



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“I am convinced that a society without literature, or a society in which literature has been relegated – like some hidden vice – to the margins of social and personal life, and transformed into something like a sectarian cult, is a society condemned to become spiritually barbaric, and even to jeopardize its freedom.”

-From “Why Literature?”
Mario Vargas Llosa, the
New Republic 2001

The June 27, 2004 *New York Times Book Review* had a controversial essay by Cristina Nehring, called “Books Make You a Boring Person.” I was surprised by this article and it made me angry.

One could say this essay was not even worth considering, since it seems like a trite and easy attack on what the author called the “fetishization” of reading. But it made me think about fads; in particular, how tempting it can be to write off someone who seems to be participating in one.

Her premise is that not only has reading books become enormously popular, but also readers assume some sort of moral superiority over non-readers. As she puts it: “To be a reader these days is to be a sterling member of society, a thoughtful and sensitive human being, a winner.”

Her other point is that people who read a lot can’t think for themselves: “We all know people who have read

everything and have nothing to say,” she asserts. It is interesting to note that her support for this assertion includes quoting writers from the 16th, 18th and 19th centuries. It is a brave person who denigrates readers and then proceeds to expose her back-ground of extensive reading.

I think what bothers me most about her description of those faddish readers is that she leaves out so much. Nowhere does she talk about visiting a public library and seeing what librarians see every day: Parents reading aloud to their children, children reading to themselves, teens browsing the shelves in the teen area, patrons discussing titles at the reference desk, and the rustle of pages in the newspaper and magazine corner.

Nor does she talk about the joy of discovering a book and recommending it to a friend. Or of rediscovering a novel and finding you still like it, forty years later. Or the

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feeling you get when you are coming to the last few pages and you dread having the end, because all those characters will disappear from your daily life.

I do agree that reading seems to be in these days. Large bookstores are everywhere, and their chairs and floors and coffee areas are filled by people reading. There are book discussion groups, city-wide book readings, books about book groups, radio discussions of books and more. But it is not clear to me what exactly this means about the readers themselves; in fact, I don't think it tells us anything about them. Since almost activity can become a fad: eating dark chocolate, driving a hybrid car, wearing a hat, getting a piercing - it is difficult to imagine why anyone would use popularity as a way of diminishing the pleasure or importance of a behavior.

I think Ms. Nehring has

forgotten about the power of a book, no matter why it is being read. It can be a respite, a conversation, a life-changer. It is more than the words on the page. It is what we make of them, how we incorporate them into our lives and our thoughts, and how we interact with other readers. To again quote Mario Vargas Llaso, “[Literature] exists only when it is adopted by others and becomes a part of social life - when it becomes, thanks to reading, a shared experience.”