

THE BROWSER

Literacy: The price of admission

Kim Marshall

Jonathan Kozol '58, *Illiterate America*, Anchor Press/Doubleday, \$15.95.

"A third of the nation cannot read these words." So begins the first chapter of Jonathan Kozol's new book, *Illiterate America*, and we are immediately skeptical of the figure. But in short order, Kozol produces a blizzard of statistics

Sixty million illiterate or marginally literate adults are "substantially excluded from the democratic process and the economic commerce of a print society."

showing that 25 million adult Americans can barely read at all, while another 35 million are "semi-literate," that is, unable to read at the level demanded by our technological society. That adds up to 60 million illiterate or marginally literate adults, disproportionately black and other minority, who are "substantially excluded from the democratic process and the economic commerce of a print society." Kozol argues that even these shocking figures are conservative estimates, since the census and other surveys tend to underestimate this mute population in our midst.

Kozol acknowledges that the first category—true illiteracy—has shrunk in recent years, but the second—functional illiteracy—has grown because of the steadily increasing demands of our society. Kozol ticks off the benchmarks of literacy: a ninth-grade reading level is required to understand the antidote instructions on a bottle of corrosive kitchen lye; a tenth-grade level is needed to understand the instructions on federal income tax forms; many newspapers are written at a tenth- to twelfth-grade level; and a twelfth-grade level is required to understand life insurance forms and the national newsmagazines. He quotes the educational director of the AFL-CIO as saying that by the 1990s, anyone who doesn't have at least a twelfth-grade

reading, writing, and calculating level will be absolutely lost.

None of this material is accessible to sixty million adult Americans. The illiterate do not have access to important information on nutrition, bargains, travel, safety, work, entertainment, health insurance, medical consent forms, and educational and political choices. They are unable to make intelligent decisions to better their lives. Illiterate people are easy marks for consumer fraud, and don't have the skills to catch errors and prevent themselves from being cheated.

The illiterate are also saddled with shame and self-hatred. People who emerge from schools without the ability to read have to ask themselves, as Kozol frames it, "Am I inherently deficient? Am I lacking in intelligence? in energy? in will? If the answer is yes, I am inferior. If the answer is no, I am the victim of injustice." It is an unusual person who will draw the second conclusion, and for this reason, the illiterate are less likely than any other disadvantaged group to organize politically to improve their lot.

Most devastating is the effect of illiteracy on the next generation. The children of poor and marginal readers begin school with a tremendous disadvantage, and it is a remarkable school that can make up for these deficits. In addition, illiterate parents are hesitant to visit their children's classrooms, having developed a distaste for schools from having done poorly themselves, and are often ineffective in bringing their concerns to the attention of teachers and principals.

Kozol argues that the price we pay for this extraordinary level of illiteracy includes child welfare; the costs of crime (the prison population, Kozol says, represents the single highest concentration of adult illiterates); unemployment benefits; health costs; worker's compensation due to damage to equipment and accidents attributable to poor reading skills; and much more.

What is being done about illiteracy now? Kozol puts the four major efforts under his analytical lens and finds them all wanting. He does give credit to several good initiatives, and is especially



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complimentary of a 1983 alliance of a number of adult literacy groups with the American Library Association and B. Dalton, the bookseller. But he feels that these efforts are grossly underfunded and are reaching far too few people. He calculates that present efforts to combat illiteracy are spending only \$1.65 for each needy person.

Kozol finds the definition of literacy used by most programs wanting. Teaching the skills needed to fill out job applications and welfare forms, he states, is a trivialization of literacy. His list of desiderata for true literacy aims much higher (and is, incidentally, something any public high school curriculum should contain). This book is impressive for the number of practical suggestions it offers for solving the illiteracy problem. The specific ideas give credibility to Kozol's oft-repeated assertion that we do

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not need another blue-ribbon commission to study this problem; we know what to do right now. He believes that, with the proper programs and a real national commitment, we could substantially conquer illiteracy by the year 2000.

Kozol believes that illiterate people desperately want to escape their condition, and could be persuaded to participate in literacy programs that have a number of important characteristics:

—Carefully chosen people recruiting door-to-door in target neighborhoods

—Noninstitutional settings (church basements, vacant apartments), which students would refurbish

—Day care, potluck dinners, and other community-building devices; concrete rewards (a bookshelf for a child, for example); and occasional guest speakers

—Teachers who work with collegial groups of six or seven, not one-on-one

—Active participation of the elderly, and of college and high school students who would receive academic credit for tutoring

—“Two-way tutoring” of less skillful readers (both tutor and tutee improve in such situations)

—Teachers from public schools, whose long-term interests are at stake

In memory of Robert Fitzgerald

Suavis iustorum fragrat odor tumulo.

—Saint Venantius Fortunatus

Beeswax on the tiles squeaked under whatever feet might invade the skewed, mysterious corridor of his sixteenth-century convent, now employed as the Springfield poet's refuge. Visible under a ping-pong table across the hall from the chapel, a set of golf clubs slumbered in their bag.

