

BOOKS AND MAGAZINES

“Of making many books there is no end, and much study wears the body.”

(Ecclesiastes 12:12b)

The philosopher represented in the book of Ecclesiastes, most often referred to as Kohelet, didn't have to contend with an over-kill of information on the Internet, but he did have a valid point about books—even then. Some contemporary observers thought that the Internet, with its rapid access to unlimited information, would spell the end to the publication of books. It hasn't happened, although the publishing of newspapers has diminished.

G.K. Chesterton is reported as having said, *“What a glorious garden of wonders the lights of Broadway would be to anyone lucky enough to be unable to read.”* He clearly despised the supersaturation of Broadway advertising, but did he really mean that someone would be lucky if they could not read? Judging by the number of books and articles he wrote, I doubt it.

But there are many people throughout the world, including in America, who cannot read. Some, we realize may have genetic or physical problems that makes reading difficult or impossible. Others have never been taught to read properly. One furlough I substitute taught at a high school in Pennsylvania and one of the classes I had a number of times was “Remedial Reading.” Several students were about to “graduate” but could not read fluently. They were not dumb, they just had never learned the basics of reading and “hated” to read. My solution was to get them reading comic books after teaching them some basic reading principles.

There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of languages in the world whose speakers cannot read. I know—we worked with one such group in the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. In Kewa, the language we learned, people could not read because there were no books. And there were no books because there was no orthography, no alphabet—the language had never been written. Working with the people, we compiled an alphabet and Joice constructed some basic pre-reading and reading materials. There are things we take for granted: Who taught you how to hold a book and helped you trace the words from left to right (in our system)? Who taught you the ABC's and how to write? You may remember little about the details, but you did learn and, hopefully, you enjoy reading and looking at pictures.

Teaching people to read who have never had books, an alphabet, or any reason to read, is not easy. We wanted the Kewa people to read the Bible, but of course no youngster starts their English reading lessons with the Bible. It is too difficult—we start with stories and it takes time before anyone has mastered the art of reading fluently enough to read the Bible.

I have owned thousands of books, journals and magazines. Moving about as we have over many years I have had to “get rid of” a lot of them and it has been painful. I have donated hundreds of them to friends and libraries, yet I still have bookshelves filled with books. Some I just can't give away although I know that after I die, they may disappear rapidly.

The Kewa people—and thousands of language groups like them—still do not have many books in their language. Often, they come to believe—or are taught—that their languages have little value and that they should learn the dominant language. In many cases this seems true because the smaller ethnic groups are assimilated into the larger dominant cultures and languages—witness the history of Native Americans and the Australian Aborigines.

We spend millions of dollars to protect certain animals from extinction, or even “endangerment.” Currently, there are 1,556 known species in the world have been identified as near extinction or endangered and are under protection by government law. Open your TV on a Saturday morning and there are a number of programs that promote the protection and care of animals. Although millions of dollars are spent on protecting endangered species of plants and animals, we rarely see a program that is devoted to the preservation of a dying culture or language.

This is Not a Book is the title of a book by Keri Smith, published in 2009. It is, in this case, not a book unless there is a reader to compile it. The “book” is almost completely blank, and as the reader, you must create the content. The purpose is to teach you to think creatively. But, if not a book, what exactly is it? The answer is left to you, as the future reader, to determine. It seems odd that people will pay money to buy a book that has nothing in it—why not simply start writing a journal? Apparently a blank “book” will motivate some people to compile their own book. Sounds crazy, but it seems to work—for some people.

I love to examine and read books, although I admit that I don’t read many very carefully. I am out of school now and can pick and choose what I like! That is what it is like when you have lots of books to choose from. But I am aware that there are not books in many small languages in the world.

Karl Franklin
Not exactly a bibliophile, but close