible to the layman. Her approach is pragmatic: her intent is to examine how people read, why, and what happens. I will be referring to her so frequently that this may well seem a sort of homage.

Rosenblatt’s research was conducted in the field of literature, but following Wiegand’s suggestion, I think we can profit by applying her findings to those instances where the reader is reading sequentially for the journey and experience the book provides – this would include narrative non-fiction such as history, biography, memoir, outdoor adventure; and, of course, fiction and all its subgenres, poetry, drama, etc.

Given the shortness of our time together, I will only be able to touch on Rosenblatt’s most important ideas and findings. In an attempt to give them more staying power, I will be reiterating some of these themes in a number of ways and contexts.

The text, for Rosenblatt, is just marks on a page until the reader evokes from it the literary work. Just as a musician evokes from the printed score the actual music, the reader must evoke the literary work in the act of reading. Rosenblatt puts the reader at the center of the experience of pleasure reading, which she describes as a powerful and dynamic transaction between the reader and the text.

Her transactional theory is one of the things for which she is best known, and it goes something like this: A transaction is the lived-through experience of a particular

individual reading a particular text at a particular time. Or, to expand upon this in a passage which captures several of her interrelated themes: “the reading of a text is an event occurring at a particular time in a particular environment at a particular moment in the life history of the reader. The transaction will involve not only the past experience but also the present state and present interests or preoccupations of the reader. This suggests the possibility that printed marks on a page may even become different linguistic symbols by virtue of transactions with different readers.”³

Librarian Catherine Sheldrick Ross, whose work we will examine shortly, has described this type of reading as “a transaction between a text and a reader who uses both personal experience of the world and familiarity with literary codes and conventions to construct meaning from the black marks on the page.”⁴ This lived-through transaction involves more than decoding the marks on the page or connecting the words to their referents – it prompts a response in the reader in which images, feelings, attitudes, associations, and ideas are elicited. “Always,” Rosenblatt says, “there is the human being mediating between the linguistic symbol and its referent.”⁵ The reader actively constructs or recreates the text in the act of reading.

As Rosenblatt notes, because of the reader’s past experiences and present preoccupations, the same text can have different meanings to different individuals at different times and under different circumstances – and a given reader’s response to a particular text can change over time depending on her particular situation or life experiences. I imagine many of us have returned to a favorite book from our younger years only to find that it no longer affected us in quite the same way. The words on the page are the same, but we have changed, and we evoke a “different” book in the later reading from the one we experienced in the former.

Basically, the fullness of the reading experience involves bringing the text together with the complexity of the reader and the totality of his life experience. For the reflective individual, the activity of reading a particular text is a process of organizing and synthesizing an evolving response in which the reader is constantly interpreting the text and his own interpretations.

By putting so much emphasis on the reader’s personal and past experience, one might think that Rosenblatt has succumbed to a form of extreme relativism. But nothing could be further from the truth. She believes in multiple readings, but that not all readings are equally valid. She emphasizes that the reader will respond to the text based on personal associations, but upon reflection the reader must be sure that his interpretations are “anchored in the text.”⁶ Again, in her own words: “Two prime criteria of validity as I understand it are that the reader’s interpretation not be contradicted by any element of the text, and that nothing be projected for which there is no verbal basis.”⁷

And although Rosenblatt certainly acknowledges qualitative differences among texts, her approach is not an exclusive or elitist one – she would tell you that the lived-through experience can be had as readily by readers of Harry Potter as by readers of Virginia Woolf.

To summarize, the transaction that a reader has with a particular text includes the complex web of the individual's thoughts, emotions, attitudes, and tangible and intangible lived-experience. The associations evoked also draw on the reader's present situation and past experiences, and on his previous experience with texts and language. Given the full engagement of the reader's cognitive, emotional, imaginative, experiential, and temporal worlds, it is no wonder that avid readers find the experience of reading so vital and rewarding.

