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Sent: Saturday, June 23, 2012 2:55 PM
To: Read, John [John.Read@ATR.USDOJ.gov]
Subject: Do we want a nation of people who aren't more than superficially literate?

As an author of children' books -- primarily picture books -- who aims to produce ones that will be loved beyond my lifetime, I know that approval of the settlement that allows Amazon.com to pick off the few remaining bookstores I think of as "real" -- what are now being labelled "brick and mortar bookstores" will be the death knell for the my genre, and for the chance for good books that don't aim at being big sellers, but to be worth rereading.

I think it's an important genre. There are all kinds of studies that demonstrate the long-term advantages of reading aloud to children by parents, tempting them to become, when they learn to read by themselves, the kind of voracious readers that once were common. Now students have to be bribed with rewards and special programs to read. (In our family, in contrast, we needed a rule "No books at the table" because without the rule we all would have been likely to read rather than make conversation, and our parents wanted mealtimes to offer a chance for sharing our lives, ideas, etc. My children made good use of public libraries, and grew up into adults who continue to read, and think about what they read.

The early books are of special importance, and well-chosen ones tend to be read by again, by those who loved them early on, to their own children -- and the really good ones continue to be loved by today's children just as much.

I fear that soon books printed on paper will be as scarce as the bookstores that offer such books for browsing, giving new authors a chance to be discovered. For those of us who love to create picture books, both these losses will be painful. Reading a book to a child at the end of the day is a multi-faceted, bonding experience that matters. Who can imagine snuggling up to a child at bedtime to share a book shared on a small screen? Picture books aren't read page by page, they are read and shared a whole spread at a time -- often the same art spreads across both pages, from margin to margin, and is so views as the words on the page are read.

Fewer and fewer children read for pleasure, and fewer read books that encourage thought and the use of inference. One of the reasons I have yet to even attempt to read a book on a small screen is that I so often like to go back to books I really love to find a passage I recall and want to see again, either to share with a friend or simply savor again myself. This kind of reading would be more difficult on a screen that offers one small surface, and no way to skip easily the part you'd like to see again.

The written word is dying as an important factor in human development. People read fewer books; they read less demanding ones; they think less about what they read. "Real" bookstores tend to be staffed by those who love books, and love introducing their customers to unexpectedly good new

ones. Few new unknown but promising authors are going to have a place where their books can and will be discovered once Amazon has wiped shaped the market to its advantage.

It's easy to find a newly-reviewed book on Amazon, you just have to search for it with the words or author's name you noted down from a review -- but how can one easily browse there to find a wonderful new book that has not be singled out by reviewers? You can't use "wonderful unknown book" as search words, and if you could find a wonderful book on the web that way you'd only be able to glance at a couple of pages to be sure it was a wonderful book for YOU. You can't stand there and read 10 or so pages before realizing that YES, this is definitely a book worth having, I should get it.

Maybe the death to real literature and thoughtful reading is inevitable, but it can and should be slowed. A country that chooses its political leaders on the basis of TV ads is going to be a dangerous society in which to live, and I fear we need to hang on to some things that help us to learn how to sort out what is worth having and doing and passing on to other generations. Giving that growing cannibal Amazon yet more of an edge that it already has -- it has gone beyond more books, and is killing off other kinds of independent small vendors -- would be a big mistake.

Children who would rather text to one another rather than talk together are already dismayingly common. Kids with vocabularies large enough to express themselves accurately and vividly are not.

Keeping Real Bookstores Alive may give us one way to slow down our nation's rush to being less truly literate than was my grandfather -- who never went to college but was a voracious reader, and considered the Intellectual of the town in which he raised his kids. While he never ran a well-financed campaign, he managed to become a state legislator who could be (and was) trusted. He had read a lot about history, and thought about what he read. He wanted to serve his community, and had ideas about how to do that well.

Reading thoughtfully, and digesting what you read, somehow happens more naturally if the book is on paper, I think, and if you can choose your reading in an unhurried way while browsing in a bookstore owned and stocked by a booklover, and shopped in by other booklovers who may also have tips on titles worth reading. These are places where readers can linger happily, and come away with books they are likely to read to their profit.

Amazon is killing off those stores now; please don't make it easier. Amazon already has more power to corner the market than it should.

This letter is too long, but there is no time to make it shorter. A quick final plea: Please realize that the settlement the Justice Department is considering is in the public interest! A lot of us have deep reasons to believe it is most definitely not.

Sincerely,

Alice McLerran