

Does Literature Change Lives?

I don't believe that, in my society, novels effect serious changes in anyone other than the handful of people who are writers, whose own novels are of course seriously affected by other novelists' novels. I can't see anything like that happening to the ordinary reader, nor would I expect it to.... You asked me if I thought my fiction had changed anything in the culture and the answer is no.

Philip Roth

I was changed by literature, not by cautionary or exhortatory literature, but by the truth as I found it in literature. I recognize the world in a different way because of it, and I continue to be influenced in that way by it. Opened up, made more alert, and called to a greater truthfulness in my own accounting of things, not just in my writing, in my life as well. It did that for me, and does that for me, and no one touched by it in this way should have any doubt of its necessity.

Tobias Wolff

Beyond my own reading experiences is the larger question of how other readers are affected by their literary encounters. The commonplace book tradition cannot thrive, let alone exist, in a culture where literary reading is on the wane. However, we hear from every quarter in this country that no one reads anymore, that television and now the Internet have all but killed off the pleasures of the page. We bemoan the closing of one bookstore after another and the alleged sharp decline in literary reading documented in the recent National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) report.¹ However, I am not entirely convinced by all these obituaries for reading, especially the widely cited NEA analysis. The study reports the findings of a large sample survey of over 17,000 individuals

¹ *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*. National Endowment for the Arts, Research Division Report #476.

conducted by the Census Bureau in 2002. The survey was designed to learn more about public participation in the arts, including the extent of literary reading in this country.

To measure literary activity, individuals were asked to indicate whether or not they had read at least one literary work during the past year. A “literary work” was defined as a novel, short story, play, or work of poetry. A reported decline in literary reading of 10% (56.9% to 46.7%) from 1982 to 2002 was the finding that aroused the greatest concern. This trend was observed for all the demographic groups that were studied— gender, ethnicity, educational level, and age, with the steepest decline of 28% reported for those in the youngest age group, those between 18 and 24.

In my view, the study is flawed in several respects. The definition of literary work is unnecessarily narrow, as a person who has read a memoir, collection of essays, or historical biography is not counted as a literary reader. Similarly, a person who has read the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky in a Russian literature course is also excluded from this group. Moreover, the measurement procedure does not distinguish between various types of literary works—reading a book of Ogden Nash poems is considered equivalent to reading Tennyson, Proust, or Keats.

In truth, as documented in the report, a significant amount of reading occurs in this country, as almost 60% of the US population indicated they have engaged in some form of literary activity during 2002. Moreover, given the rise in the population since 1982 (the year of the previous NEA survey), more people are reading literature today in terms of absolute numbers than in 1982, 205 million compared to 168 million, values that cannot be readily dismissed.

In a word, the implications of the NEA report may not be quite as dire as its authors imply. Perhaps individuals are reading more literary works on the Internet, or reading other literary genres, such as biography or political commentary or listening to literary works on tape, or simply spending more time reading periodicals and newspapers that on some accounts have the same benefits as the novels, short stories, plays, or works of

poetry measured in the survey. Also, 2002 may not have been a representative year, as the profound effects of the attack on this nation in September of the preceding year were still very salient.²

Indeed, informal book clubs and reading groups are flourishing throughout the country. Consider my hometown. Portland, Oregon is said to be a rather bookish city, with perhaps more bookstores per capita than any other comparable size city in the country. People seem to like to read, or at least to have books around for those long and dreary rainy days and nights. In a recent edition of *The Sunday Oregonian*, I was astonished to find that twenty-four different groups were scheduled to meet during the month and those were just the groups whose meetings were open to the public: The Great Books Group, The Popular Fiction Book Group, The Modern Women's Group, Contemporary Fiction, Science Fiction, and Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Book Groups. The Romance Readers Classic Books, First Wednesday, Mystery Lovers, Memoir, and Biography Groups, etc. etc. I was simply bowled over by the number of groups, the range of topics, and the fact that they were meeting regularly. Who would have imagined that so many people were doing so much reading?

