

— REID, V.S.

My consolation today as I face this group of professional people is that as a non-professional, I am not expected to talk about libraries, or librarianship. Indeed, my position is particularly unique in that I cannot be construed into either of the two great branches of people connected to libraries: that is, I'm neither borrower or lender. I am, in fact, in a small way, a tradesman engaged in servicing libraries.

So I am here almost under false pretenses. I should really be knocking at the back entrance instead of being here up front among you. But since you've asked me in, here I am and here I'll be, God helping you, another year or so.

There is, however, one area of your work on which I believe I can make a few comments; comments which, I hope, will make your work appreciably more taxing, for the simple reason that your work will be more appreciated by that reluctant branch of your business whom you call borrowers.

You should expect no less from me since as a non professional I can have only a limited sympathy for your long hours, and your short salaries.

But leaving aside toil and spoil for a moment, I wish to spend a little time talking about a canker to do with books - and anything about books ought to interest you.

The charge, or opinion has been expressed very often that ours is an inarticulate society. In a way, this is of course, not true. If we accept that to articulate means simply, to speak, then this society is one of the most verbose on earth. Our streets, our countryside, our cinemas are one continuous stream of talk. We whisper in concerts and churches. And even where the degree of exertion precludes our giving voice to our opinions, we hire people to do it. Hence we had our digging songs in the old road gang .

But, by articulate, I mean the ability to express ourselves through knowledge of what we are talking about. It means to understand what went on, to understand what's going on, and to understand what will go on tomorrow. It means knowing something more than what our island-bound, terribly limited personal experiences will

teach us. It means a deeper understanding of the world around us, and the world as it touches us. And I don't have to tell you how hard and often we're being touched. A visit to any of our jetports, on any day, will articulate this point with more powerful emphasis than any words of mine.

But I must depend on words of mine to bare to you a desperately stunted section of our local psyche. And that is: the opposition, the very active opposition of adult people, to allowing their children to read. It may sound fantastic, even preposterous, but it is true. Mark you, I do not mean the reading of textbooks. I mean that children are being prevented from entering upon that vast body of written works which should be their heritage. And so, generation after generation, our children grow up unacquainted with reading. By the time they are adults, reading has become such a sweaty chore, that they never return to it. And there grows another ignorant generation.

To get down to the nitty gritty, many parents consider reading to be a waste of time. They themselves having grown up illiterate (although they can read and write), they see no reason why their children should "waste time" with books. They actually think that putting up a road block against books will help the teacher's task.

To be fair to these parents, they do regard reading as a recreation, which neither they nor their children can afford. Their children should be more concerned with "studying", preferably "arithmetic", which will enable them to "make money" when they grow up. To what extent a knowledge of arithmetic enables one to make money, I do not know. Monkeys have been taught to add and subtract very competently, yet I haven't heard of any monkeys among our tycoons.

Unless, of course, I'm misinformed.

In this tragic mistreatment, which I've observed firsthand in many places, an incoming generation is doomed to mature in the same shortages as their forbears, except for whatever easement may be brought by the presence of radio and television. And because these children have been conditioned by their parents to regard extra curricular reading as a vice not far behind ganja smoking or sexual perversion, they grow up to no desire, no urge to continue their education after school.

And it is a fairly established fact, ladies and gentlemen, that for quality and style, self-education after school beats a lot of learning.

Now, what results, what side effects, may we expect from this sunless existence? The answer is, quite a few, none of them good.

We may expect a widening of the generation gap, that gap which showed up so dramatically, so sadly, and yes, so warningly during the October troubles. For we saw an older generation massively losing its composure, its compassion, at the first onslaught of young people on old entrenched ideas. We saw the spectacle of our leaders, not necessarily political ones only, laying out blame on their children for pushing ajar a door in our house which we had hoped to keep closed; thus exposing some of the rumpled rooms of our society.

And like any good Joneses, we resented this baring of our hire-purchase life and retaliated with emotional savagery. But there were those of us in this country who, while I repeat, condemning riotous behaviour, were sufficiently understanding of our times to know that condemning our youths would only cause a break in communication, and end a dialogue. If ever there was an overkill in the Jamaican history, this operation was. I won't go further into this genuinely sad episode since my hope is that we will all work towards healing the present wound. What else may we expect out of this figurative burning of the books?

