

OPENERS

For the Love of Reading

by Lyn C. A. Gardner and Cy Dillon

This special issue of *Virginia Libraries* is devoted to what brought most of us here in the first place—the love of reading. As library staff, we rejoice in books and do what we can to foster both literacy and reading for pleasure. During tough times and budget cuts, and in the face of reports that voluntary reading is on the decline, it's important to celebrate what we're doing to foster this mission. We want to get communities excited about our libraries by reawakening the love of books of all types and genres, and presenting patrons with chances to meet the authors who make our existence possible. To that end, this issue is devoted to some of the many literary events and programs being sponsored by libraries, as well as interviews with Virginia authors.

Much speculation on the future of libraries stems from the fear that books as we know them may be perceived to have decreasing relevance in modern lives. Though there are also many positive aspects of alternative media, such as e-texts and online book groups, ever since the advent of the television age, authors have been losing readers to other media. The fears raised in the fifties have some merit: the amount of time children spend with a TV on in the room does seem to have a negative impact on their ability to focus on reading (indeed, the rapid shifts of commercials are thought by some to contribute to ADD). Even children and adults who enjoy books often spend at least as much leisure time

watching visual entertainments as reading. Though the Internet often involves reading, some posit that browsing online has decreased readers' attention span.

Furthermore, publishing, which has been in decline for years, has entered a new level of crisis with the current recession. In November, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt put a halt to acquiring new titles for its trade (including fiction) and reference divisions, and many positions have been eliminated. Random House, also cutting positions, has consolidated its five adult publishing groups into three, and has absorbed the Bantam Dell Publishing Group, including Bantam Dell, the Dial Press, and Spiegel & Grau. Continuing the trend of eliminating positions, Doubleday has sheltered part of its operations under the Knopf umbrella as the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, and the rest have joined the Crown Publishing Group. Simon & Schuster is also cutting jobs.

What does this mean for readers? There will be less variety; less fresh, new voices; and more emphasis on mass appeal than unique voices. Readers will have fewer choices in the present, and the impact may carry forward into the future, as many current writers, already struggling to scrape by and usually working other jobs, may of necessity decide to hang up their hats, while other emerging writers may be silenced before we even have the chance to hear their voices. Even if some of these writers reemerge if the publishing climate stabilizes,

"I received the fundamentals of my education in school, but that was not enough. My real education, the superstructure, the details, the true architecture, I got out of the public library. For an impoverished child whose family could not afford to buy books, the library was the open door to wonder and achievement, and I can never be sufficiently grateful that I had the wit to charge through that door and make the most of it. Now, when I read constantly about the way in which library funds are being cut and cut, I can only think that the door is closing and that American society has found one more way to destroy itself."

—Isaac Asimov, *I, Asimov* (1994)

readers will have been cheated out of the many wonderful books they might have produced; while other writers, hurried on by the demands of life, may never return.

What does this mean for libraries? Aside from the fact that we need varied content to fill our shelves and maximize our value to our communities, good writing is the lifeblood of reading. Readers who do not encounter those unique voices that speak to them may find less and less reason to turn to reading when so many other pursuits clamor for attention. Further, libraries are as essential to authors as the reverse:

whether through budget cuts or the failure in publishing, without rich content in libraries, some future writers may never develop.

How can libraries help? Fears over the future of libraries and reading may never entirely disappear. Maybe it's time to stop worrying and simply celebrate the wonderful world we have to offer. Enthusiasm is catching; by sharing our joy, we may reawaken that wonder in our patrons. There are many things that libraries are already doing, and doing well—book clubs, reading recommendations, literacy programs of all sorts, eye-catching displays, author talks and programs, and other exciting and creative events that bring good books to the notice of patrons and help give them the tools to enjoy them. Just take a look at some of the articles in this issue. So let's take a moment to appreciate all the ways we strive to inspire the love of reading in others. Libraries and authors need one another. Let's continue to support each other to make a brighter future for all of us—readers most of all!

Cy Dillon

I have to confess not connecting libraries with authors until I was in college. As a child and adolescent I looked at libraries the way an NFL lineman might look at a pancake house, as a simple opportunity for consumption. After reading my way through our elementary and high school libraries and attacking the bookmobile every month for years, I imagined myself well-read for an eighteen-year-old. Then I had a course from Dabney Stuart. Dabney, author of more than a dozen volumes himself, drove generations of Washington and Lee students to scour the library for things he assumed they should have already read. I left his office more than once with lists of critics or writers whose works were essential to understanding twentieth-

century literature, and later—in some cases years later—marked off each item completed with a sense of accomplishment.

Now, forty years after those long afternoons reading next to an open window in the stacks, I understand more about the symbiotic relationship between libraries and authors. That makes me particularly appreciative of my friend and colleague Dr. Richard L. Smith. You may have seen him on the History Channel discussing the importance of Timbuktu as a center for trade long before the colonial era; he looks the

**"You must live feverishly
in a library. Colleges are
not going to do any good
unless you are raised and
live in a library every day
of your life."**

RAY BRADBURY, *WRITER'S DIGEST*,
FEBRUARY 1976

part of a seasoned African explorer. Smith came to Ferrum College from Rutgers even before I arrived here, and he has spent the intervening years teaching thousands of undergraduates, serving as a department and division chair, and producing articles and books on the history of Africa and Asia. During that time our library—and the study of history in general—has benefited from his publications, but an even more important influence on us has been his guidance in ordering books to support the numerous classes he has designed and taught. And, like my mentor, he has required his students to use the library. Obviously anyone who provides us with good books, expert acquisitions advice, and serious researchers is a great asset.