Anecdotal Evidence

Recently I have begun to wonder how readers are influenced by experiences like this and by reading literature in general. Does a reader of literary works behave differently after their reading experiences than they would have otherwise? Or how are their beliefs or values changed by books they have read? The experience of reading a work of literature is rarely if ever, included among the influential agents of personal change. Yet many people report that it was a book that changed the course of their life or the lives of a large group of individuals. Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* is perhaps the foremost example of the powerful impact of the reading experience. It led so many young individuals into acts of imitative suicide that it was banned in several countries soon after it was published.

² Sampling yearly trends, rather than ten-year periods, would have provided a much clearer picture of the trends in literary activity.

Less dramatic effects have recently been reported on several sites on the Web. The San Francisco bookstore, A Clean Well-Lighted Place for Books, has a page on its website (www.bookstore.com/bookschallenge.html) that invites readers to "name the book that changed your life." One contributor responded: "The Harry Potter books changed my life. I used to hate reading. Now I am the best reader in the class. Those books changed my imagination. I wasn't too much of a dreamer. Now, I love to imagine things. I just hope that they change someone else's life like they did mine."

The Autodidactic Press also offers a similar invitation on the "Books that Changed Lives" page on its website (www.autodidactic.com/changedlives.htm). In citing *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, one individual wrote: "I first read the book as a sixth grader. The book was so searing that I vowed to become like that unusual man. Today I am a Muslim as a direct result of Malcolm's autobiography."

The Academy of Achievement seeks to bring young students in this country into contact with the "greatest thinkers and achievers of the age." To encourage young individuals to develop a love of books the Academy has created a website, that has posted the responses of individuals it regards as "eminent achievers, to the question "What book did you read when you were young that most influenced your life? (<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/books/1>).

To date the Academy has recognized 142 achievers in five areas: the arts (46), business (14), public service (40), science (30) and sports (12). Its Web site has posted detailed interviews with each of these individuals about their past and the keys to their success. Among the questions asked was one on notable books they had read in their youth: "*What book did you read when you were young that most influenced your life?*" The edited responses from individuals in three of the groups³ are shown below:

³ Apparently the interviews with individuals in the field of Sports did not include a question about their favorite book.

Arts: Joyce Carol Oates

The one book, probably, of my young adolescence would have been Henry David Thoreau's Walden. That struck a very deep chord with me..... I think that I probably have grown up to have a Thoreauvian perspective on many things. He believed one should simplify, simplify, simplify.

Business: Steve Case

One in particular that actually was a meaningful impact in terms of what I ended up doing -- focusing on interactive service and the Internet -- was a book I read in college in the late 1970s by Alvin Toffler called The Third Wave....This was 1979, and most people 25 years ago thought I was a little bit loony, but I just believed. And so I just kept pursuing that.

Public Service: President James Carter

When people ask me what's a favorite book that I've ever read, I used to say Let Us Now Praise Famous Men by James Agee ... who wrote about the lives of people who lived in desperate poverty.... What impressed me with that book was the tremendous chasm between people who have everything, who have a house and a job and education and adequate diets, and a sense of success or security ...and the vast array of people still in our country who don't have any of these things,and we are not doing much about it.

The way in which literature can shape a person's life has recently been the subject of three books.⁴ In the first, *The Book That Changed My Life*, by Roxanne Coady and John

⁴ The issue has also been treated in Diane Osen (Ed) *The book that changed my life: Interviews with National Book Award Winners and Finalists*. 2002. Modern Library Paperback Edition. The title of this book is rather misleading as the subject matter of the interviews treats all manner of topics related to the lives of these writers. In only one or two cases does it deal explicitly with a book that changed a person's life. For example, David McCullough, a historian, describes the experience of reading *A Stillness of Appomattox* as if a "window had been thrown open." He says in retrospect, that he knows it changed his life.

Johannessen⁵ 71 authors who gave a reading at the first author's bookstore were asked to write a short passage about a book that had a major effect on their life. In most cases, they wrote about a book that led them to become a writer. After reading the *Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, Dorothy Allison wrote: "If I could repay a tenth of what I owed this storyteller, this brave and wonderful woman on the page, I would give anything." And Frank Rich, former drama critic of the *New York Times*, wrote: "*Act One* [by Moss Hart] showed me a way out of my childhood. If Moss Hart could escape his circumstances through hard work, luck, the kindness of strangers, and the sheer force of his passion, maybe I could too."