We may also expect the continuing narrowing vision which makes Jamaicans look on with a vague but unclear hurt as foreigners enter the country with new industrial ideas for flogging our pockets - legitimately.

Then we may expect more of the timidity and absence of enterprise which has handcuffed most of our agricultural folk to the hoe their grandfathers used. This is the sleeping conservatism which 75 years of agricultural societies have failed to throw out of bed. And still other expectations, ladies and gentlemen.

And we may expect a continuing acceptance of mediocrity which not only faults our standards of production, but makes us second class consumers paying first class prices through unawareness.

And expect a continuance of bad manners and its corollary, violent behaviour through the frustrations brought on by a sense of inadequacy, or inferiority.

And expect the continuing damage to our corporate image.

Expect the admiration of dishonesty which we sublimate into Anancy-ships.

Expect the woeful lack of pride in our past because most of us are unfamiliar with it and accept what we're told by professional denigrators interested in keeping us ashamed. Expect all these and more, for these are the results and effects of our national disinclination to read.

Even that greatest book, the Bible, a proven sustenance spiritually and materially, is little read; not only because of our literacy problem, but because people have no desire, no urge to read. The consequences are a lack of compassion and an obedience to instinct.

And this brings me to the crucial point: how can we lose an age and win a generation by making our people desire to read, and read? How can we influence our adults against feeding their instincts at the cost of their compassion? Can the librarian help put back growth in this stunted psyche? Frankly, I don't know. But I do know you don't ask a doctor if he knows how to make splints. You figure he does.

The trouble is that many people of my generation are not only unacquainted with books, they are also unacquainted with librarians. They would probably think that the word was the name of some new detergent. Their minds work that way.

They are however familiar with "teacher" and here is where we could, I believe, mount the opening salvo in this operation.

Recently I talked with the head of one of our secondary schools and he observed that this was a real problem. He himself was undertaking personal visits to certain homes. So, you see, the crisis is being recognized among teachers.

We have no quick formula for solving this 300 year old problem. But it can be licked. Not by librarians alone, but with the help of teachers, of friends of libraries, and librarians. We can reach the parents and explain to them what we are getting at. We must tell them that Johnny and Jane are not wasting time by reading "story books." They are really getting a free tuition in addition to their school education.

I am putting to this meeting the proposal that we encourage, and actively assist, in changing books from being suspect articles, to what they really are:

teachers' aids in school, and the source of continuing education all our lives.

All we need is a sort of evangel spirit in us that will remind us at all times, especially in talks with parents, to point out the value of reading. The teacher or librarian must win over the parents to belief in books, explaining that books and libraries offer the most inexpensive high school and university education there is.

In other words, the parents should know there is something in it for them.

Somebody might ask: why bother? What are we saving? I'll tell you what we're saving. We're saving a truth. Our particular truth is that this country is a most blessed piece of earth; and that most of its people are the salt of the earth.

We must try to throw overboard the untruth that our people, in general, applaud anancy-ship, or prefer mediocrity. We're caught in a technological age. We must endeavour to strengthen the lines of communication, now much too thinly stretched because of the social gap; and consider that the social gap has been largely created by the educational gap, which splits this nation into suspicious and warring halves.

We must try to change self-expression from being a perquisite of the few. Why is rumour more important than technology in our communications? It's because we're a word-of-mouth society, still stuck with an oral tradition, unaccustomed to reading and analysing for ourselves. So we keep our lie factories at full production.

So you think race divides us? You just observe the "rabbity" with which young Jamaicans of whatever race are marrying each other. You leave this race business to them. They will fix it. No, race is not our most important divisor. It is education, and the trauma that the lack of it brings, which present the great divide. We must build bridges, and books are excellent timber.

To you I will say, books are the hymns ancient and modern of our whole civilization. It is the single one of man's inventions that can conceivably escape the holocaust. You are the keepers of this treasure. The dispensers of its benefits. Video tapes and micro films need electric power and machinery to bring them to life. But books, with their infinite greater capacity to add to individual knowledge, only need eyes to leap into life. Today, even the blind are reading.

I told you at the outset, it may mean more thinking on your part, and more  
and better public relations; but you see, you have chosen a proud profession. You  
are the guardian of the future, not the tomorrow future, or the day after tomorrow  
but the future of man.

V.S. Reid  
January 31, 1969

Presidential Address  
J.L.A. Meeting