Rosenblatt and Catherine Sheldrick Ross

Catherine Sheldrick Ross is one of the most visible library educators today to be exploring the experience of reading. In 2006 she published a book called *Reading Matters* and I highly recommend it to all librarians who work in public libraries.⁸ Today I am going to draw from an earlier article of hers that looks at reading for pleasure, called "Finding without Seeking."⁹

The article is grounded in a survey she conducted of 194 avid readers, and the results largely confirm the particulars of Rosenblatt's transactional theories that I have just gone over. I have merged some of the descriptive characteristics Ross identifies¹⁰ and combined them with findings from Rosenblatt to illustrate the most common reasons people read:

- ❖ People read for an awakening of perspective, or for an "enlargement of possibilities" and understanding.¹¹ Some of the disparate variations on this theme might include:
 - to see the world and reflect on life from within the perspective of diverse types of people and personalities
 - to experience places and customs different from the reader's own
 - "a means for getting outside the limited cultural group into which the individual is born"¹²
 - to make personally available to the reader elements of societies "distant in time and space"¹³
 - to learn about the "extraordinary diversity of subcultures" to be found in a particular society or throughout the world¹⁴

(Incidentally, it is interesting to compare these characteristics with the progressive stages in an individual's ethical development as identified by psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg.¹⁵)

- ❖ Another reason people read is for "lived-through" experiences they would not otherwise have. As Rosenblatt says: people read to "acquire not so much additional *information* as additional *experience*... a *living through*, not simply knowledge about: not the fact that lovers have died young and fair, but a living through of *Romeo and Juliet*."¹⁶

- ❖ People read to feel a “connection with others / awareness of not being alone”¹⁷ – narratives that mirror the reader’s situation or experience. To discover that others have lived through joys or fears or difficulties similar to our own.
- ❖ To identify roles open to the reader – models for identity and living; narratives that inspire, reassure, comfort, confirm self-worth, offer strength or courage to make a change.¹⁸ And to learn from others’ mistakes; to encounter and recognize nefarious human conduct, but to escape its actual consequences.

Speaking personally for a moment, I would add that I am frequently stunned to discover unanticipated connections between the books I’ve read. On the other hand, I do anticipate, and relish when I find, the well-turned phrase, the evocative image, some idea or sentiment stated in a powerful, provocative, or intriguing way. Years of positive reading experiences have convinced me that literature is one of our most remarkable and transformative art forms.

Part 2: Reading from the Library Perspective

I’d like to shift gears now to look at the predominant view of reading we find within the library profession. Our information-based approach is strikingly different from the highly individualized and lived-through transactions we’ve just been talking about. Louise Rosenblatt again, however, provides us with a window onto our own activities.

The Efferent-Aesthetic Continuum

One of the other things for which Rosenblatt is best known is her identification of what she calls the efferent-aesthetic continuum. The type of reading I have just described in Part 1 is what she calls aesthetic reading. This is the type of reading that the majority of our users say they come to libraries specifically to experience.

Librarianship, however, is largely dominated by efferent reading. Efferent reading is reading for particular facts or purposes, with the intent to come away from the reading with some nugget of information. One example Rosenblatt uses to illustrate a case of extreme efferent reading is to imagine that a child has just swallowed a household poison, and the mother is frantically reading the label on the bottle for the antidote or emergency measures to administer.¹⁹ The reader in this case is certainly not reading for any of the aesthetic reasons listed above, but only to extract what is needed in order to provide emergency assistance.

Clearly, efferent reading is useful and people engage in it all the time – as we know from working at reference desks where we help people find particular information for everything from repairing their cars to writing resumes, pricing a particular collectible, researching a medical condition, etc.

Because of their strongly utilitarian advantages, our professional focus has come to rest on the tools that will assist us in extracting pieces of information; and reference services

traditionally have been predicated on goal-oriented searching that assumes pre-defined needs and articulated questions. But this almost completely efferent modality in librarianship may actually discourage pleasure readers from seeking our assistance at reference desks, because, as we have just discussed, they are often seeking to expand their perspective or discover something that they've yet to encounter and, hence, cannot easily describe. Pleasure readers operate in ways that are often diametrically opposed to our own – they frequently come in just to browse and see what “jumps out at them,” or maybe they are hoping to find a book that will satisfy some nebulous need or unstated expectation, or that will fit a particular mood.