Harriet Scott Chessman described a rarely mentioned book, Gertrude Stein's *Ida*. Chessman comments: "I loved this striking book for the courage it gave me to start looking for my own "genius," my own spirit, and my own writing life. Stein's influence was slow but profound." It is clear that many of the books mentioned by the writers have had a life-long influence on their life. Anita Diamant wrote: "Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* influenced me as a journalist and as a novelist in ways that continue to unfold."

The books selected by these writers constitute a mixture of literary fiction, poetry, drama, biography, history, memoir, and unlikely volumes such as the Sears Catalogue. Several writers mentioned books they had read as children—Nancy Drew Mysteries, *Charlotte's Web*, *A Child's Garden of Verse*, *The Little Engine That Could*. But literary fiction including both classical and contemporary novels, and in a few instances short story collections were the most commonly identified genre. Taken together as Coady writes in the Introduction to their volume these accounts are "a dramatic reminder that everywhere, every day, someone is changed, perhaps even saved, by words and stories."

⁵ Roxanne Coady & Joy Johannessen *The Book That Changed My Life: 71 Remarkable Writers Celebrate the Books that Matter Most to Them*. 2006 Gotham Books

A somewhat broader sample of individuals was drawn upon in Canfield and Hendricks volume, *You've Got to Read This Book*.⁶ This idea for this book emerged during a meeting of “transformation leaders, business consultants, and authors” who had gathered at the home of Jack Canfield to discuss ways to make the “world a better place.” During a break, the topic of books came up and several members spoke of the books that had a major influence on their life.

When the group reassembled, Gay Hendricks asked each person to describe a book that had changed their life. Hendricks notes, “What happened next was wonderful to behold.” Each person spoke with an enthusiasm that “absolutely glowed.” This experience led Canfield and Hendricks to conduct in-depth conversations” with 55 people about the books that had this sort of impact on their lives. In turn, the conversations were edited and reorganized by an associate into short essays about the way these books had shaped their life.

It is not entirely clear how the 55 individuals whose edited accounts are presented in *You've Got to Read This Book!* were selected. They appear to be chosen because they had some acquaintance with the authors and in one way or another because they were “all doing valuable work in the world.” They were from a variety of fields with the majority in the “self-help movement” including spiritual counselors, personal coaches, and motivational speakers. A large number came from the fields of marketing and technology and several were either writers or publishers.

It is also evident that a goodly number wore many hats, combining work in business and writing and personal training etc. For example, Pat Williams, the senior vice present of the NBA's Orlando Magic is described as a motivational speaker, author of numerous books and marketing guru. He and his wife are also the parents of 19 children, 14 of whom have been adopted from foreign countries. Another contributor, Tim Ferriss, is characterized as “an accelerated-learning researcher, world traveler, and guest lecturer at

⁶ Jack Canfield & Gay Hendricks. *You've Got to Read This Book: 55 People Tell the Story of the Book That Changed Their Life* 2006 Harper Collins

Princeton University.” He is also said to be fluent in Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, German and Spanish and holds a title in Chinese kickboxing and a Guinness world record in tango, coached more than 80 “world champion athletes and the author of several books. We should all have such talent.

Consistent with the backgrounds of the contributors, about a third (32%) of life-changing books came from the non-fiction self-help genre. That includes those intended to provide inspirational direction, overcome a personal problem, or encourage innovative business practices. Examples include *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen Covey (cited twice), *Learning to Love Yourself* by Gay Hendricks, *Man’s Search for Meaning* by Victor Frankel (also cited twice), etc.

Fiction, both classical and contemporary, ranked second (22%) in the type of books chosen. That included 2 classic novels, e.g. *Don Quixote*, *Siddhartha*, and 10 contemporary novels, e.g. *The Alchemist*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, etc. Clearly the great 19th Century novels of inspiration and devotion didn’t do much for these individuals, nor did the great Russian novels of Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky, or those modern classics of Hemingway or Joyce. Readers admired those novels, but they didn’t report they were life-changing.

