

The Book – Kindle'ing for the Mind

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kin-dle¹ | kindl |

verb [trans]

light or set on fire

- Arouse or inspire (an emotion or feeling)
: a love of art was kindled in me.
- [intrans] (of an emotion) be aroused: *she hesitated, suspicion kindling within her.*
- [intrans] (becoming impassioned or excited: *the young man kindled at once.*

kin-dler noun

ORIGIN Middle English: based on Old Norse *kynda*, influenced by Old Norse kindill 'candle torch'

kin-dle²

verb [intrans]

(of a hare or rabbit) give birth

ORIGIN Middle English: apparently a frequentative of **KIND (1)**.

When it was first released in 2007, I must admit to being a little incensed and puzzled at Amazon's decision to name their wireless Reading Device "Kindle." Linking the verb "kindle" (to light or set on fire) to "books" (regardless of the format) immediately summoned to the mind of this longtime English educator, "the memory hole" in George Orwell's (1949) *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the institutional book burning in Ray Bradbury's (1951) *Fahrenheit 451*. The spectre of cultural and intellectual heritage lying waste as a pile of smoldering ash was further reinforced by my recent reading of Hilary Mantel's (2009) Booker-Award winning novel *Wolf Hall*, a fictional chronicle of the historical figure Thomas Cromwell and to a lesser extent, Thomas More, whose fate, in turn, points to a line in Heinrich Heine's 1821 play which references the burning of the Qu'ran during the Spanish Inquisition. Heine wrote, "Where they burn books so too will they in the end, burn human beings." The irony emerging, of course, from this intertextual aside, is that More inevitably succumbed to the same fate as the readers and books he condemned to the pyre. In contrast, we can take no perverted comfort in knowing that Heine's play was among the 20,000 volumes set ablaze in 1933 as Joseph Goebbels read out the names of banned writers in Berlin's Opernplatz. Throughout history, the destruction of books as a means of cultural, linguistic, religious, historical, and intellectual annihilation has become an emblematic practice of authoritarian and oppressive regimes. But don't get me wrong, I am not one of those "partisans of print" described in Ted Striphas's (2009) *The Late Age of Print*, who believes that just as "video killed the radio star," e-books threaten to kill off their paper-based counterparts" (p. 22). What I found disturbing was merely an unfortunate association. Yet in a rather circuitous way, the verb "kindle" and my capacity to recall images stored in memory and to form associations has led me to identify another kind of "libracide" (yes, "libracide" is indeed a word) decidedly less deadly

but arguably more insidious, that is to say, “proceeding in a gradual, subtle way but with harmful effects.”

To illustrate, permit me a personal anecdote. Almost two decades ago, I wrote a collection of eighteen French children’s books published with Addison-Wesley/Pearson Educational. With titles like *Badaboum!*, (Krasny, 1991), *Jazz au zoo*, (Krasny, 1993a) and *J’adore la pizza* (Krasny, 1993), it’s obvious I’m no Dostoevsky. The books, however, were marketed nationally for more than fifteen years, sales were good, and virtually an entire generation of kids attending elementary French immersion and Core French classrooms had popped at least one of my books into their home reading tote. Marked by rhyme, rhythm, and repetition, the books mimicked the much loved songs, jump rope rhymes, fingerplays, chants, and nursery rhymes that were a childhood staple. I would be less than honest if I said that the works were void of a pedagogical agenda. I was, after all, a primary school teacher when I wrote them and their improvisational quality draws heavily from my training and experience in *Orff Schulwerk*, an approach to teaching music that combines music, movement, drama, and speech. Convinced then as I am now that reading is an embodied act, I hoped that children would revel in the repeated sounds of the words— marking the syncopated rhythm of *Jazz au zoo* with their own verbal ostinati— write and illustrate their own variations, and interpret the cadence of the language through song and dance. In short, the books would inspire them to make their own music or (and here is where linguistic ambiguity has redeemed Amazon’s moniker) *kindle* their imagination.

Throughout the years, teachers, parents and the children themselves have made me aware of how the works led to the writing of individual and collective class books, and provoked spontaneous song writing, shared reading experiences, and dramatizations. Nothing could be more pleasing to this author than knowing the works had yielded the kind of

spaces in which children could exercise their right to play. One morning, however, on a routine school visit in my later role as curriculum coordinator, a teacher greeted me in the hallway and proudly announced that she and her literacy team had successfully managed “to benchmark” my books and they were now officially part of the Literacy Lab. Benchmarking books, for those of you not in the literacy field, means calculating things like the mean length of words and sentences, the ratio of print to illustration, and what we refer to as the number of “return sweeps” that is to say, the number of times on a page, the eyes have to return to the left to continue reading the next line. Once the books are measured in this way, they are used, in turn, to measure children’s reading ability. While authors have to accept that books take on a life of their own, and knowing full well the teacher and her team acted in what they believed was best, nonetheless I could not help feeling that benchmarking the books and housing them in a Literacy Lab constituted an act of libricide. Similar practices at all levels are not uncommon and thousands of students have plugged in to *Accelerated Reader* and *Reading Renaissance* programs whereby they must answer the requisite number of comprehension questions correctly to move from one level to another (a bit like climbing the ladder on *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*). Teachers have confided that they logged into the programs themselves and advanced several levels without ever having read any of the books. Again, don’t get me wrong, I recognize the importance of teachers having effective means of identifying the textual features that may aid or inhibit children’s access to meaning in print so that they might best be able to respond to children’s individual needs and provide instruction accordingly. Nevertheless, I’m sure that when E. B. White (1952) wrote the beloved *Charlotte’s Web* he did not stop to think whether he was writing for an “L” level or a “P” level audience of readers. He wrote, however, convinced of literature’s potential to arouse the human

emotion of compassion by narrating the relationship between a spider and a pig.

