

OLD AND NEW PATHS OF LITERACY

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KEYWORDS: Literacy. School. Literary canon. General reading. Elite reading. Scope of the book. Cultural distance. Television. Internet

ABSTRACT: General reading retains both a close and distant social environment, which influences quantitative and qualitative dimensions. From 1989 in Poland readers gained accesses to new kinds of writing and authors. This choice ultimately changed reader interests, which had previously focused on a canon literature that had been fixed the school curriculum. However, family traditions and school set texts are not the only indicators of reading practices. New, and little-recognized reader groups, often of an elite character, have a diversified the traditional reading community, often-times supported by cyberspace.

TRADITION

Man – Antoni Kępiński wrote – nurtures biological and social legacies which transmit determined material and spiritual values. The formulation of speech, letters, messages about world, moral, artistic values, technical devices and the like, are handed down from the moment of birth. If man was deprived of this legacy, he would always have to start anew and the development of culture would be impossible (Kępiński, 1992, p. 30). In the light of this statement, everything seems bright, wherein this legacy begins with the first words that a child articulates within the bosom of its family.

A teacher may state that involvement in culture starts when a child forms words. School facilitates this acquisition within the collective, but mastery is an individual matter. School is the first institution of the collective to help overcome illiteracy and forge a path towards literacy. Indeed, the next generations come along after all the work has been done in terms of tradition, language, customs, and system of values. The form in which this introduction takes place is one of the oldest forms leading to literacy, albeit the process itself continues to provoke contentious debate.

Computerization and the Internet support the illusion that it is possible to simplify this path or to replace it with something that involves less effort. This is not a cause of concern for everybody. The poor quality of teaching at primary and gymnasia schools generate headlines but not serious public debate. International research conducted some years ago by PISA on Polish fifteen-year-olds, revealed some worrying trends and results. Even though newspapers published these results, general commentary jumped to the defense of the Polish education system, describing the research methodology as flawed, and praising young people for their patriotism and knowledge of social affairs.

In 2007, results published by the Central Examination Board definitively burst the bubble. Out of almost half a million sixth-graders, 23.5% achieved less than 20 out of the available 40 marks. This indicated that 27.1% of pupils from the countryside, and 18.1% of pupils from major cities were unable to cope with further learning. Gifted pupils (with 34+ points in the test) in the countryside constituted 18.4%, whereas in the major cities this figure totalled 29.3%. Traditionally boys performed poorly (on average 2 points fewer than girls). Amongst boys 28.4% had bad results, as compared to 18.5% of girls (Pezda, 2007).

There are two principle reasons for making a distinction between the performance of boys and girls, the first being the continuity of traditional education within the family. In the 1970s and 80s, boys often chose to attend vocational school, which prepared them for a specific and often well-paid profession. Literature, prose and poetry were regarded as being the domains of women. Vocational school curricula offered a limited humanist outlook. Girls with little technical aptitude attended secondary schools which prepared them for administrative work. These girls often chose, in turn, to marry young and start families. These days, vocational schools are not considered as an attractive option, and higher education is seen as guaranteeing a better life. But having said this, humanist subjects continue to be sorely neglected.

The general observations of provincial librarians are confirming nationwide findings which show that boys are abandoning literature at the end of primary school. Their reading interests move towards fantasy and computer-related interests. Librarians also observe that that boys are choosing to avail of abbreviated copies of set texts.

Schools have traditional supported the cause of literacy, followed closely by libraries. In as much as schools focus on reading and writing, the library looks to reinforce and develop this process. Both apply different work methods, and constantly refine them in order to adapt to given social conditions. Popular observation is delivering evidence that the modernization of schools and libraries is not keeping pace with social change, wherein the Internet and Television are replacing traditional reading habits. Even more worryingly, this comes at a time when parents have no time, or are simply ceasing, to read to their children, thus severing a core valve of literary acquisition. In many countries including Poland public libraries are organising classes for ever-younger children. Through supervised play, these children enrich their vocabulary and learn to verbalize their thoughts. It is filling the cultural gap, which for many reasons has arisen in modern-day families.

The ability of people to read, write and comprehend texts is a base measure of culture and civilization. Since the introduction of compulsory attendance at school (in Poland this law was introduced only after the regaining independence in 1918), not only teachers, librarians, educationalists, but also politicians, economists, representatives of the world of science and cultures have taken an interest in literacy. In an ever-changing world of intensifying social structures, emigration and migration, globalization, computer technology and all that is related

to the cyber world, issues associated with literacy have become more and more become complex.