The remaining collection of influential works were drawn from a variety of fields including 7 biographies, e.g. *Ghandi*, *Veeck—As in Wreck: The Chaotic Career of Baseball’s Incurable Maverick*, *Kennedy’s Profiles in Courage*, etc., general science, e.g. *The Silent World* by Jacques Cousteau, *On Aggression* by Konrad Lorenz, *Psycho-Cybernetics* by Maxwell Maltz etc., and 1 each in History (*The Passion of the Western Mind* by Richard Tarnas), mythology (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell) and politics (*Mein Kampf*). The Bible, the most popular book of all time, was mentioned only once. And in spite of the popularity of contemporary memoirs, only one was cited, *Instant Replay: The Green Bay Diary* by Jerry Kramer.

An overwhelming majority of book-induced effects were changes in a person's beliefs, commitments, or intentions to act. In addition, each such change was usually preceded by a dilemma in the person's life that the book dealt with and offered a solution.

Ten readers described relatively specific changes the book motivated them to undertake including being more sociable or goal directed and, in the case of five individuals, emphasizing the importance of controlling the course of one's life and taking responsibility for one's actions.

I pulled it [Psycho-Cybernetics by Maxwell Maltz] off the shelf, started reading, and found it was easy to read and made a lot of sense. It took the book home and read it cover to cover, and then started again at the beginning. One message stood out for me: You are in control of your destiny. Your mind is very powerful; what you think is your reality. Rudy Ruettiger

Fifteen readers described a wide range of effects including "lightening up," "doing what is right," trusting your instincts or desires, taking risks and being more courageous.

The most frequently noted effects were spiritual/cognitive changes that were noted by 17 contributors. Gaining understanding or insight about an event in their life was the most often mentioned (8), followed closely by those who turned toward a more spiritual life (7) with 2 individuals reporting a book that helped them to "find the real me" or gain a greater sense of their own identity.

I had been trying to control things that were fundamental uncontrollable and the cost had been the moment-by-moment disruption of my peace of mind. ...But now with the help of Epictetus [The Book of Life] I realized the pointlessness of trying to control my emotions. They have a life of their own, and they will last as long as they last. Applying the wisdom Epictetus conveys in his first sentence, I relaxed my resistance, letting go of my effort to wish my feelings away....That brief moment in time exerted such a powerful positive influence on me that it has affected the way I live my life and practice my profession ever since. Gay Hendricks

Books That Made the Difference, prepared for the Center for the Book by Gordon and Patricia Sabine⁷ constitutes the broadest sample of readers who were asked about a book that changed their life. The Center for the Book in the Library of Congress was established in 1977 to promote the reading of books and improve literacy in this country. In 1983 Center conducted the “Books That Made the Difference Project” in which over 1,382 individuals were asked to respond to two questions: “What book made the greatest difference in your life?” and “What difference did it make?”

The sample consisted of a group of “interesting Americans” chosen in a thoroughly unsystematic fashion simply because of “who they were, what they’d done, where they worked, sometimes even how they looked or precisely where we [Gordon and Patricia Sabine] found them.” The sample consisted of an extraordinarily broad collection of individuals ranging from well known actors, politicians, writers, and athletes to unknown airline stewardess, dairy farmer, logger, waitress, and innkeeper.

They were interviewed in twenty-four large American cities and twenty-four smaller ones across the country. The final sample consisted of 200 individuals whose responses were reported in the Sabine’s book, *Books That Made the Difference*. Their volume is organized around the difference the book made in the respondent’s life. Representative examples of these differences⁸ along with the title of the book are shown below:

How much difference do books really make?

The difference that it [The Secret in the Daisy by Carol Grace] was enormous. It took me from a miserable, unhappy wretch to a joy-full, glad-to-be-alive human. I fell so in love with the book that I searched out and married the girl who wrote it. Walter Matthau

⁷ *Books That Made the Difference: What People Told Us*. Gordon and Patricia Sabine 1983 The Shoe String Press Hamden, CT 06514

⁸ The Sabine’s original list of seventeen differences has been reduced to eleven as six of those difference had only one response or overlapped with one of the eleven that are reported.