The problem is not necessarily the quality of literature made available to students but rather what I have observed as the gradual erosion of aesthetic capacity in curriculum. The race to get through mandated outcomes and the promise of raising performance scores through incentive-based reading management programs (corporate rhetoric traditionally more suited to insurance sales) leaves little time for paying attention to the *qualia* of the reading experience. Qualia are phenomenal states comprised of “personal and subjective experiences, feelings, and sensations that accompany awareness” (Edelman, 1992, p. 114) and by and large, provide the experiential stuff used to imaginatively respond to and make meaning from literary texts. Dewey (1932) passionately argued:

Unless there is a direct, mainly unreflective appreciation of persons and deeds, the data for subsequent thought will be lacking or distorted. A person must *feel* the qualities of acts as one feels with the hands that qualities of roughness and smoothness. (pp. 268-269)

Dewey (1911) held that the disregard for aesthetic and affective factors in American schools was “the greatest deficiency in...education systems with respect to character building.” (p. 368). He was insistent that the sympathetic imagination that can only grow out of having certain communal and intersubjective experiences (of which I contend reading is one) is central to moral inquiry. Effective moral education occurs when students “happen to be already animated by a sympathetic and dignified regard for the sentiments of others” (Dewey, 1916, p. 364). To Dewey, narrowness of mind could be attributed to a lack of the affective and imaginative in one’s educational life. The arts, in Dewey’s view, perform an edifying function insofar as they engender affective relations with others (albeit, often vicarious ones) across a variety of situations to

signify moral terrain that would not otherwise be available. Developments in neuroscience (Damasio, 2003; Edelman, 1992, 2005) cognitive science (Thompson, 2003) and neuropsychology (Paivio, 2006; Sadoski, 1992) continue to support my persistent claim that the evocation of imagery and affect during the act of reading can establish literature as precisely such a landscape (Krasny, 2004, 2007).

Like Martha Nussbaum (1995) who opens her book *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, with a passage from Dicken's (2007) *Hard Times* I find myself constantly reminded of Mr. Gradgrind's drive to squelch the literary imagination and its concomitant moral aporia in the campaign for political economy. For the past year, I have eked out a smidgen of time here and there to see what my sons have been reading in their first year at university in their program *Business and Society*. I was undeniably pleased to see that like Dickens and Nussbaum, at least one of their professors recognized literature's contribution to moral and public life and that reading in and outside the literature classroom can animate moral imagination in ways that can provoke and inspire the pursuit of less utilitarian modes of existence. The program's foundational readings twinned writings by classic and contemporary philosophical economists with literary works to disrupt, challenge, and expand rational conceptions of the attainment of economic well-being. For example, Dickens's *Hard Times* provided the obvious counterpoint to the proposed division of labour basic to the political economy in Adam's Smith's (1776/2009) *The Wealth of Nations*. Ursula LeGuin's (1974) science fiction *The Dispossessed* further highlights the consequences of a self-regulating economy to provide a literary illumination of local economist, David McNally's (2006) critique of global capitalism. And Ayn Rand's (1971) critique of the New Left and its ethical objection to advancing technology is met with Elmer Rice's (1923) play *The Adding Machine*. Within stated program aims, literature becomes an important analytical tool "to help students account for, evaluate and transform the

various ways business influences society” (York University, Faculty of Arts, online).

The function of the book to kindle or arouse an emotion or an image is fundamental to the human capacity to think metaphorically. In *The Life of the Mind*, Hannah Arendt (1971) aptly describes the cognitive role of metaphor as the bridge between the inner world of sensory experience and the outer world of appearances. This is a capacity which she found wanting in her observation of Eichmann who, throughout his trial, displayed the “narrowness of mind”—“the sheer absence of thought” that gives rise to the “banality of evil” (Arendt, 1963). Given that I have for some years now, dedicated my research efforts to formulating a philosophical and psychological accounting of why reading matters and of my conviction that ambiguity in the novel constitutes a terrain for moral deliberation, I have been particularly attentive to Yann Martel’s website “What is Stephen Harper Reading?” (online) and would be encouraged by the slightest indication that Martel’s provocations registered some moral ‘food for thought’.

