

WHO'S READING OUT THERE?

By William Nicoson

Is it true that, in the age of TV, reading a book is regarded as a quaint, ineffective pastime? Is it true that the "next generation," after release from academic labors, instantly abandons the written word for the talking head? I admit that, as a columnist, I've a bias against believing no one cares to read any more. Fortunately there's evidence showing that people around me not only read but read a lot.

The Fairfax County Public Library, with 19 branches and an annual budget of \$25 million, reports that 77% of the county population holds its library cards. In 1998 close to 5 million visits were made to library branches in the county.

The regional libraries at Reston and Burke are the busiest county branches. Each loaned more than 1 million books in the last fiscal year. The Public Library as a whole lent more than 10 million items that year, up by 400,000 from the previous year.

In fact waiting for other readers to return sought-after volumes has become a recurring problem. But the library staff is strict in honoring reservations and calling in overdue books. Reservations may be made by phone or online -- <http://www.co.fairfax.va.us/library> -- with directions for pickup at the most convenient branch. The library's online catalog has greatly increased lending volume.

The library tracks which publishing sectors attract the most readers to inform its decisions on acquisition. Currently readers are showing particular interest in books on computers, health, travel and home decorating. Last year's book-buying budget was increased substantially by the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors based on burgeoning book-lending demand.

The Reston Regional Library closed August 30 for reordering of space designed by Branch Manager Nadia Taran and her team to improve the reading public's quick access to information. It reopened September 10th, with the information desk at the center of ordered clusters of reading matter and facilities, such as a children's wing, a biographical wing, an elliptical track for other non-fiction stacks, and centralized copiers.

The Herndon Fortnightly Library, closest of other county branches to Reston, experienced roughly 3-times its normal peak-hour activity while Reston Regional was out of action, according to Branch Manager Dede Pruett. "Fortnightly" refers to the Fortnightly Club, organized by eleven Herndon women in 1889 for discussions, once every two weeks, of the arts, science and issues of the day. By 1900 the club had acquired more than 1,000 volumes in a library on Spring Street which it opened to the public. In 1972 the Fairfax County Public Library assumed operation of the library and, when the current facility on Center Street was opened in 1995, retained "Fortnightly" in its name to honor the early initiative of Herndon's citizens to promote

reading, discussion and learning.

Reading, discussion and learning are, after all, at the core of what we call civilization. It's reassuring to be reminded by the heavy use of libraries in Fairfax County that our progress into the TV age of spoon-fed communications hasn't left civilization behind.

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