Seeing yourself in print

Before, I always thought I was just some kind of weirdo. With the book [Passages by Gail Sheehy]. it was nice to know everybody else was going through the same thing too.

Books that inspired careers

What made the greatest differences were the plays—and I will not pick out just one—the plays of Bernard Shaw, which resolved me at about the age of fifteen or sixteen that if I could make it, I'd become a playwright. That made the difference of pointing the way I wanted to go and that was the way I went. Clare Boothe Luce

Early reading

For some reason, leatherbound copies of the goings-on in Congress lined the shelves of our living room, and I pored over them when I was twelve. I had never read anything so funny. From then on, I knew I wanted to do comedy. Alan Ada

In spite of their limited representativeness, these anecdotal accounts leave little doubt that books can be powerful agents of change for a wide range of individuals. It is also abundantly clear that a multiplicity of books can have this effect--from the *Sears Catalogue* to, *Instant Replay: The Green Bay Diary of Jerry Kramer*, *Don Quixote* to Homer's *Odyssey* and Aristotle's *Ethics*. This indicates that whatever influence the experience of reading a book might have, it will be highly personal. In all the accounts I've mentioned rarely was a book cited more than once and those that were number less than ten. The Bible was the one exception. It was cited 15 times in the Sabine's volume--the largest and most representative of the samples reported. However, the Bible's impact is not universal, as it was not cited by any of the 71 writers who contributed to the Coady & Johannessen volume and only one of the 55 individuals interviewed by Canfield and Hendricks.

The wide range in the age an influential book is read is also evident from these accounts. Readers recalled books that they read early in their childhood, adolescence and throughout their adult life. In addition, most indicated they were surprised by the book's impact; it was unexpected, more a matter of happenstance than one intentionally planned. In this respect the experience of reading an influential book is much like the process that occurs when any kind of fortuitous event alters behavior.

Empirical Evidence

However, rather than personal testimonials of this sort, I was looking for more general tests of the various hypotheses about the effects of reading literature, tests that would determine how widespread and long lasting such an effect might be compared to the many other ways we attempt to change behavior. I was aware of various theories about the effects of reading literature that date back as far as antiquity, but as far as I could tell, the empirical study of these views under natural reading conditions was virtually non-existent.

It seemed to me then that literary scholars had examined almost everything else about literature except its influence on readers. Robert Wilson put it well: "Although most persons would agree that reading may be generally efficacious in directing an individual's development, few attempts have been made to define its influence more precisely."⁹ Perhaps the question is simply too complex or too "psychological" for the critics. They may simply assume that reading literature influences individuals, that, indeed, it sometimes affects their thought and personality but that it is hopelessly naive to expect that empirical studies will ever be able to clarify the nature and extent of its influence.

In fairness, writers and critics recognize the importance of the question. In his remarks at the PEN conference The Power of the Pen Salman Rushdie acknowledged that while it is unusual for literature to have a major influence on one's life, occasionally readers will fall in love with a book that changes them permanently. He referred to Uncle Tom's

⁹ Robert N. Wilson, Literary Experience and Personality. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1956, 14, 47-57.

Cabin that “changed attitudes toward slavery, and Charles Dicken’s portraits of child poverty [that] inspired legal reforms and J.K. Rowling [who] changed to culture of childhood making millions of boys and girls look forward to 800 page novels.” He also noted that occasionally a reader will fall in love with a book that “leaves its essence inside him...and those books become parts of the way we see our lives; we read our lives through them, and their descriptions of the inner and outer worlds become mixed up with ours—they become ours.” The experience is rare but when it does take place it exerts a powerful and long lasting hold on the reader.

In one of the first in-depth, albeit not experimental, studies I found on the effects of reading literature Martha Purdy analyzed the various forms of learning that occur in reading literary fiction.¹⁰ Purdy conducted comprehensive interviews with five regular novel readers. After coding each interview, she found, not surprisingly, that these readers sought out novels for entertainment and escape. But along the way they also collected new factual information, as well as insights about themselves, their personal beliefs, and values. They did not necessary read with the primary intention of learning, but it was an inevitable consequence of an incidental learning process that characterizes virtually every experience, including that of reading literature.

