Survivor in the Library

by Carol Jago

A country that spent the summer watching Survivor and Big Brother should hardly be surprised that its children’s literacy achievement has stalled. Despite enormous investment in early reading programs and teacher training, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reports that after declining in the 1980s, reading scores are only slightly up in the 1990s. It’s not hard to see why. Children do as we do. However much we tell kids that they ought to read, as long as the adults in their lives sit glued to reality shows, they are unlikely to make reading a habit.

Instead of railing against the damaging effects of television viewing on literacy, I’d like to suggest a new kind of reality show—“Survivor in the Library.” Producers would maroon a dozen readers in a public library and set them the challenge of persuading others of the intrinsic merit of a book they have chosen. Participants would read aloud to one another for an hour a day, six days a week. The camera could follow participants as they selected books from library shelves and as they talked in small groups about what they heard. In individual interviews, participants could reveal what went through their minds as they chose a book for the competition, as well as how they feel about the biographies. Producers might want to avoid self-help book addicts, though. To liven up the group, one of the participants might be a published mystery writer and another a literary scholar. The winner would be the library survivor who persuaded all the others to read his or her book. The prize? A bookstore certificate for 1,000 free books! Imagine if, instead of watching brainless twenty-somethings in bathing suits discussing vapid relationships, Americans sat rapt listening to A Tale of Two Cities. Imagine millions of viewers arguing at work, in bars, and on the bus about whether Toni Morrison or Gabriel Garcia Marquez is the better writer. Picture a Harry Potter–like stampede for copies of Call of the Wild. It could happen.

What won’t happen is an improvement in children’s reading habits without a shift in adults’ television viewing habits. As long as parents sit glued to wrestling and reality shows, kids will follow their lead. “Survivor in the Library” might just save us all.

Carol Jago teaches English at Santa Monica High School and directs the California Reading and Literature Project at UCLA.

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