



THE GEN-Z READER:

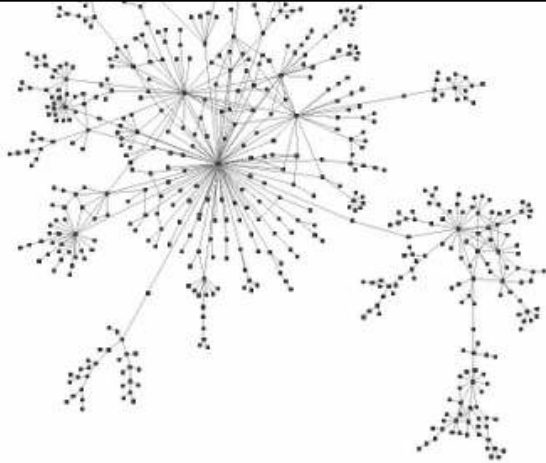
Understanding the New Reader of
the Post-Electronic Age

Presented by Kristen McLean
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Let's start with a bird's eye view



Understanding 21st Century Literacies

It is impossible to avoid the incredible explosion of technology and social media in any contemporary discussion of reading. It seems that everyone has an opinion—be it positive or negative—about the future of reading in the oncoming generations.

Before we discuss the specifics about what the future reader looks like, it's very helpful to pull back a little and look more broadly at some of the changes in our society, and the kinds of skills these changes are going to require of all participants in the future.

There is a robust conversation going on in academia about the confluence of literacy, technology, and education in preparing our kids for the 21st Century. The speed with which we have developed new technologies has outpaced our understanding of the social implications of some of these powerful new tools. A number of forward thinking researchers are now looking at this issue, particularly when it comes to the intersection of social development and learning. They have identified a number of "21st Century literacies" which they believe will be critical for success in the future.

These literacies can be described as "skills embedded within a social context." They do not replace traditional literacies like reading, writing, mathematical reasoning, and creativity. Rather they are built upon these fundamental skills, and come from being able to apply basic literacies in today's connected and networked world.

Although there are several prominent academics working in this area, I take my definition of these Literacies from Howard Rheingold¹, Professor of Social Media studies and Digital Journalism at Stanford University and U.C. Berkeley, and the author of the 2002 book *Smart Mobs*. I believe he does the best job of articulating where we find ourselves in terms that are relevant to people interested in children and the future of reading.

¹ www.rheingold.com

The Six Literacies of the 21st Century



Attention

- Awareness of what is the appropriate level of attention for a given situation
- When to give undivided attention, and when to multi-task
- Learning how to transition attention when the situation demands it
- This requires mindfulness and internal discipline
- This literacy is a tricky one, because as adults we don't fully understand it and definitely haven't mastered it. (ie: Driving while talking on a cellphone.)



Critical Consumption

- Knowing how to ask a good question
- Knowing how to evaluate the quality of the answer
 - Online this means researching a site and determining ownership
 - Knowing how to drill down to original documentation and go for the source
 - Cutting through the "noise"



Participation

- Using blogs, generating content, wikis, and other means of public discourse
- Contributing to the collective environment
- No longer a passive consumer, but an active and empowered creator
- Finding a voice, even if it is very localized (ie: friends and family)



Collaboration

- Knowing how to use tools for collaborative functions
- FlashMobs, Citizen Journalism, Emergent Collective Response to Events, group projects, Wikis (check out this school's blog: <http://blog.ps119amersfort.com/?p=1143>)
- Organizing collective action and participatory democracy





Network Awareness

- Understanding what a network is and what it is good for.
 - Who is in it?
 - How can I use it to meet my goals?
 - How can I be useful to others so they can be useful to me?
- Setting up Personal Learning Networks.
- Knowing how to sample the flow of information
- Understanding the difference between one's audience (passive), and one's public (active participant, in dialogue with you)

Creativity

- Knowing how to creatively synthesize disparate influences into a coherent strategy
- Knowing how to make the best use of resources
- Seeing relationships across multiple disciplines
- Seeing what other people don't—seeing opportunity, seeing new ways of doing things

A new media homework assignment...

Do you currently use Twitter?

If you are not currently a Twitter User, or if you are on it, but don't use it because you don't find value in it, I challenge you to try a little experiment.

