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## Of Books and Reading

Last year a record 19,962 books were published in the United Kingdom and a near-record 12,589 in the United States. Whether we should regard the combined output of more than 30,000 books with pride or alarm is uncertain.

But perhaps the following two questions are more important: How well are the books assimilated? How many people read them? These questions can be answered, at least in part, thanks to the fact that for the last 20 years the American Institute of Public Opinion has been regularly surveying the reading habits of the American people. Through its affiliates abroad, the institute has gathered comparable information for several foreign countries.

In the United States no more than 17 percent of all adults were to be found reading books at the time of the most recent survey. This is in sorry contrast to the percentages in several other countries: Canada, 31; Australia, 34; England, 55.

The reading habits of our high-school and college graduates are likewise depressing: 57 percent of our high-school and 26 percent of our college graduates have not read a single book for the past year. A special study confined to college graduates showed that five out of six had not read a serious book outside their fields of special interest during the preceding several months.

We might hopefully suppose that, even though college graduates do not read much currently, they have some background of reading, some acquaintance with "the best that has been known and said." The results are again disappointing. The college graduates were asked to name the authors of the following books: *An American Tragedy*, *Babbitt*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Leaves of Grass*, *The Old Wives' Tale*, *Utopia*, *Vanity Fair*, *The Origin of Species*, *The Wealth of Nations*, *The Rubaiyat*, and *The History of Tom Jones*.

Nine percent could not name the author of any one of these books and 39 percent could not name more than three authors. Of the same group of college graduates, only 55 percent could name any recently published book.

Perhaps the pocket-size books are filling the gap? Not so. Nine percent of the people who buy books of this kind account for 78 percent of all sales. Book clubs? Unfortunately, no. Although books clubs distribute millions of books annually to hundreds of thousands of readers, the effect is statistically unimportant.

Are there any indications of a change? Currently, as pointed out above, only 17 percent of all adults were reading a book at the time they were interviewed; the comparable figure in 1937 was 29 percent. The trend is apparently downward.

The statistics give evidence of a grave cultural inadequacy and an even graver cultural decline. Books, both new and old, play an important part, possibly an indispensable part, in the transmission of the ideas that hold a civilization together. The relatively small—and apparently declining—number of people in the United States who read books should be a matter for general concern. We have heard much about Rudolf Flesch's book, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, a book that has been widely discussed. Whether or not Johnny can read is one thing, whether or not he does when he grows up is another. The answer apparently is: seldom.—G. DUS.