Librarians are naturally intrigued by advances in the computing field that have augmented our authority-controlled catalogs with features such as keyword searching, search field and format limits, relevancy algorithms and sorting options. It is natural that much of our attention is focused on these advancements and their potential to assist in information discovery. But computerized information seeking is an efferent-oriented activity that has little to do with the type of experiences book readers are seeking. “Search” has come to dominate our field so extensively that the thought librarians give to reading does not typically extend beyond the act of tacking up celebrity posters emblazoned with the single word, “Read.”

If you think I'm exaggerating librarianships' emphasis on efferent information and its general disregard for what happens in the act of reading, try finding in the library literature articles on the *experience of reading*, or, say, *libraries and adult readers*, or *reading and epistemology*. It is true that some articles are published on these subjects but they are few and far between, and they are particularly rare in the mainstream library press readily accessible to most public librarians. On the other hand, the typical public library is likely to subscribe to periodicals such as *Computers in Libraries* and other professional journals that are full of articles on data manipulation and technological applications.

Efferent reading is extremely valuable, and reference work is essentially founded upon it, so it is perhaps not surprising that we are focused so intently on finding tools and information retrieval. But to be stuck more or less permanently at the efferent end of the continuum is to leave unexplored the complex cognitive, associative, and emotional experiences the majority of our users say they get from books. To better serve pleasure readers we must be prepared to move from our own efferent comfort zones toward the multifaceted approaches that readers have been shown to adopt. In short, we need to develop a greater understanding of the practice and experience of reading.

Ross has a few considerations for librarianship bearing on all this. She notes that our efferent-oriented library catalogs (as Rosenblatt might describe them) are “ill adapted to the task of helping readers find books they will enjoy.”²⁰ Readers instead rely on their personal experience to make reading choices, and they seek out books recommended by sources they trust. Avid readers rely on an array of resources and techniques to scan their environment and they pick up leads from trusted reviewers, book jacket blurbs, friends and family, etc. – libraries should employ both passive and personalized readers' advisory services to gain this trust and to assist infrequent readers.

Ross also reminds us that the reader or researcher is actively engaged in constructing meaning. She says “any theoretical model of information seeking that emphasizes *matching* of terms rather than the reader’s *making* of meaning is inadequate.”²¹ And Ross makes it clear that the *affective dimension* – the reader’s moods or emotions – plays a critical role in the reader’s transaction with texts. The problem-solving, goal-directed emphasis in librarianship downplays the powerful emotional responses readers evoke from books.

The good news is that the relatively marginalized niche of readers’ advisory has made important gains in recent years: good readers’ advisors inquire about the patron’s particular mood, past reading, and appeal factors such as characterization, plot, and pacing. And tools for matching readers with books, such as read-a-like lists and genre guides are lifesavers for frontline service librarians. But the understandable desire to expedite the suggestion of potentially appropriate authors and titles still does not really approach all that transpires between the reader and the text in the act of immersive reading. Additionally, the readers’ advisory renaissance has been largely a grassroots effort mobilized by practitioners; it receives limited emphasis in our nation’s library/information schools.

The Book as a Medium

At this point I would like to take a moment to debunk a spurious notion that is widespread in libraryland: the idea that the medium, or the “container,” as it is sometimes called, doesn’t matter. This statement is often made in connection with the promotion of electronic information delivery, but it is also used to blur the distinctions between books and other formats such as audiobooks and film. Now, I love a good film, or theatrical performance, or audiobook as well as the next guy – but to say that audio and visual adaptations are equivalent or identical to the written texts from which they are drawn is simply inaccurate. Let’s take a look at this.

- Books are composed of printed words; they demand literacy; they are accessed and decoded through the sense of vision; the reading of books is self-paced; and they are evoked in the highly individualized circuitry of each reader’s mind, heart and imagination.
- Audiobooks or movies based on books are non-literal; the language component reaches us through the sense of hearing; the pace is not controlled by the user; and the text is interpreted by the performer or performers (and is sometimes greatly abridged).

These are not trivial differences. Basically, once a book is transformed into a recording, it is no longer a literary work but is instead a dramatic one. The medium *does* largely determine the message, and once the individual is not reading for herself the words of the text, the message and experience becomes something very different indeed.

