Reading Still Matters

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Announcer 1: And they connect the dots between what they do and its importance to your life.

Announcer 2: Okay, let's get on it.]

Paulette Rothbauer: There's a push for me at least to remind libraries and librarianship that reading still matters. It's something that we want to keep our horse in that race.

Mike Ridley: *Reading Still Matters: What the Research Reveals About Reading, Libraries and Community*, a new book from Catherine Ross, Lynne McKechnie and Paulette Rothbauer. These are scholars who are well acquainted with each other, who've worked together for many years, who are friends and who are deeply, deeply passionate about the research they do and about the position of reading in our lives, the position of the reader in our own lives.

Catherine Ross: So, I'm Catherine Ross and I'm a professor emerita at FIMS at Western.

Lynne McKechnie: And I'm Lynne McKechnie, and I'm a professor at FIMS at Western.

Paulette: I'm Paulette Rothbauer. Also, I'm an associate professor at FIMS at Western, and I also think it's probably worth saying that Lynne McKechnie was my supervisor and…

Lynne: And my supervisor was Catherine Ross. We are a family of scholars.

Catherine: And we've been focused on reading now for how many years?

Lynne: Well, me probably since 1991 so 25, 26 years.

Paulette: And me, like forever. I don't remember not being focused on reading.

Catherine: Oh, okay.

Paulette: Since I was a little girl I want to say.

Catherine: Because you were in a bookstore before.

Paulette: I was yeah, yeah.

Lynne: So I'm going to have to do a case study of you then.

Catherine: Well the first book was *Reading Matters*. And since then, well, we thought 'We should just do an update. It'll be the same book just updated.' But then, when we got into it, it turned out that no, we couldn't just update it. We had to rewrite the whole thing, because certain things that we had featured in the first edition, like stuff about series books, we felt, okay, that battle's been won. People are no longer saying series books ruins readers for real reading. They're now stocking series books and treating them properly in libraries and so on.

But new issues came up, and one of them of course is the whole business of reading online and digital reading. And some people are suggesting that, well reading doesn't matter as much because, you know, everything is going to be done in some other format. So, *Reading Still Matters* connected it to the first book but also is making a strong statement about how this is an important thing.

Paulette: I did the chapter on reading with young adults and teenagers, and in the 12 years since the first book it's just been a huge change. Like the rise of young adult publishing that everybody's reading – it's not just teenagers and young adults of course – the three big franchises they call them, so *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games* and *Twilight*, you know just launched this whole new golden era of young adult literature.

And so because of that, it just meant that there's this whole new milieu in publishing and reading and literary production, all of it, that it just needed – it really, really seriously needed updating, so that the hand wringing around teenagers and reading that might have been in place 15 years ago, which is that teenagers aren't reading, that endures. That's a myth that just endures. But teenagers and young adults of course are reading more than they've ever read before, and they're reading sort of promiscuously across all kinds of formats and all kinds of publishing landscapes.

Fanfiction is massive. And if we're just really beginning to look at fanfiction sort of in public libraries, right, as a… It's not so much as a collection issue as a cultural issue. If we know that teenagers are reading fanfiction – and that fanfiction is being read by the millions, right – we have to take some account of it. So there's been a lot of changes that way, really fun and exciting things to look into in fact.

Lynne: And with the children, it's kind of interesting because, at the time of the first book – and my early research looked at emergent reading, the big question how do children become readers. And a lot of work done on that, and if anything I would say maybe too much work because one of the differences between adults and teens and children is that we can impose reading on them.

And the research is actually pretty clear that when you impose reading – I mean I can still hear one boy saying, I said "Do you like reading?"

"Well it depends" he said. "If is assigned, I don't. If I pick it myself, I do."

So there's been all that emergent reading stuff now, a little bit of a backsplash, because we're doing a lot of damage. You know, we're turning reading into work. So it still matters, but what really matters is this whole idea of a large, large, broad access to reading materials that a place like the public library can provide free, and voluntary free reading which we owe to a researcher called Stephen Krashen from Education, the ability to pick your own stuff.