Follow the directions on the separate handout "**How to build a Personal Learning Network on TWITTER**" and see if you can set up a Twitter feed for yourself that you actually find interesting. Along the way you will need to use many of the 21st Century Literacies addressed above.

Twitter has zero commitment, it is not a conversation, and you can dip in and out of it as you like. You can listen and never post. It is an information stream.... it has an upstream feed, and a downstream feed, and you are in the middle.



You can use it just to listen to people who have interesting ideas, or you can track news, listen to the opinions of other booksellers, or you can explore a new area you've always been interested in.

Go ahead and give it a shot. Even if you just try it for a few weeks, you will get some valuable insight into the social environment of the readers you will be serving....

Reading requires a new definition

Now that we've taken in the bigger picture, let's get down to business. There has been a tremendous amount of hand-wringing in recent years over the "decline in reading" once students reach puberty. To be sure, social and academic pressures can conspire to limit reading for pleasure in the teen years, but today's teens are reading and writing more than ever before. Just differently.

A 2005 study by Cambridge University of thousands of exams sat by sixteen year-olds in the UK showed that today's electronic teens are substantially more literate than their pre-electronic counterparts from 1984. Today's teenagers are using far more complex sentence structures, a wider vocabulary and a more accurate use of capital letters, punctuation and spelling. They also use more colloquialisms, which does not necessarily indicate a poor grasp of language basics as some have argued, but rather a more fluid and improvisational approach to language.²

A 2008 Study by the Pew Center found that more than half of online teens have created content for the internet. They also found that "teens are often much more enthusiastic authors and readers of blogs than their adult counterparts. Teen bloggers, led by older girls, are a major part of this tech-savvy cohort. Teen bloggers are more fervent internet users than non-bloggers and have more experience with almost every online activity in the survey."³

A 2010 Kaiser Family Foundation Study found that kids 8-18 still read books for pleasure for 38 minutes a day on average. This is only down about 5 minutes a day since 2004. Books remain an important source of content. By contrast, other forms of traditional print such as magazines and newspapers are down precipitously, although some of that reading is now being done online.⁴

So what does this mean for us as booksellers?

Well, first it means we should be optimistic for the future of the written word. We are raising a generation of highly communicative readers and writers. That is a good thing.

² http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/education/article584810.ece

³ http://www.pewinternet.org/ppf/r166/report_display.asp

⁴ <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/8010.pdf>



Second, we need to wrap our brains around this new way of being in the world, and figure out what we can use to our advantage, and what is beyond our control as retailers.



Trends & Strategies For the bookseller

Format is changeable, and therefore somewhat irrelevant.

Experience and access are more important than form.

This means that today's reader doesn't think that reading is something you do with a book, and only with a book. Frankly, they don't think about it at all. They just read, in the most convenient way possible at any given moment. (And, let me just say for the record, that we here at ABC consider listening to an audio book to be reading too.)

What we're really talking about here the separation of content from form. The new reader is looking for content in many different forms. It could be a traditional book, it could be for an e-reader, an electronic text online, audio by download, or soon I'm sure, a book on their i-phone. The traditional book is not going away. It's just getting some well dressed siblings.



Given this increasingly porous approach, Gen-Z readers who read traditional books will do it by choice. They will do it for pleasure. They will probably do it as an antidote to all that communication.

Strategies:

- Be conservative when buying audio in CD for the YA market. This format is on its way out.
- Be aware of new formats, devices, and trends. Follow the ABA lead on the e-book market.
- Don't dismiss e-books. They are not going away. Neither are hardcopy books. Don't panic.
- Concentrate on creating a really special environment where young readers can enjoy and take pleasure in traditional books.

The Myth of the Digital Native

Although it is true that the next generations of readers will have a much more intuitive and comfortable relationship with technology, it doesn't necessarily follow that they will somehow also grip the social implications of the technology, and the basic community and ethical skills teens have always been grappling with are still present.

Parents, teachers, schools, libraries, and community institutions like bookstores will still need to support the emotional development of all children, and not assume they can learn it on their own.