LANGUAGE

We do not choose the language we speak. We describe it as our mother tongue. In English “mother tongue” signifies the language which a mother speaks and hands down to her children. It is possible to stop here, but people today are being confronted with the need to acquire a second language, enabling them to study, work, and participate in the local community of an adopted country.

Acquiring a second language is conditioned by adaptation and is becoming an economic issue in the contemporary world to the same extent as political and cultural considerations. The Educational Research Centre of St. Patrick's College of the University in Dublin in 2007 in a seminar entitled “Learning a Second Language and Teacher Education In Reading/Literacy” forms part of the research findings of the International Reading Association, findings which have been presented at numerous national and international conferences. The choice of topic for the seminar in Ireland was not accidental, and is related to both the historical events and current politics of the country. Ireland is trying to revive its Irish language. With a population of 4 million people, the popularization of the Irish language has progressed slowly. 80% of Irish people speak English at home, mainly because this language has consolidated traditions, is the language of communication for the majority, and most importantly, is a window onto the world in terms of science, business, banking, and so forth. Schools have played a key role in restoring the Irish language to its rightful place in terms of cultural and social life. A government initiative introduced in 1970 was aimed at supporting the language, and a similar initiative in 1996 established an Irish-language TV channel and radio stations.

However, results have been less than impressive, even though recent findings show that 22% of Irish people can communicate in their mother tongue. On an everyday basis, however, (in shops, on the street, in public places) only 5% of Irish citizens make recourse to the Irish language. Until recently, approximately half a million Irish people understood nothing of their native language.

Similarly, only much earlier, the restoration of a mother tongue took place in the second half the 19th century in the Czech Republic. For Czechs this campaign was intended to support their efforts at achieving autonomy, and in 1918 for full sovereignty. After World War II in Czechoslovakia numerous commissions were established which restored or created new Czech vocabulary. Czechs are exceptionally sensitive about the nativeness of their language, and resist the adoption of foreign names and terms.

Lithuanians are also making efforts to rid Lithuanian of Polish and Belarussian influences (Venclova, 2006, pp. 18-19). However, both in Vilnius and the Lithuanian provinces people are communicating in a language which makes frequent use of Polish, Lithuanian and Belarussian words.

Ukraine has seen different processes, although the situation is changing. In the early 1990s Ukrainian members of parliament began to speak Slavic *volapik* in parliament: which combines Ukrainian, Polish and Russian words. Ukrainians are restoring their tongue, starting in kindergarden and are beginning to enjoy a measure of success.

Other protracted language issues are to be found in Georgia. During the Soviet era Georgian and Russian were taught in schools. Russian was the language of communication and opened the doors to further education and a professional career. Today half of primary teachers working in primary schools cannot speak Georgian well. Some are choosing to speak in an Azerbaijani dialect. Regional and ethnic conflict is hampering attempts at popularizing the Georgian language. Those who consider themselves to be Georgians and who speak in a Georgian manner live in the highlands. Establishing primary schools these areas and employing teachers who speak the language has proven difficult.

Latvia and Estonia are contending with similar issues. The languages which their citizens speak can be put down to not only ethnic divisions but also political and social. The policy of the former Soviet Union aimed at settling Russians in both of these countries and establishing Russian as a dominant language in the spheres of business, culture and politics. In 2006 Russians accounted for 40% of the Latvian population. Wanting to obtain citizenship of the country, these same Russians had to learn Latvian and pass an exam. In schools where Russian is the principle language, Latvian occupies a close second.

Coming to Estonia, in the second half of the twentieth century the Soviet authorities systematically attempted to reduce usage of the Estonian language, by limiting the publication of books and magazines in Latvian in favour of Russian. This policy also obtained for the language of collections in public libraries. In schools, Russian language, history, literature and values were taught. Since 1989 however, Estonians have managed to redeem much of their cultural identity Estonians by emphasizing folkloric, musical and literary traditions.

In both Estonia and Latvia, universities are playing a central role in reviving their respective native languages. Of course, this process has not been without its conflicts. Russians have found it difficult to reconcile themselves to the loss of linguistic dominance, and to add insult to injury they resent being forced to learn Estonian or Latvian.

An example of a language becoming the focus of politics can be seen in Croatia. Prior to its regaining of independence schools conducted lessons with parallel texts in the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets. However, in the mid – 1990s the Cyrillic alphabet was effectively dropped. Children were glad, but some philologists claim that it has deprived younger generations of their shared heritage with Serbia.