And of course there is now digital reading, and so I've done some research and others have done a lot of research on children and eBooks and their digital reading. And a wonderful thing about children is that they're so flexible.

So we were asking "Which do you like best? Do you like the eBook? Or do you like the print book?"

And I can still see one little guy and he's looking around. He's looking from one to the other. And then he goes "Why are you asking me? These are both books." So he troubled our definition and understanding of book, and in him it was innate. We saw that across many children.

So yeah, so it still matters but in a different way, a little bit of a pushback against formal education approaches, which are not a problem. Schools have to teach kids to read. But to make them readers is different. And then the other, it's this digital reading is big.

Catherine: And one thing that you were implying but you didn't say the word so I'm going to say it, which is pleasure. They key we think in all of this is pleasure and starting with something that the child likes. Whether it's considered a classic by literary critics doesn't matter.

The Golden Book I read would probably be sneered at. They'd say, 'Look at these inferior comic book-like illustrations. Compared with say Maurice Sendak this is very inferior.'

But it was something that I loved right then. And I think that's one of the things we've all found is that you have to start with what does the person love. Whether they're an adult and whether they're reading some denigrated genre like romance, or if they're child reading a denigrated genre such as what used to be series books, you have to start with what they love and then let them choose.

Paulette: But I think with the reading research and teens, especially the reading that they choose to do, the free voluntary reading or the reading that they do for pleasure, I sometimes think of it as kind of a radical thing to support teenagers' reading choices. And I think that because teenagers' behaviour is so circumscribed, that their ability to exercise agency and autonomy and

choice in a world that surveils their every movement and almost their every thought, to make a choice to read. So it's not just the choice about what to read, it's the choice to engage that way with the world.

Catherine: The argument that Maryanne Wolf is making is that, when we surf and skim websites, going from node to node to node, we're changing our brains. And Nicholas Carr I think agrees, that we're changing our brains and not for the better. We're changing them in such a way as to make it impossible now to read *Middlemarch*.

And a number of critics have said "I used to be able to read *Middlemarch*, but now I can't read *Middlemarch*." They say in very long books that actually must have taken them years to write. "I can't get into that deep stuff because my brain has been changed."

So I don't know, I think the jury's out on that. But what I see people doing is reading *Middlemarch* on screens. So, it all depends doesn't it? And you've done research with children.

Lynne: Well, and they talk again and again about that – still talk about that business of going away and immersing themselves in books. They don't use those words.

One interesting thing about children is that they've been less tampered with as the school is very prescribed, but the rest of it is freer. Like, it hasn't crossed their mind that reading is a radical act. They just do it. They read what they want to read. They read for pleasure.

But you do see them just – they're doing deep reading. And it may be also be because they're still really involved with decoding and all of the logistics around reading, which is a very short period where you learn to do that. So they just go on a head. It's the way they learn everything. They ignore the adults and go on about secretly doing their business. And research has uncovered what they've been doing but isn't there yet.

I've seen lots of deep reading, even with very, very young children. A child, for example, who returns to a relatively straightforward, simple picture book text again and again and again and again and again, hundreds of times, I would say is probably engaged in deep reading and cannot articulate what's going on. And I think we can only get at it superficially.

The book is cautionary in some sense, right, because we have to provide opportunities and spaces for this type of engagement because we are all readers. We are all committed lifetime, voracious readers. So we understand how fulfilling it is to get there.

But I suppose it's like anything. I'm thinking about, is it Malcolm Gladwell and his 10,000 times you have to practice something?

Catherine: Ten-thousand hours.

Lynne: Ten-thousand hours, yeah. So I think we have to, to get to some of the stuff – I'll speak for myself as a reader. My history, my biography as a reader, I had to do an awful lot of practicing where I could get to that level of engagement, which is it must be like running a marathon faster than anybody else in the world. I mean I don't think of it as a race but I think of it as the sheer pleasure of that. So we have to provide opportunity and spaces, and continue to do that. Any my own feeling is there's a number of places that can happen, but the one shared, fully-accessible place is the public library.