My search uncovered several investigations of the use of reading experiences as a therapeutic tool. This approach, known as "bibliotherapy," is the "use of print and non-print material, whether imaginative or informational...to effect changes in emotionally disturbed behavior."¹¹ While bibliotherapy was employed initially with individuals institutionalized in prison or mental hospitals, it has recently been extended to other community settings, including schools and libraries. All such programs attempt to use the experience of reading written material to change a person's behavior, attitudes or values in some way.

¹⁰ Martha Leete Purdy. *Adult Experience of Learning from Novels*. Doctor of Education dissertation, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 1998.

¹¹ Richard J. Riordan & Linda S. Wilson. Bibliotherapy: Does It Work? *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 1989, 67, 506-508.

Is bibliotherapy an effective way to change behavior? The behaviorally oriented approaches, during which individuals are asked to read self-help materials in treating problems such as alcoholism, obesity, and social anxiety, appear to be the most successful. But even in these cases the evidence for their effectiveness is mixed. A recent review indicated that it was most effective in the treatment of depression, mild alcohol abuse and anxiety disorders and less successful for smoking cessation and more severe cases of alcohol abuse.¹² In contrast, reading fiction, poetry, or creative non-fiction as a self-help tool appears to have only a modest degree of influence that is most clearly reflected in attitude rather than behavioral change. However, the research in this area is not extensive and what has been done is methodologically far from elegant.

I have somewhat similar concerns about the studies reported by Hakemulder in *The Moral Laboratory*.¹³ Hakemulder summarizes the results of a large number of investigations on the effects of reading narrative passages on attitudes and moral beliefs. Unfortunately, the studies he describes varied widely in their outcomes with few statistically significant results. Moreover they were carried out in the laboratory under highly reactive test conditions in which the individuals were asked to read specially prepared segments rather than intact works of literature. In my view, research with individuals engaged in natural reading experiences seems far more likely to capture the effects of literature than such artificial laboratory situations.

Consider, for example, recent research on some of the newly emerging programs designed to introduce literature to economically and educationally disadvantaged individuals.¹⁴ Most are based on the interdisciplinary humanities curriculum developed

¹² Jennifer Mains & Forrest Scrogin. The effectiveness of self-administered treatments: A practice friendly review of the research. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 2003, 59, 237-246.

¹³ J. Hakemulder, *The Moral Laboratory: Experiments examining the effects of reading literature on social perception and moral self-concept*. John Benjamins Publishing Co, 2000.

¹⁴ Samuel Freedman. To Fire Up Troubled Students, A Program Turns to the Classics. *New York Times*, August 18, 2004.

by Earl Shorris, known as the Clemente Course in the Humanities.¹⁵ The eight-month course in poetry, logic, art, history, and moral philosophy described in Shorris's book *Riches for the Poor* has been adopted at several locations throughout the country, with a goal of fifty such programs in the coming years. According to Shorris, the intensive study of the humanities is an effective way to move people out of poverty and into community engagement and meaningful work.

How successful is the course in achieving this goal? Gathering evidence to answer this question is not easy. It is often difficult to track down participants in the courses, many of whom lead chaotic lives with no permanent addresses or phone numbers. Shorris reports a preliminary evaluation in the Appendix to his first book, *New American Blues: A Journey through Poverty to Democracy* (Norton, 1996). Only half (55%) of the students were able to complete the course the first time he offered it, leaving a sample of seventeen individuals for the pre- and post-course assessment analysis. The findings indicated there were modest gains in the student's self-esteem and use of cognitive strategies. But most of the change scores were not significant, and absent comparative data from a group of individuals who were not able to participate in the course or were enrolled in an alternative program, it is difficult to know what to make of these findings.