A similar fate befell Yiddish in Israel, where today only a narrow circle of specialists in literature and cultural studies have retained an interest in the language. Young Israelis are no longer familiar with the literary and spoken traditions which developed on Polish lands in the 19th and 20th centuries, or of the social and political thought to be found in Yiddish books and prints. Indeed, it is a ironic twist that research centres in Yiddish are flourishing in Germany.

And so, in this brief conspectus we have seen how a second language can become embroiled in politics, wherein it is difficult to reconcile conflicting national, ethnic or social interests.

Every year the people of Iceland celebrate the Icelandic language. People national flags, and radio and television stations broadcast related programmes. Reading is widespread, in political discourse a native artistic creativity is preferred. In terms of mass media, especially television, there are many programmes related to literature and reading. Although books are expensive, each Icelandic child receives on average a dozen or so titles every Christmas.

Poland is monolingual. National minorities which speak their native languages are relatively few. In the Second Republic there were no conflicts whether cultural, political and economic. In the interwar years Polish citizens spoke Yiddish, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Belarussian and German. These minorities looked after their own educational needs and school curricula. They also published books and magazines and established libraries, although not all cultural enterprises met with success.

Polish society was diverse, and certain groups were greatly divergent in cultural and economic terms. Prior to World War I in the Polish countryside the notion of leisure time didn't exist as people were forced to work from dawn to dusk. Even children had their chores to carry out.

In 1918 with the introduction of compulsory teaching at primary school enabled peasant children to find time to do homework and read, although such measures did not narrow the gap between city and countryside. However, the new situation did little to alleviate the lot of peasant families, who were still faced with a heavy day's work.

Poles spoke two languages. One, often determined as literary, was the language of the educated and professional cosmopolitan classes. The second language was composed of various regional local and peasant dialects, such as the highland dialect, Kashubian, and Silesian). Illiteracy was common amongst these groups. This division has persisted until today.

Research carried out in recent times related to reading has established that times people from the city read more than those from the countryside. Indeed, reading is a permanent fixture amongst educated and young people, albeit this is a fact that cannot be extended to older generations or those solely in possession of a primary education.

The changes which took place after 1945 involved industrialisation and migrations from the countryside to the cities. In turn, primary and professional education programmes flourished. The absorption of surpluses of the rural population by the productive sectors of the economy, was mirrored by the intensification of the careers of women, in mainly education, trade, the health services and libraries. This should have been a glorious age, which laid the roots for the flourishing of our language. This failed to happen, however.

Today you would have to be deaf not to hear the kind of language that pupils, students, politicians, journalists and representatives of the different professions are choosing to make recourse to. In terms of accent, the melody of the sentence, and grammar, everything is far from the way it should be correctness. Clearly vocabulary and the store of ideas is becoming endangered, drowned out by superlatives such as “cool” and “super”. Politicians from the front pages of newspapers have trouble with the correct building of a sentence. They start with the centre, confuse subject with object, and use bizarre phrases or inappropriate Latinisms, not actually understanding what it is they mean. Correct articulation is a rarity.

SCHOOL, LIBRARY AND HOME COLLECTION

In the 19th century, it was said of someone who could read and write that they possessed the art of reading, and those who could write was regarded as being literary. Indeed, in the interwar period there was a column to be found on forms with headings “literate” or the “illiterate”. Being able to sign your name was a privilege of the literate. Mastering the ability to write determined advancement in learning and participation in the public life.

These privileged people have also been traditionally associated with institutions facilitating access to books, newspapers, magazines and other materials. According to Grażyna Straus and Katarzyna Wolff, these institutions are a) libraries of different kinds, b) home libraries, c) individual purchases, and d) family-social circles (Straus & Wolff, 2006, p. 56). Determining the scope of library reading is not a simple task. According to findings on the scope of the book, in 2004 45% of Polish citizens read books, of which 33% used public libraries, 15% school libraries, and 9% scientific and special, trade union and parish (Straus & Wolff, 2006, p. 56).