So I agree, I agree very much with what my colleagues are saying about libraries must remember, they must remember… It has not been that long since libraries have understood that reading is half their business and reading is something that the people that use the library, the community members value above all. It legitimizes it. It's a place where they can go as a reader and have that legitimized.

Sure they do the information work too, but the biggest service… I think that's what they would rally against closing the libraries. It's the readers, because this is the place where that's going on. So it's a cautionary book.

And we fully intended, I remember in the discussion for the first book, we wanted to put in the hands of public librarians the evidence they needed to justify, especially to funding groups, what they were doing. And you know it's easy enough because the Internet comes and, yeah, you can find out any fact you want probably faster, but what they do around reading is a whole different game.

Paulette: With some other colleagues at FIMS, we're working on this new project where we're interrogating what we call the I Love Books trope. And we're trying… Well, I mean I'll speak for myself, I'm trying to rescue that, because it's sort of bandied about right now as a professional liability in librarianship. And I think that dishonours love and passion and commitments, deep commitments to something that's represented by books and reading.

But it doesn't mean that that's the only thing that libraries are. And I think that's what I objective to the most is that libraries aren't just about books. Well of course they're not. They've never been. And it's this disavowal – I think that's the word I want – of I think really serious deep commitments that bring people to our professional field. And I think we should find a way to honour that without saying that's the only thing.

So that's reflects my own professional commitments too. So I don't know. I mean is it self-interest? Maybe, but I do think there's a lot at stake. In particular, for public libraries is being one of the only sites where people can do this kind of really valued, everyday, very important activity of reading.

Catherine: Joyce Saricks, who is a reader extraordinaire and a reader's advisor, she says the library's brand is story, which gets around as either or. It's either

books or not books. It's story in any format. And of course the stories also suggest the importance of pleasure, because the stories you want to hear are the ones that give you pleasure. So whether you listen to it as an audio book or whether you watch a DVD or whether you stream something live or whether you read a book, story is the thing that draws the reader/viewer, whatever, on.

Paulette: And just how more – I don't know what the right word is right now. Imagine making story the brand rather than technology, or digitality or digital life, or however people are talking, you know, whatever words people use to talk about digital labs and that sort of thing.

Lynne: When you think about, for example, the public library's eBook collections, and our local public library I believe, the circulation of eBooks is about to surpass, if it not already has, print books. But I agree, it's story. And you know we've got lots of colleagues in other disciplines and probably this calls for some more interdisciplinary work. Anthropology understands story, probably because of their work with First Nations and things like this; it's story.

We certainly know that working with those children to bring them to reading, which is valuable print textual reading you go through story. That's the missing link that we had. We put them in schools where story was not seen as prime; it was decoding.

But I do agree with that, you know a place for story. And there's lots of things where, if… Maybe that's the next book, *And Yet It Still Matters*, is that we could maybe help, by pulling together research, public librarians understand how they could do that, although they're clever. They're very clever. Once they get that idea they would understand how to implement space and programming and all sorts of other services and collections that would in fact support that link to story if that's what's meaningful.

Catherine: And of course children's librarians have always understood story.

Paulette: Yeah.

Catherine: Yeah, yeah.

Paulette: It's just that we need to expand it from the children's…

Catherine: Yeah, they sort of don't like it when we're at meetings and we're practicing finger plays, which are small stories, you know.

Lynne: Which is why children like them. You know they used the last book – and because I came out of practice; I have 20 years as a children's librarian so I interact quite a bit with practice, and they've told me that they use it to guide practice, that they're always…

When they would read the chapter on children for example, when I'm talking with children's librarians, they'd say "Here it is, one place where I get a lot".

I'm hoping that it will still guide practice in some way. I think, for example, across the book there are alternate perspectives on digital and e-reading to what is being presented, for example, by our professional associations. And I think those alternate perspectives then become a site for they are clever. The librarians in public library, all the staff, it's quite amazing what they can do.