Slightly better evidence is available from a class in humanities offered by faculty at Stanford University to groups of fifteen to twenty female addicts and ex-convicts who have been placed in a residential (Hope House) drug and alcohol treatment program. The Clemente-derived course offered at Hope House focuses on classic texts, with an emphasis on political and social issues. Follow-up evidence from the women who have participated in this program revealed that approximately 70% have remained drug free and out of prison, a value that the authors describe as "far better than the national average."¹⁶

¹⁵ Maggie Riechers Streetside Socrates. *Humanities*, May/June 2000, Volume 21/Number 3. <http://www.neh.gov/news/humanities/2000-05/clemente.html>

¹⁶ Satz, D & Reich, R. The Liberal Reach: Teaching Humanities to the Poor. *Dissent*, Winter 2004. www.susanohanian.org/show_commentary.php?id=242.

In the tradition of these studies, the Portland-based Oregon Council of Humanities, in collaboration with nearby Reed College, offers a free, two-semester, college level course in the humanities to low-income individuals with limited education. Recently the course was introduced to a group of incarcerated inmates at medium-security adult male correctional facility in Eastern Oregon. The course, known as Humanity in Perspective (HIP) seeks to provide the knowledge and intellectual skills that can foster significant changes in the lives of the participants. It is based on the conviction that all individuals, no matter what their life histories or economic circumstances, can learn to live better lives once they have the opportunity to explore the great literature and ideas of the past and present. In the Fall semester students read key Ancient Greek works drawn from texts in history (Thucydides), philosophy (Aristotle & Plato), poetry (Tyrtaeus & Sappho), and drama (Sophocles & Euripides). In the Spring Semester readings are selected from more contemporary texts including Emerson, Thoreau, Mark Twain, Flannery O'Connor, Tennessee Williams, Martin Luther King and Toni Morrison.

I was recently given an opportunity to evaluate the course. A questionnaire was developed in order to compare the student's responses both before and after they participated in the course. The survey consisted of three sections designed to assess the impact of the course in a number of areas including literary activities, critical thinking, writing ability and self-esteem. The results in both settings indicated that the course exerted considerable influence on a wide range of student attitudes and beliefs.

The students in Portland displayed a significant improvement in their level of self-esteem, verbal ability, and in their analysis of the major course themes. It also had a positive impact on the inmates who displayed an overall positive change in their literary activity, writings skills, and their treatment of the major course themes. These findings should be tempered somewhat by the fact that the samples were small and there was considerable variation between the students and settings in which the course was offered. For instance, the two groups were not evenly matched, especially in terms of educational

background. Unlike the students in Portland, most of the inmates had enrolled in GED and other education courses offered at the institution. As a result, they had recent educational experiences that were directly assessed in the survey, whereas many of the students in Portland had been out of school for several years or had never participated in any non-school educational programs.

The inmates were also highly motivated to enroll in the class, while it was difficult to recruit students for the course in Portland. Class attendance at the prison was required and the inmates were always escorted to the classroom by a guard. In contrast, the students in Portland often had to drive or take the bus a considerable distance to reach the classroom and, on occasion, missed the evening class because of travel or personal constraints. These difficulties may account for the differing course graduation rates between the two groups: the rate for the course in Portland, over its five year history, is 41%, while in its first year, the students at the prison had a 86% graduation rate.

In combination, these differences may explain why the course did not have the same effects in the two settings. That is, gains on one measure by participants in one of the groups were not necessarily associated with comparable gains by the students in the other group. It is evident, however, that the humanities courses in Portland and the correctional institution exerted considerable influence on the students. The overwhelming impression one gets from examining these data is that the experience of reading and discussing some of the great works of literature went a long way toward meeting the educational goals of the Humanity in Perspective Program and fostering a number of significant changes in the lives of the students.

These findings were supported by uniformly positive anecdotal reports by the students in both settings. A student who spoke at the Spring 2006 graduation ceremony in Portland eloquently expressed the student's sentiments:

My classmates and I answered an invitation to come and learn. Twice a week for 2 semesters we gathered together to discuss some of history's

great minds and ideas. We read and discussed the Greek Philosophers and dramatists...the foundations of Democracy in America...the Transcendentalists and contemporary writers...issues of slavery, prejudice, women's right, civil rights, human rights. We wrote papers and formulated thesis arguments. These things alone would constitute an interesting educational experience. But this is not all we learned. We learned that these were not just texts to be read, but ideas to live by. We learned about the power of words to harm or to help. We learned how to listen, and how and when to speak up. We learned that our ideas and our opinions are important. We learned that each of us can make a difference in our lives, in our community, in the world. We learned these things not only from these texts and from our teachers, but from each other.