Published by the National Library of Poland, the 2005 annual *Biblioteki Publiczne w liczbach* [Public Libraries in Figures], showed that 19.2% of the Polish population availed of libraries. Beginning from 1999, this indicator remained stable at 19-19.2%. In 2005 a fall in the number of readers was noted totalling 171,234 (*Biblioteki...*, 2006, pp. 29-30). It was almost as if cities of average size had ceased to be interested in books. It is possible of course to take consolation in the fact that this figure only totalled 2.3% and that the reading population attending public libraries amounted to over 7 million persons. This drop in numbers could

be put down to the wanton elimination of libraries, especially in the countryside, where in the very nature of things access to the book is more difficult than in the city. Since 1989 the network of libraries, which at the time boasted the figure of 10,313, fell by 1,722, which represented a 16.7% reduction. In the years 2001-2005 the pace of closures slowed somewhat with just sixty libraries disappearing year on year from the cultural map of the country. Provincial librarians declared that library closures had led to a significant drop in the number of readers. Experience has shown that people may travel 5 kilometres for a loaf of bread but no further than 3 kilometres for a book. Indeed, it is worth noting that the Finnish Libraries Act from 1999 provides that readers should travel no further than 2 kilometres to the nearest library. As a result 80% of Finns use public libraries, and the young people of Finland lead the rankings in terms of reading, writing and comprehension (*Najlepsze wzorce...*, 2005). It is a similar situation in other Scandinavian countries. In Denmark over one third of the population attends the library at least once a month, and over 80% are pleased with their library services. In Sweden and Norway 80% of young people use public libraries. In Great Britain 60% of people have a library card, a figure comparable to the United States, where 62% of the population has a library card. What is more, 66% avail of public libraries at least once a year. Of those who used a library in the past year, 67% borrowed a book, 47% sought the advice of a librarian, 47% referenced dictionaries or encyclopedias, read the 31% newspapers or magazines, and 26% made use of available Internet access. In turn, 25% borrowed CDs or videos, and 14% took part in some event held by the library.

Library documentation constitutes important source of information relating to library use. In many countries this information is used for determining readership numbers. Research conducted by the Institute of the Book and Readings of the National Library of Poland and the National Széchenyi Library in Budapest have proven rather exceptional in this. They have examined the tradition, methodologies and research histories relating to reading in both Poland and Hungary.

Determining the extent of the purchases of books and magazines is more difficult. This is because reader declarations are often very general and impossible to verify. Of course it is possible to compare them with book sales, but it doesn't guarantee an accurate picture of active reading. According to research on the scope of the book in 2006, 33% of Polish people aged 15 years and older declared that they buy at least one book a year.

In terms of volume of purchases, one in five Polish people bought no more than 4 titles. One in ten bought between 5 and 11 titles, but only a 3% of those polled had bought 12 titles or more. Amongst country dwellers only 22% had actually bought a book, whereas amongst residents of cities this figure totalled 39%. Those up to the age of 60 with a higher education and purchasing power bought books more often. And so individual purchases do not account for wide-spread literacy. For those living in small villages and towns public libraries remain the primary source of access to books.

Reading books borrowed from relatives and friends is an important aspect of Polish reading. In 2006, 36% of respondents declared as such. Determining the size of home libraries is not a simple task. When asked, people generally exaggerate the size of their home libraries. For many, admitting to owning only a small number of books is a source of embarrassment. Even if we assume, following Przemysław Czapliński, that the figure of 2.4 billion books in home libraries is exaggerated, the fact remains that reading is still a central part of home life.

Those who grew up amongst books, listened to fairy tales read by their parents, saw people reading and talking about books, listened to how their parents and their acquaintances discussed books or recommended them to each other, will read, buy and borrow books. Perhaps not every adult who reads took this pleasure from home, however if an adult does not read, then they were most likely reared in an environment deprived of books (Czapliński, 2007, p. 81).

Traditions of home reading were always an integral part of family life amongst the Polish intelligentsia, and research on reading in the city and countryside indicates that this tradition is continuing. Here public libraries have played a key role by inviting older readers to read to small children or to relate stories from the past, by which the histories and traditions of towns and villages are passed on to the younger generations.

ELECTRONIC MEDIA

The clash of print and cyber worlds is visible not only in individual observation, but is borne out by national and international statistics.

According to the findings of the American company NOP-World, in 2004-2005 the average resident of Earth watched TV for 16.6 hrs a week, worked on the computer for 8.9 hrs, listened to the radio for 6.5 hrs, and devoted 6.5 hrs devoted to reading. Polish mores are

located in this world average, although Indians and Thais are more active readers, 10.7 hrs and 9.4 hrs respectively. Czechs, Russians, Swedes, French and Hungarians also polled high in terms of reading hours.