Each morning, on the *piano nobile*, the poet construed a score of lines of Homer in a double-doored room made precious for his purposes, next to the *sala* where massive cabinetry and an untuned piano slept as in a fable. The *autostrada* grumbled miles below the parish of St. Fortunatus of the Hills.

The villa, refuge for his work of words, could skew an ancient epic into perspective: are saints not painted, enshrined in gilt, in tribute to the odor of sanctity?

Some poets transform one tongue into another despite the rattle of talk that fumes from a kitchen where village girls are cutting *fettuccine* before a fireplace vast enough to roast a sheep.

And if at noon the poet abandons his meters to shoulder his golf-bag, and his lithe wife drives him to a nearby nine-hole sparsely-seeded course, and with narrowed eyes each smites a small ball, balanced between tufts, from hole to hole—odor of chocolate drifts down on their contest between the cypresses and oleanders from a factory fuming in the mounded hills unto which the golfers lift up their sad faces.

Though Saint Fortunatus was a noted glutton, *vexilla regis prodeunt*; and you, proud harper, translated your epitaph: “You speak with art, but your intent is honest. The Argive troubles, and your own troubles, you told us as a poet would, a man who knows the world.”

—PETER DAVISON

A note on the poems of Saint Venantius Fortunatus: “They are little letters in verse, reminiscences of dinners where the fish was as subtly flavoured as the Falernian, of churches where the sunlight wavered on the ceiling as on sea-water, of the midday halt in a wood, July heat and dust and the lapse of spring water and a tired man lying on the grass and chanting Virgil to himself, or the Psalms . . . *Vexilla regis prodeunt* was written for the coming of a fragment of the Holy Rood to Poitiers: five hundred years later it was the marching song of the men who fought for the Sepulchre.”

—Helen Waddell, *Medieval Latin Lyrics*

Peter Davison '49 recently published his eighth book of verse, *Praying Wrong: New and Selected Poems, 1957-1984* (Atheneum). He is senior editor of the *Atlantic Monthly Press* and poetry editor of the *Atlantic*.

—An integrated approach to the teaching of reading, writing, and critical thinking

—The use of language experience and new oral history methods

—The use of politically charged words (“rent,” “landlord,” “eviction”) to draw on people’s experiences and engage and empower them (Kozol sees the process of motivating nonreaders as inherently political)

—The “one-way library,” giving out overstock hardcover books that publishers shred by the thousands.

Kozol describes one Boston program using these ideas which in sixty days of three-hour sessions in a church basement brought 250 adolescents from the third- to the sixth-grade reading level. But he is under no illusions that neighborhood barn raisings are enough to fund a nationwide network of such centers. He knows that the literacy problem must be put on a par with health care, environmental concerns, and defense. He calculates that meeting the needs of the thirty million worst-off illiterates would cost \$10 billion a year and would require five million workers, as well as in-kind contributions from publishers, more action-

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oriented research, and universities encouraging their students to serve as volunteers. Kozol admits that none of these goals is realistic now, but thinks even a partial implementation of his proposal could make a substantial dent in the problem, reducing the number of illiterate people by one half. His book is a rousing call to arms for such a commitment.

Unfortunately, Kozol doesn’t demand nearly enough of the institutions responsible for teaching people to read in the first place—the public schools. Most Americans feel it is nothing short of a national scandal when children drift through school without learning to read, but Kozol throws up his hands and concentrates all his energy on adult literacy efforts. He does not mention an exciting wave of positive thinking and effective methodology in urban public school systems stemming from the work of Ronald Edmonds, Michael Rutter, and others. This research has found schools in urban areas that get excellent (and equitable)

results despite the odds, and identified the factors that seem to be making a difference. Public school educators are increasingly taking responsibility for the learning of their least advantaged students, rather than making excuses for their not learning because of home environment, television, and so forth. Kozol has much to offer us in our uphill battle. I just wish there was more of a feeling in his book that we are all in this together, working toward the same goal.

Kozol’s blanket indictment of computers and television as useless tools for improving literacy is valid up to a point; many educators agree that most current instructional software is dreadful, and television remains a cold and one-way medium ill-suited to the needs of the illiterate. But he totally fails to mention word processing—a splendid application of computers to classrooms. There is growing evidence that the ability to edit one’s writing so readily is having a very positive effect on the writing of millions of schoolchildren (as well as adults), and that in this respect computers are a liberating and empowering tool.

Kozol also minimizes the value of the rich nonprint environment in which we all move—radio, television, movies, and conversation. An illiterate person *can* make reasonably intelligent voting decisions by watching speeches, press conferences, newscasts, debates, and competing advertisements, and so is not totally disenfranchised. Kozol also does not discuss the phenomenon of *aliteracy*, where millions of Americans know how to read but choose not to, and survive very well.