But you need the alternate perspective, and that's one thing that this book does quite well it. I hope that it will inspire informed practice, which will give us more good stuff for the next book when we're all really ancient.

Catherine: When we sat around to design the first book, *Reading Matters*, what we wanted to do was to say here's the research, and we're pulling it together to make it accessible to librarians that don't have time to track everything down. And then at the end we've got, well what would be suggestions then for librarians based on this research? What might they want to do?

And so some of the suggestions have to do with how would you provide readers advisory. How would you do displays? How would you engage with collection development? We hope that it will be sort of compact. But if the person wanted to pursue a particular topic, the research is there and they could follow it and see what lies behind the recommendation to do something.

I've had librarians say "Well, I was in my school library and they wanted to take out every series book because they said it was all junk. And I waved your article *So What if They Read Nancy Drew* at them." It was like, you know…

Lynne: *Series Readers Talk Back*. You forgot that subtitle.

Catherine: *Series Readers Talk Back*. It was based on series readers. Sixty percent of them, these avid readers that weren't chosen because they were series book readers; they were chosen because they said "Reading is really important in my life".

And when asked "What did you read next and next and next?' they then said "Oh, and Nancy Drew" or "Oh, then I read the" you know, fill in the blank depending on their age, "series".

So when she waved this at them they apparently fell away like vampires do when you wave crosses and garlic at them. So we hope that it will provide some tools for librarians to do the kind of work they want to do, which is to engage with their readers and with their users.

Paulette: And I just want to add to that by saying that I think the book also kind of works as a banner. It's a declarative statement that reading still matters. So it matters for professional practice and for library workers like we've been talking about, but it also works that way with researchers from different disciplines too.

Catherine: And they say that reading fictions as opposed to non-fiction enhances theory of mind, which is the understanding that other people see the world differently and so on than the way you may, and enhances empathy. It's interesting that these are the very things that our readers have been telling us. But what would be regarded by that kind of research is just sort of impressionistic anecdote.

Paulette: Well, and it was wonderful I have to say, so many times people said "Catherine Ross's interviews with readers that she's been doing for decades" you know, as a place to start.

Lynne: And you know, that is another defining characteristic of this book is how it privileges the reader. We privileged a lot of the research where readers where front and centre. They were allowed to speak. Our own work for the most part starts with the reader. It starts with the reader, puts them in the star role. So you get a lot of readers' voices in here.

It's a very complicated and large topic for individuals, their life as a reader. It might appear transparent in a way. You might be able to get at it through public library lending records and all of those kinds of measures, but I think it's far more complex. You'd have to probably really do a case study, and you'd probably have to spend two years doing it with someone.

Catherine: When I was writing the chapter in the book *Reading Still Matters* that had to do with the experience of reading, I thought 'What are the dimensions that vary from one reader to another?' I mean we know that some readers re-read, and Lynne says she doesn't re-read much. I do re-read. So a number of things obviously jump out right off the bat.

But then, when I started thinking about this I ended up with about 43 different elements in my, you know, 'What kind of reader are you?' And then "Do you do X? Or do you do Y?" And I tried this out on a number of people and, yeah, people do do either X or Y, or sometimes somewhere along that spectrum toward one end or the other.

So re-reading wouldn't be a good test of popular favourite, wonderful book for everyone, because some people say "There's so books out there, why would I want to re-read a book I've already read when there's so many wonderful books I haven't read yet?"

And then there are others that say "No, I have my favourites."

I interviewed Alice Monroe herself on this and said "How do you stand on this question?"

And she said "Well, you know there are people that would say there's so many kinds of ice cream out there, I'll never have vanilla again." "There's so many men out there, why would I stay with this one?" But she said "I'm not that kind of reader. I like to re-read and I re-read" she said "the book changes depending on where I am in my life".

Paulette: That's true.

Announcer 2: This has been another episode of So What?.

Announcer 1: The podcast about library and information science research and why it matters.

Announcer 2: So What? is created and produced by students at the faculty of information and media studies at Western University in London, Ontario.

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