

ALLEGATO E

Neil Gaiman:

Why our future depends on libraries, reading and daydreaming

Neil Gaiman's lecture for *the Reading Agency*, delivered on October 14th, 2012, at the Barbican in London.

[...] Fiction has two uses. Firstly, it's a gateway drug to reading. The drive to know what happens next, to want to turn the page, the need to keep going, even if it's hard, because someone's in trouble and you have to know how it's all going to end. And it forces you to learn new words, to think new thoughts, to keep going. To discover that reading per se is pleasurable. Once you learn that, you're on the road to reading everything. And reading is key.

There were noises made briefly, a few years ago, about the idea that we were living in a post-literate world, in which the ability to make sense out of written words was somehow redundant, but those days are gone: words are more important than they ever were: we navigate the world with words, and as the world slips onto the web, we need to follow, to communicate and to comprehend what we are reading. People who cannot understand each other cannot exchange ideas, cannot communicate. [...]

The simplest way to make sure that we raise literate children is to teach them to read, and to show them that reading is a pleasurable activity. And that means, at its simplest, finding books that they enjoy, giving them access to those books, and letting them read them. I don't think there is such a thing as a bad book for children. [...] It's tosh. It's snobbery and it's foolishness. There are no bad authors for children, that children like and want to read and seek out, because every child is different. [...]

I was lucky. I had an excellent local library growing up. I had the kind of parents who dropped me off in the library on their way to work in summer holidays, and the kind of librarians who did not mind a small, unaccompanied boy heading back into the children's library every morning and working his way through the card catalogue, looking for books with ghosts or magic or rockets in them, looking for vampires or detectives or witches or wonders. And when I had finished reading the children's library I began on the adult books.

They were good librarians. They liked books and they liked the books being read. They taught me how to order books from other libraries on inter-library loans. They had no snobbery about anything I read. They just seemed to like that there was this wide-eyed little boy who loved to read and would talk to me about the books I was reading, they would find me other books in a series, they would help. They treated me as another reader – nothing less or more – which meant they treated me with respect. [...]

I worry that here in the 21st century people misunderstand what libraries are and the purpose of them. If you perceive a library as a shelf of books, it may seem antiquated or outdated in a world in which most, but not all, books in print exist digitally.

I think the point has to do with the nature of information. Information has value, and the right information has enormous value. [...]

In the last few years, we've moved from an information-scarce economy to one driven by an information glut. According to Eric Schmidt of Google, every two days now the human race creates as much information as we did from the dawn of civilisation until 2003. That's about five exobytes of data a day. We are going to need help navigating that information to find the thing we actually need.

Libraries are places that people go to for information. Books are only the tip of the information iceberg: they are there, and libraries can provide you freely and legally with books. More children are borrowing books from libraries than ever before – books of all kinds: paper and digital and audio. But libraries are also, for example, places that people, who may not have computers, who may not have internet connections, can go online without paying anything: hugely important when the way you find out about jobs, apply for jobs or apply for benefits is increasingly migrating exclusively online. Librarians can help these people navigate that world.

I do not believe that all books will or should migrate onto screens: as Douglas Adams once pointed out to me, more than 20 years before the Kindle turned up, a physical book is like a shark. Sharks are old: there

were sharks in the ocean before the dinosaurs. And the reason there are still sharks around is that sharks are better at being sharks than anything else is. Physical books are tough, hard to destroy, feel good in your hand: they are good at being books, and there will always be a place for them.