The acceptance and prevalence of this myth signifies, to me, that though libraries once celebrated literacy and reading, we now largely fail even to recognize the qualities unique to the book and to the reading experience.

Pleasure Reading and Purposive Skills

Along with the strong emphasis on providing patrons with useful information and answering narrowly defined reference questions, public libraries have played an important role in providing materials that citizens may use to inform themselves in order to carry out their democratic responsibilities. Louise Rosenblatt's research on the activity of leisure reading also identifies its potential to fulfill some of librarianship's most deeply held ideals and principles. Rosenblatt was careful not to suggest unequivocal or absolutist powers for the book, but she did think the practice of reading for pleasure could enhance a reader's critical thinking skills and result in personal growth, ethical development, and the strengthening of democratic values.

In her book *Literature as Exploration*, Rosenblatt discusses how the lived-through experience of reading can prepare an individual to be a better citizen in a democracy by helping him to think independently; to question ready-made solutions; through heightened sensitivity to the needs and problems of others; and by cultivating a "greater imaginative capacity to grasp the meaning of abstract laws or political and social theories for actual human lives."²²

I will not dwell on this aspect of Rosenblatt's research, but it is not insignificant that she closes her book *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* with the following quote from Walt Whitman's 1871 essay, "Democratic Vistas":

"Books are to be call'd for, and supplied, on the assumption that the process of reading is not a half-sleep, but, in highest sense, an exercise, a gymnast's struggle; that the reader is to do something for himself, must be on the alert, must himself or herself construct indeed the poem, argument, history, metaphysical essay – the text furnishing the hints, the clue, the start or frame-work. Not the book so much needs to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does. That were to make a nation of supple and athletic minds, well-train'd, intuitive, used to depend on themselves, and not on a few coteries of writers."²³

Conclusion

In this brief talk I've tried to highlight important qualities in the reading process: to look at how and why people read, and what happens during reading. Any abstract or account such as I have provided here is going to pale in comparison to the most intense moments I've personally experienced in my own reading: where characters have been fully imagined and their conflicts known from the inside; where scenes have been vividly painted into my mind and memory; where language has evoked everything from laughter to dread to astonishment and delight; where I have traveled in the most intimate ways across time and space; and where things have been said that challenged or reflected my

own thoughts, feelings, and experiences in ways that touch the center of who I am. Readers know how powerful the experience of reading can be, but it is difficult to convey the fullness of this experience to others. As Rosenblatt has noted, someone can adequately paraphrase the ideas in a scientific text for you, but no one can read a literary work of art for you.²⁴ Ultimately, what happens to the reader during reading cannot be experienced in any other way than the reading itself provides.

In our eager embrace of quick and easy access to bits of data and information, I wonder if libraries are not hastening the demise of the literary arts and the reading of books. As long as books deliver experiences qualitatively different from those provided by electronic media, avid readers will not give up their books. But if we do not stimulate in non-readers the pleasures of reading – and instead choose to champion all manner of electronic communication – we may find books relegated to the margins of our libraries; libraries that once had been solely concerned with print culture. The greatest demand currently and, in my opinion, the greatest hope for libraries in the future lies in our nurturing the love of reading and fully engaged literacy.

It is tempting to propose solutions to the situations I have detailed above, or to at least enumerate the ways libraries currently serve readers or could better serve them: from building timely, interesting, well-maintained collections to proactively integrating readers' advisory into public services; from providing quality displays, book discussion groups, and author programs to improving findability features in our catalogs and creating dedicated spaces for readers on our web sites. Libraries need to be doing all these things and more – to the degree our staffing resources will allow. Clearly, with 80% of our users coming to libraries specifically for books, it is essential that we prioritize our physical collections, their accessibility, and our service to the many patrons who are interested in using them.

The best solutions emerge only when a situation is thoroughly understood. With the exception of those focusing on readers' advisory, library educators and practitioners have demonstrated little interest in understanding the processes and nature of the reading experience. If our professional disposition places us on the opposite side of the reading spectrum from our largest body of users, then it is incumbent upon us to learn as much as we can about reading from the reader's perspective. Then we will be in a better position to discover solutions and to integrate this understanding into all elements of our collections and services.

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