Strategies:

- Support the basics
 - Reading, writing, math, hands-on science
 - Don't throw the baby out with the bath-water



- Promote quality literature that promotes Critical Thinking
- Celebrate Creativity
- Encourage Good Citizenship
- Don't overlook books in the YA section that help kids explore some of the more challenging aspects of growing up in today's wired society.
 - Identify books with mature or difficult content honestly, but also keep in mind that teen readers need topical books more than ever in today's fast-paced world.

Assume they know more than you do.



This is a highly sophisticated reader, who has a very sensitive bull-shit meter. They are well informed, highly specialized, and they have way more time than you to explore all of the various aspects of what they are interested in. If you cop an attitude, they will too.

The upside of this is that the Gen-Z reader can be an incredible source of intelligence and information, and they will show you the way to more effective retailing if you let them.

Strategies:

- Approach your teen interactions as a dialogue. Ask them what they like, what they've found, what's the most interesting discovery they have made.
- Ask teen customers that have a particularly well developed area of interest to make you a top 10 list, or a shelf talker.
- Have a computer station available for research in the store.

The New Reader craves community.

Even though teens are more networked than ever before, their families are busier, they themselves are busier, and they crave opportunities to have a real sense of community.

A 2008 report by The Intelligence Group, a youth marketing and trend research firm, found that 60% of its "trendsetting" subjects preferred to play a board game over a video game.⁵ This backs up recent articles about teens feeling over-pressured, stressed, and lonely.⁶ Bookstores are in a unique position to offer teens a positive environment in their natural roles as community centers. By



⁵ http://www.intelg.com/CassandraReport_sample.pdf

⁶ Washington Post: "Too Busy Teens Feel Health Toll" 7/08; <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/07/14/AR2008071401396.html>



recruiting teens into the customer base bookstores can benefit in many ways: sales, staffing, the contribution of reviews, creation of reading groups, and much more.

Strategies:

- Appreciate that Gen-Z readers still crave a sense of community
- Recognize that this group must be actively recruited, and the best way to do it is to offer them some sense of responsibility, and/or ownership
- Look for opportunities for teens to come together in the store, as an advisory panel, through internships, on a project basis, in writing groups, as organizers of events, as reviewers, teachers, and more.



The New Reader has a more interactive relationship to what they are reading.

Active readers have no limitations when it comes to immersing themselves and getting more information, author contact, and fantasy role play than ever before. They can contact their favorite authors directly through a website, they can blog, create online clubs in Second Life, attend literary camps, and do any manner of things previous generations never dreamed of. As a bookseller you

can be a good conduit of related book information, and a source of ideas for expanding the reading experience.

Strategies:

- Create "A then B" lists for popular books so that readers can easily follow a path of interest.
- Create book marks for favorite books that list Author or club homepages, related historical information about a story if applicable, and three other title suggestions readers might like.
- If you have a group of readers forming around a particular section, work with them to form a literary club.
- Look for opportunities to create access to fresh avenues of information and access for hungry teen readers.





The New Reader likes to be involved.

This is really a corollary to everything we've talked about above.

This new generation of readers is smart, curious, active, self-directed, and responsive.

Top down strategies don't work. Guessing doesn't work.

The number one rule for understanding and working with them is this: GET THEM INVOLVED.

Strategies:

- Start asking questions.
- Start issuing invitations for participation.
- Let these readers show you the way.
- Check out *Not Your Mother's Book Club* for programming inspiration.
<http://community.livejournal.com/notyourmothers>
- Consider hiring them. They make great employees, and they will bring customers.



≡ Exploring 21st Century Literacies

A mini-course on network and social network literacy—Howard Rheingold:

<http://howardrheingold.posterous.com/a-min-course-on-network-and-social-network-li> (2 x 20 min. videos)

Attention Literacy—Howard Rheingold

http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/blogs/rheingold/detail?blogid=108&entry_id=38828

Twitter Literacy—Howard Rheingold

http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/blogs/rheingold/detail?blogid=108&entry_id=39948

Online Crap Detection 101—Howard Rheingold

www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/blogs/rheingold/detail?entry_id=42805

Mindful Infotention: Dashboards, Radars, Filters—Howard Rheingold

http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/blogs/rheingold/detail?blogid=108&entry_id=46677

Kids' Technology Anthropologist Mimi Ito on Participation Literacy: What parents, educators ought to know about trends in kids' use of participation literacy. (3 part video interview)