Following research on the scope of the book in Poland (2006), the popular view was debunked that Internet users were not interested in books. 69% of Internet users declared an interest in reading, whilst amongst those who did not use the Internet only 37% of respondents declared an interest in books. Books are now being sourced in digital libraries, whether virtual or electronic. The Internet now serves as a source of information for the printed book, and browsers can find information on the latest publications, reviews, and recommendations. Purchasing over the Internet has also become a common practice.

Amongst politicians and sociologists the view dominates that the Internet is integral to civilizational development. Representatives of parliament, political parties and numerous foundations are also looking to equip schools with computers with access to the Internet.

Young people are proficient with computers, but librarians can see that and older readers are proving just as adept. Of course, no one can doubt the significance of the cyber world for everything from learning, business, communication and medicine, to military and banking. However, evidence that the Internet is a guarantee of future educational success has yet to be presented.

Librarians are observing that young children are beginning to regard text messages as reading materials, but what is perhaps of greater concern is the fact that teachers and pupils are making recourse to the same internet materials, which are often of dubitable provenance. A good teacher needs to emphasize the value of books. And a good minister for education should withdraw computers from schools. However, nobody will ever do so. Because progress is development (Finkelkraut, 2007).

We are being pressurized by global institutions producing new cyber technologies, having at their disposal unimaginable financial resources for marketing and having achieved absolute dominance over the publishing world. This can be put down to the fact that, as Stanisław Siekierski, writes,

The attractiveness of reading in comparison to other pastimes is systematically decreasing and it seems that this is an unavoidable process. Working for the benefit of other media is the entire machine of mass culture: economic mechanisms are playing a role of no small importance. Implementing new techniques of transmission is generating huge revenues for rich producers... Increasingly, reading in one's leisure time will depend on people's psychological predispositions. It will arise from a conscious choice of lifestyle, from the psychological needs of individuals, and people's aspirations toward independent thought (Siekierski, 2000, p. 182).

The proverb says: "to the clever don't speak, with the rich don't sit down". Television and radio have parted company with the printed word, especially with literature. In order to cross the boundary of their locality, people need only look at a television or computer screen. It is a much simpler option to reading. However, television in Poland enjoys a shared history with Polish theatre. Poland's Theatre Television has made celebrated productions of Polish literary greats: Juliusz Słowacki, Stanisław Wyspiański, Cyprian Kamil Norwid, and Witkacy, to mention but a few. What is more, writers such as Zbigniew Herbert, Ireneusz Iredyński, Stanisław Grochowiak, Jerzy Krzysztoń, and Władysław Terlecki have written plays especially for radio. In the past Polish television and radio have also showcased famous literary works of literature, and in doing so have laid foundations for European cultural integration.

It was George Washington who said that all those who participate in public life must demonstrate a minimum level of intellectual ability, and particularly in the area of reading and writing. He and America's founding fathers knew that literacy and books formed the foundations for the organisation of communities, but also allowed people to engage in the national project. And so, we may ask again, whether text messages address the lofty expectations that nations hold for their peoples.

THE LITERARY TRADITION AND FREEDOMS OF CHOICE

The organizational changes taking place in institutions providing access to the book are of a dynamic character, and are informed by educational structures, library and bookshop networks and storage facilities. Distribution methods have changed, and the same obtains for the publishing market. The interests of the reading public have also undergone a revolution of sorts. Up until 1998 readership tastes had a uniform character. These tastes had been

principally formed by the school curricula which had selected literary texts. The said choice of texts was intended to link past and present and forge a path to the future.

In the Polish People's Republic, even though it may seem as having been contradictory to the governing ideology, contrary to ideological establishments of the ruling party, publishing and educational policies supported the idea of nurturing the country's historical and literary traditions. Indeed, generations of Poles obtained a vision of their history through 19th-century works of literature. However, literature by its very nature presents a simplified or skewed version of history, and many would argue that writers like Henryk Sienkiewicz succeeded in creating a fictional past. This same issue has been mirrored in the cinematic adaptation of Poland's canonical works. Today young people are more familiar with the cinematic versions of these classics, and as a result they see the history of Poland from a two-dimensional perspective, with no appreciation of nuance or symbol. This lack of historical knowledge on the part of young people is compounded by the fact that school texts encourage rote learning. As soon as pupils leave school they are only too happy to forget everything they've learnt.