Kozol is a powerful and brilliant writer, but he sometimes gets carried away and weakens his case. (At several points he comes dangerously close to implying that every industrial accident and billing error in the United States can be traced to illiterate workers.) He is prone to ringing words of a radical bent, and some readers who need to hear his message might close their minds because of this. (An example: “We do know this: Democracy is a mendacious term when used by one third of our electorate.”) And Kozol’s explanation of why we have the illiteracy problem we do hardly points toward the kind of nitty-gritty solution he proposes:

Illiteracy among the poorest in our population is a logical consequence of the kinds of schools we run, the cities that starve them, the demagogues who segregate them, and the wealthy people who escape them altogether to enroll their kids in better funded, up-to-date, and more proficient

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institutions. It is a consequence, too, of economic planning which for many decades has regarded certain sectors of the population as expendable, or at least extraneous to the perpetuation of the social order.

All this notwithstanding, Kozol's is a tremendously important book that deserves to make a difference. Almost twenty years ago, his first book, *Death at an Early Age*, led many idealistic young Americans to think of urban teaching as a high calling and got some of them into public education. My sense is that this tenacious visionary has again put his finger on a national issue of compelling moral importance. I only hope

that *Illiterate America* will stir the current generation of latent idealists toward adult literacy action—and toward work in the beleaguered public schools. Our children deserve no less.

Kim Marshall '69, Ed.M. '81, taught and served as curriculum coordinator in a Boston middle school from 1969 to 1980, and is now curriculum director for the Boston public schools. His books include Law and Order in Grade 6E (parts of which originally appeared in Harvard Magazine), The Story of Life, and Opening Your Class With Learning Stations.

dangerous threat he increasingly poses to our republic and to peace and justice in the whole world. I urge Harvard to call it off.

WILLIAM E. ROWLEY '37, Ph.D. '68
Altamont, N.Y.

That a man so little distinguished either in intellectual life, in moral leadership, or in his chosen profession of movie acting should be so honored is shocking enough; but that such an honor should come on the heels of his public homage to the storm troopers of the Third Reich is nothing short of outrageous.

No doubt the president's popularity among large segments of the electorate, including many Harvard graduates and wealthy friends of the University, plays a major role here. The rationalizations being offered even before the act (e.g., "We're honoring the office, not the man") speak eloquently of the shabbiness of the idea. Surely our ancient University does not need to bow before the president of the moment, or before his plutocratic allies.

RICHARD D. KAPLAN '72, M.D.
New York City

LETTERS

Presidential presence

I'm dismayed to read in the New York Times that President Reagan has been invited to speak at the 350th anniversary convocation and that Harvard is considering whether to award him an honorary degree. I write to oppose any honorary degree and urge that some way be found to withdraw the invitation for him to speak.

According to the Times, the argument for giving Reagan a degree is "that Harvard would be honoring the office of the president, not necessarily the man who holds it." I don't think such a distinction can be made. His very appearance at Harvard would necessarily be a political event. He would capitalize on it. Harvard would be perceived as either applauding the man, as well as respecting his office, or at least as thinking that he is harmless enough to be, or act, on this occasion as a political neuter. Reagan, ideologue and politician to the core of his being, could not be or even act for one afternoon like a neuter. And Harvard cannot be perceived as, or be, above politics in the decision it makes. I remember with pleasure FDR's appearance at the 300th anniversary, when I was an undergraduate. I didn't mind his politics so much. As I remember it, it was a political as well as an academic event.

In 1970 the faculty of the State Uni-

versity of New York at Albany, where I worked for twenty years until my retirement, voted to condemn Nixon's invasion of Cambodia. Then, a few days later, enough conservatives—some trying to think they were just academic purists, preaching "academic freedom" and "the university should not get involved in politics"—managed to call another meeting and get our resolution rescinded. But their renegeing vote, much as they wanted not to think so, was just as political as ours. It was a failure to vote against that bad war and so was a silent vote that condoned it. Any act of respect by Harvard to "the office of the president," while Reagan holds it, would be just as political. One hundred and thirty-seven years ago, during the Mexican War, one good Harvard graduate wrote, "How does it become a man to behave toward this American government today? I answer, that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it." What would Thoreau have said if Harvard had invited President Polk to such an affair as the 350th anniversary celebration?

You can't have that man up there without making Harvard, along with the television cameras, give him glory. Not only glory, but to some degree more power. It would necessarily be a silent vote, by a great institution, for him, condoning the

I suppose protocol dictates that the University recognize the office of the chief magistrate by inviting the present incumbent to the celebration of its 350 years, and to address the assemblage. However, I find it intolerable, as, I dare say, do many other alumni and alumnae, that it should so far mortgage its integrity as to confer on him an honorary degree.

FREDERIC E. PAMP '39, Ph.D. '51
Rockport, Mass.

Editor's note: Harvard president Derek Bok characterized as a "media invention" the reported controversy at Harvard over whether President Reagan should receive an honorary degree at the 350th anniversary celebration in September 1986. "No real decisions have been taken," the Boston Globe, on May 25, quoted Bok as saying. "We don't know if we are even going to give honorary degrees to those who speak at the 350th, never mind deciding which speakers should get one." In June five members of the faculty gave the controversy some reality by sending Francis H. Burr '35, former senior fellow of the Harvard Corporation and now chairman of the 350th celebration commission, an open letter condemning him for his part in inviting Reagan to the party. The letter, from professors Richard C. Lewontin, John Womack Jr., Richard Levins,