<http://www.smartmobs.com/2010/01/02/video-interview-mimi-ito-on-participation-literacy-part-one-of-three/>

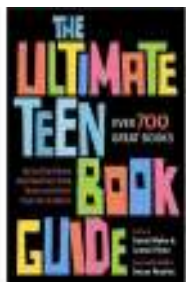
Print Resources



500 Great Books for Teens by Anita Silvey

Houghton Mifflin / 978-0618612963

This fantastic resource written by one of the industry's most respected figures breaks out her top 500 into thematic categories that are great for displays, or for making "If A then B lists". The focus here is on tried and true core books, with a generous heap of adult crossover titles mixed in.



The Ultimate Teen Book Guide by Daniel Hahn, Leonie Flynn, and Susan Reuben

Norton / 978-0802797315

This great guide, written in 2007, takes a democratic approach, and includes a series of great lists by authors on subjects they're known for. For instance E. Lockhart on Love and Relationships, and Patrick Jones on Short and Gripping Books, as well as top 10 lists by genre. This book is a great in-store resource for teen reading groups, as well as for staff.



Online Resources

The Kaiser Family Foundation 2010 Study : Generation M2: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds

<http://www.kff.org/entmedia/mho12010pkg.cfm>

The definitive ongoing study of kids and media. Tracks quantity and quality of media use by kids every 5 years.

Ypulse media – <http://www.ypulse.com/>

This is the one place to subscribe if you want to keep your pulse on this Gen-Z group. This youth intelligence group publishes a blog and a free newsletter that is PACKED with a broad range of youth related information. They track articles in all areas of popular culture, and take a particular interest in YA books. They offer insightful opinion, and a good perspective. One of the best free resources available.

TeenReads.com

A fantastic site that is used by all areas of the YA world. Reviews, articles, interviews, and much, much more. A great place to send Teens, and for pulling additional info for the bookmarks referenced above.

Reading Rants – www.readingrants.org

A wonderful site with out-of-the-ordinary booklists with titles like “Bare Bones”, “Virgin Run”, and “Boy Meets Book”. Excellent YA reviews by the site and by teen readers, as well as annual top ten lists.

No Flying No Tights - www.noflyingnotights.com

A rock-solid site for looking for material on graphic novels and other graphic media for teens. Written by a librarian and mom who really understands this market. The first place to start if you want to expand this growing and important YA category.

AdBooks - <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/adbooks/>

A fantastic Yahoo group dedicated to the discussion of YA books. The group members include teachers, parents, librarians, students, writers and others. A good place to stay on top of great new books. A daily digest is available.

YALSA - www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/yalsa/yalsa.cfm

The homepage for the Young Adult Library Services Association. Part of the American Library Association (ALA) these guys are the ones who give away many important YA awards including the ALEX and PRINTZ awards. They have amazing booklists, and all kinds of good resources for your YA section.



About the ABC

At ABC, we believe in great books. We also believe in the power of independent business, and we know what it takes to run a successful bookstore. It takes knowledge, resources, smart decision-making, and support to stay competitive in today's aggressive retail climate. Since 1985, ABC has been making independent booksellers stronger through its programs, communication tools, and strategic alliances. ABC connects booksellers, publishers, and other book professionals all over the country, and provides a virtual space for ideas and community. For membership information and to find out more visit: www.abfc.com.

About Kristen McLean

Kristen McLean is the Executive Director of the *Association of Booksellers for Children (ABC)*. Before joining ABC in 2005, Kristen spent twelve years in the children's book and toy industry in various roles including frontline retailing, merchandising, buying, commission sales, and managing marketing for one of Houghton Mifflin's children's imprints. She is a graduate of [Sarah Lawrence College](#), where she earned a B.A. with a concentration in Design and Social Psychology, and has done work on an M.F.A. in Industrial Design at [Massachusetts College of Art](#). As part of her role as an industry strategist, Kristen lectures extensively on issues facing the publishing world including the effect of technology and culture on books and reading, issues in Children's Bookselling, the role of bookstores and libraries in the lives of 21st century readers, and emerging models for the Publishing Industry. Kristen is deeply interested in the confluence of emerging literacies, education, technology, and publishing in the 21st Century.