For half a century, centralized publishing, school curricula, and print distribution were subject to censorship and strict media control. Independent circulation was of course important, particularly after 1981, but its scope was principally limited to the bigger cities. In many provincial libraries underground books and magazines of all forms were well known to select readers and librarians, albeit this same fact did not betray a systematic knowledge in terms of social, political or cultural issues.

After 1990, this entire system collapsed and there emerged a free market for books and the press. Not only did countless publishing companies spring up, but the new era saw a lifting of national censorship, amendments to school curricula, and a marked increase in the choice of textbooks. Public libraries were also free to take ownership of their collections.

The choice of books, newspapers and magazines widened and revealed new interests amongst readers. People happily read translations of western literature, principally American. And the Harlequin series in particular benefit from people's thirst for romantic novels. Less popular genres were crime, horror, and literature, DIY, specialist and religious books.

Amongst the most widely-read books in 2004, Harlequin novels collectively fared the best, followed by Harry Potter, Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Trilogy* [Trylogia], *The Teutonic Knights* [Krzyżacy], and *Quo Vadis*, Adam Mickiewicz's *Master Tadeusz* [Pan Tadeusz], J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, Katarzyna Grochola's *Never Ever* [Nigdy w życiu], and Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (Straus & Wolff, 2006, p. 48). From this brief conspectus one can already see, that school curriculum titles and fiction titles together composed a significant commercial market.

With the creation of a free market, much of the literary output of the Polish People's Republic was destined to be forgotten even amongst students of the library science. Authors such Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, and a handful of others still enjoy a modest readership, and their works are still to be found on library shelves. However this entire group of writers paid a price for having being so engaged with the communist regime.

THE DECENTRALIZATION OF READERSHIP INTERESTS

Similarly to the production of the book, reading has splintered into several, currents, of which we know little. Elite reading has always been the purview of narrow intellectual groups. Differences in readerships repertoires are obvious. That said, the distance between general and elite reading is expanding. It is not just a question of reading preferences, wherein some people prefer light reads over more exiguous material, but in the way that people see and assess culture. Gustaw Holoubek so writes,

I am in favour of the deep humanization of education on all levels of the teaching [...] with a need to shape Poland's entire system of education. If I have attempted to arrive at a title for this proposal, I would call it The Great Return and Continuation. A return to the most enlightened examples of the past, which links us to the culture of the Mediterranean, the cradle of our European values. For continuity, I would look to progress in science and culture and to the new ways of acquiring knowledge (Holoubek, 2004).

His is not a solitary voice. Professor Tadeusz Gadacz and Professor Barbara Skarga advocate the reintroduction of philosophy to secondary schools. Zygmunt Kubiak believes we should read the works of ancient Greece. Of course, the voices of the cyber era may regard such exhortations as fanciful, and perhaps they have a point. After all, the country needs managers, computer specialists, designers, brokers, and not experts on ancient writings. But in the long-

term dissociating ourselves from our cultural roots will have terrible consequences, including the impoverishment of the language, the loss of collective identity, and other unforeseeable consequences.

With such a short-sighted view of elite culture, doubts have been voiced about the accumulation and conservation of library collections, the creation of bibliographical sources and the entire IT system of information relating to manuscripts, old prints, musicale and the like. However, librarians trust that future generations will enjoy the fruits of their efforts, provided, of course, that the coming generations are appropriately educated. This life-long formation should begin with the family, and continue on through nursery school, primary and secondary school, university, and adult learning.

It is fitting to mention that fantasy and sci-fi literature enjoy a broad and passionate readership, which has established many cyber forums and organised conventions. It is without doubt a cultural elite, which boasts members from the highest echelons of scientific and professional accomplishment (Sułkowska, 2006). The story of poetry in Poland is more colourful. Apart from those poets who are required reading in schools, most other poets are largely unknown. In the years 2001-03, 709 publishers located in 227 centres throughout the country published 1,445 books of poetry. Much poetic activity is centred around public libraries and community cultural centres, where poets, young and old, come together to participate in poetry readings and competitions. They also publish their poems in local newspapers and magazines. It is not possible for all aspiring young poets to publish in established poetry revues. However, the very participation of young represents a great contribution to collective cultural enterprise.

What is happening in libraries has also its own historical reference. In a local public library the past is something tangible. Cultural evenings organised by libraries revive the memories of local events which took place in the distant or recent past. Such activities place young people in a familiar space, and increases their own sense of place within their local environs.

Versions of history are taken on trust, people who record and relate history bear witness to the past. They hold the cherished memories of family, community and nation. This is the world which librarians will continue to facilitate and nurture.

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