I have a genuine concern that aesthetic capacity is further lost in the recent emphasis on ‘function and flow’ in text selections aimed at making reading immediately relevant to boys (Brozo, 2010; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). In attempting to account for the gender gap in reading achievement reported in the *Program for the International Student Assessment 2000* results, a report issued by the International Reading Association (Topping, Valtin, Roller, Brozo, & Lourdes Dionisio, 2003) suggested that schools pay “special attention to female teachers who might tend to convey their own values and attitudes, as well as their reading preferences, to students” (p. 7) to the detriment of boy readers. The clear implication is that if boys are repeatedly asked to read books unrelated to their needs and interests they may become disengaged. IRA’s analysis fails to account for Sadker and Sadker’s (1994) oft cited findings that teachers are already likely to tailor the curriculum to cater

to boys' perceived needs and that a 1989 U.S. federally funded study showed that of the ten books most frequently assigned in public high school English classes only one was authored by a woman and none by minorities (Applebee, 1989). (My guess is that Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird* might have failed to hit such canonical heights if she had chosen to publish under her more "feminine" first name "Nelle.") The tendency is to make girls read books with male protagonists because there is a pervasive belief that boys won't read (or listen to) stories about girls but girls will read anything. Again, such actions on the part of educators advance the perception of girls as compliant and boys as resistant. The suggestion that we need to further 'masculinize' the curriculum detracts from the real issue of how girls and boys construct their identities as readers according to gendered codes of behavior (Martino, 1995, 1995a) and the extent to which schools consciously or unconsciously reinforce these codes to effectively limit life's narrative possibilities.

Granted, building confidence is fundamental to developing readers of either gender and contributes to a child's ability to take risks in reading and self-monitor for comprehension, and I am in no way suggesting that fluency should take a back seat, but, frankly, this new obsession with attempting to engage students in reading with the promise of getting them to the bottom of the page effortlessly ignores the fact that reading is work—worthy work. Achieving critical comprehension and deeper meaning exacts effort but is not without its rewards. Flow simply isn't a word I would use to describe the demands of negotiating the psychological intrigue of *The Brothers Karamasov*. Even in the early years, consider, for example, how in *Where the Wild Things Are*, Sendak (1963) can engage the child's capacity to exercise the power of myth and liberate the psyche in order to confront the shadow of the unconscious. Max's adventure to "where the wild things are" could very well represent the first step in the slow and life long process of

individuation (Cech, 1995). Together with Max and among the “wild things,” children can discharge their anger to declare themselves “the most wild thing of all.” Freud himself came to recognize how a motivating fiction can spark entry into mental worlds. In *Novel Education*, Britzman (2006) explains the metapsychology linking the literary to inner life: “Without a phantasy of knowledge, without that motivating fiction, and without an admission of something on the tip of one’s tongue, with what one almost said there is hardly a way to enter into mental worlds” (p. 18).

Britzman goes on to explain that narrative properties of illness led to Freud’s self-recognition as a narrator. Case studies read like short stories with their inherent logic constructed of “plot lines, narrative flairs, rising and falling actions and denouement” (p. 19). Drawing on De Certeau’s concern for the aesthetic, Britzman argues from her point of view as a psychoanalyst that we should consider that the literary work can say more than it means which at the same time, engenders a kind of resistance to fiction—a desire to exercise judgment over the unstable qualities of language. Taking up Britzman’s contention in psychological terms and from an embodied perspective, readers fill in semantic gaps to resolve the novel’s attending aesthetic conflict by manipulating parts of existing images stored in memory, both verbal and nonverbal, into new combinations and enriching these images with affective associations (Sadoski, 1992). Novels which loom large in our mental life are likely those that elicit powerful identifications and emotions which allow us to respond to events and situations that, normally, we would find difficult to confront. Reading as an act of confrontation constitutes the kind of “textual labour” Montaigne deemed necessary to the process of self-formation.

For close to a quarter of a century, it has been my privilege to observe teachers and students as ‘curriculum makers’ in hundreds of classrooms across five countries, some under the direst of circumstances. As

curriculum scholars, we must be always mindful that teachers, students, parents and caregivers have a lot to teach us about who we are and the work that we do. Granted, the curriculum field has been trapped for far too long in the rhetoric of neoliberalism. We seem caught in an interlocutory relationship without end and the challenge remains how to break free from the dialectic (Krasny, 2006). But I do believe that as curriculum scholars we can play a critical role in *rekindling* the literary imagination and by extension return to Hannah Arendt's (1961, 1971) question "What do we educate children for?" There seems to be an ontological divide between what standard curriculum and accompanying materials dictate as the function of reading, and the ruminating reading that would allow for psychic fulfillment, psychological affirmation, moral deliberation, empathetic projection, and the chance to embody the text and mull over our own intentions, assumptions and positions. Let me end by reconnecting with the theme of this conference by borrowing from neuroscientist Jean-Pierre Changeux in discussion with Paul Ricouer in *What Makes Us Think?* (Changeux & Ricouer, 2000). In the quest for intercultural understanding, the aesthetic kindles "a mode of pleasure, satisfaction, comfort that is quite distinct from any utility. But it nonetheless possesses a positive power for humanity, allowing us to share the same emotion, to better understand each other" (p. 308). Above all else, the book grants us the existential freedom to confront the fundamental ambiguity and diversity of human existence (Krasny, 2004).

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