In a recent conversation Smith told me that for two decades after coming to Ferrum he made annual trips to either the Library of Congress or the Columbia University Library to access the seventy or more volumes and the numerous articles he read each year to pursue his research. But as improvements in interlibrary loans and the development of electronic resources reached a tipping point in the 1990s, he realized that he could work here and avoid the stays in Washington and New York.

Smith's research has provided some interesting challenges to our staff, both because of the languages involved and because of the rarity of some of the works he needed to borrow. When asked which languages he read most often, Smith said, "Close to half are in French, but occasionally I'll get something in Portuguese depending on the topic I'm working on. I actually work in some pretty weird languages, such as proto-Afro-Asian and proto-Nilo-Saharan, but I don't do the actual translation of texts." As we discussed some of the unusual requests he had made, Smith explained, "I did get an original work published in 1802 some years ago. Probably the most unusual experience I had in this regard concerned a work of geography written by the Andalusian scholar al-Bakri in the eleventh century. I ordered this in a French translation that was published in the 1850s, but what I got was an actual copy of al-Bakri's work in the original Arabic (the book itself obviously wasn't from the eleventh century). So I ordered it in French, and it came in Arabic, and I was delighted."

In spite of the sophistication of his research, Smith's most recent writings are aimed at undergraduate history students in courses on Islam and in introductory world history courses. We just received our copies of *Premodern Trade in World History*, and it is a sure bet

to circulate frequently. What more could a librarian ask?

Lyn C. A. Gardner

The biggest influence on my own literary life, both as a reader and a writer, has always been my father, Delbert R. Gardner. While I inherited a love of reading from both parents, with fond memories of both reading to us from an early age, my father carried on the tradition of reading aloud to our family long past the time when we could read for ourselves. He would read with gusto at the dinner table, in Saturday-morning living-room gatherings, or in the car on family trips from classics such as *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* or the adventures of Groo the Wanderer. When I reached my early teens, my father opened a new world to me, drawing on my own interest in mythology, medieval legends, and fantasy fiction to introduce me to the works of such authors as Tennyson, Browning, Keats, and William Morris (about whom Dad had published a scholarly book, and whose *The Life and Death of Jason* thrilled me as much as John Gardner's *Jason and Medea* at age fourteen). Throughout our lives, Dad shared with us the joy of reading all types of works; and, as a former English professor, he elucidated aspects of classic works that helped us appreciate them all the more.

Likewise, from the beginning, I loved my father's enthusiasm for pounding the keys of his heavy manual typewriter, creating drafts of stories and poems that he would meticulously polish before giving them to my mother, who typed clean copies and revised versions for submission. I loved Dad's desk, with his wooden file box and small notebook for submissions. He shared each new publication, sometimes reading them aloud to us; indeed, he could still quote his own poems in conversation

years later. I grew up loving the magical world of books, and seeing firsthand how a writer lived inside them. I always knew I wanted to be a writer like my father; and when the time came, he showed me how to submit my work, and gave me a postage allowance each month despite our limited means.

While both our parents took us on many library jaunts throughout the years, Dad continued to share the library experience with me long

"I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library."

JORGE LUIS BORGES

past childhood. In addition to taking me to a variety of academic libraries on many occasions during high school and college (we loved hunting down literary clues together), he also saw the library as the perfect place for me to work—and he was right. He encouraged me to apply to our local library when I was sixteen. From my teenage days as a page and then library assistant while I paid for college, through my years as a research assistant at a museum library upon achieving my master's in English literature, to my present work as catalog librarian at Hampton Public Library, I've loved the chance to work with books and the people who enjoy them. Dad was as proud that I became a librarian as I was pleased to be one; though he was eighty at the time, he and my mother drove all the way to Tallahassee, Florida, from Newport News to attend my MLIS graduation. He was always happy about my involvement in the world of books.

Along with his love of family, literary pursuits shaped his life. Among other occupations, he

spent twenty-one years as a professor of English literature and creative writing (whereby he met my mother, a talented former student with whom he stayed in touch) and another fourteen years as a writer-editor for the government. Throughout their marriage, my parents continued reading aloud to each other on car trips of any length, in waiting rooms and hospitals, filling hours of waiting with this pleasure they shared. On what turned out to be the last day of his life, my sister and I took turns reading to Dad when he could neither rest nor speak. Earlier in 2008, I had begun submitting his writing for him; we enjoyed discussing his work and what might be done to complete it. In the hospital, I told him how much I admired his work and vowed to continue striving to complete his publications. At his funeral, his sister-in-law spoke of how Dad opened the world of literature to her by urging her to read *Raintree County*; having discovered she'd never read it, he spent a day of their vacation hunting through a dusty bookshop for the then out-of-print work, which she fell in love with as well. One of my brothers was named in part for its author, Ross Lockridge.

Dad died on September 21, 2008. I've been finding it extremely difficult to concentrate or stay motivated even for the simplest tasks. Writing this column has been an almost insurmountable goal (and has been the first piece of writing I've managed to complete since he entered the hospital). The delay of this special issue is entirely my fault, and I beg the pardon of our readers and writers alike. But while it's difficult to find strength to continue, I'm determined to carry on his work—making sure his writing is remembered; continuing to live the literary dream we both shared; and perhaps most important of all, helping to share our passion for reading. 