“Changing Lives Through Literature” is a somewhat similar approach to investigating the question I have posed. It is designed as a sentencing alternative for high-risk offenders with a large number of prior convictions.¹⁷ In addition, the program is restricted to offenders who express a willingness to participate in lieu of a jail sentence. “Changing Lives Through Literature” is based on the belief that criminal offenders can derive considerable benefit from the experience of reading and discussing major works of literature. Robert Waxler, one of its founders, suggests that "...offenders often commit criminal acts because they operate from a value system that gives priority to emotions and primal instinct, rather than to reason and critical thinking. We need to challenge that single-minded value system by using novels and short stories that unfold the complexity and diversity of character and human consciousness."¹⁸

Literature, according to Waxler, can achieve that goal by providing individuals with an opportunity to engage in serious reflection and sustained analysis of their behavior. The

¹⁷ The average number of prior convictions for the first two groups of male participants was 18.4 per person.

¹⁸ Robert Waxler. Why Literature?: The Power of Stories. Online document: <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OVAE/OCE/SuccessStories/Part2.htm>.

program involves intensive reading and group discussions of contemporary literature, including works such as Bank's *The Affliction*, Dickey's *Deliverance*, Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*, London's *Sea Wolf*, Mailer's *An American Dream*, and Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. The discussion sessions take place every other week for two hours.

In a study of the first four groups of offenders, the recidivism rate of 32 men who completed the course was compared with a matched group of 40 probationers who were not exposed to any aspect of the program.¹⁹ An analysis of follow up criminal records indicated that only 6 of the 32 men in the reading group (18.8%) were convicted on new charges after completing the program. In the comparison group, 18 of the 40 men (45%), three times more than the reading group, were convicted on new charges during this period.

While these differences are important, it is not entirely clear they can be attributed to the *specific* works that were read or to the reading experience itself, independent of its content. The differences could also be due to the group discussions or the contact the offenders had with each other, as well as the group leader.²⁰ Moreover, the attempt to match the groups was not successful, as those in the reading group had more prior convictions and were rated as more motivated to "make changes in their lives" than members of the comparison group. Without further tests that ideally should include a control group of offenders who read non-literary materials, these factors cannot be ruled out as possible explanations for the initial findings.

In spite of this uncertainty, the "Changing Lives Through Literature" program impressed me. It sought to measure objectively the effects of a literary reading program. It did so in a formidable setting with a group of individuals who are not often responsive to recidivism reduction techniques. Perhaps the offenders did gain some insight about their

¹⁹ G. Roger Jarjoura & Susan T. Krumholz. Combining Bibliotherapy and Positive Role Modeling as an Alternative to Incarceration. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 1998, 28, 127-139.

²⁰ The groups were led by a rotating group of individuals, including a college professor, probation officer, and a judge.

own behavior from the readings and discussions after all. As one of the participants reported: "I started to see myself in him [the ship captain in *Sea Wolf*] and I didn't like what I saw."

To be sure, empirical study of this issue faces a number of conceptual and methodological limitations. There is a lack of specificity in knowing what aspect of the reading material is responsible for the observed effects. Further, most of the studies do little more than establish a relationship between exposure to these materials and changes in attitudes or behaviors, leaving open the question of whether the experience *per se* caused these effects. Finally, the research to date has been based on fairly weak designs, without, for example, comparison or control groups required to rule out alternative accounts of the findings.

Reading great works of literature is not often considered among the foremost sources of personal change. However, evidence reviewed in this chapter makes it clear that the experience of reading a book can exert a powerful influence on human thought and action. This is most likely to occur when individuals face a personal problem, when they are primed and searching for a solution. A great many individuals report it was a book that finally pointed them in the direction of one. Yet these encounters were for most part not planned or deliberately induced by an agent of change. This suggests that both practitioners and investigators of the behavior change process may be neglecting the very considerable influence that reading works of literature can have on individuals.