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“There’s no better way to discover other worlds than by reading”

40 percent of German youths aged between 12 and 19 regularly read a printed book – a figure that has remained unchanged over the past two decades.

When I was very young, I wasn’t at all interested in reading. As a young child, I wanted to listen and there were many people who read books to me – my parents, my grandparents and my godmother. I was especially fascinated by the children’s book “Heidi”. Our teacher at the kindergarten also told us exciting stories as well, so I never felt the need to read myself. During primary school, I spent a year and a half in the USA because my father was doing some training there. And that’s when I began to read myself – in English. I must have devoured a hundred girls’ mystery stories and it was a huge drama when I was told I wasn’t allowed to take them back to Switzerland with me.

Immersing oneself in another world

In addition to reading aloud in the family circle, listening to cassettes, audiobooks and radio plays was also a major thing in my childhood. I also had a large library of children’s books. As I grew older, reading took on an entirely different meaning for me and became its own world. When I was about ten years old, like many other children at this age I wanted to know what was going on in other people’s minds. So I read a lot of non-fiction books – in English – about ancient cultures like the Egyptians and the Aztecs, as well as novels set in ancient Egypt, Ancient Rome and among the Native Americans. There’s no better way to discover other worlds than by reading.

You dive into another world that stays with you during your day-to-day life. After I returned from the US, I also discovered German books, of course, and I read ever such a lot. Reading was the most important thing to me when I was young. Knowing that there was a book to return to every day where you could experience the world and its rhythms more fully than everyday life was very important to me.

40 percent of German youths regularly read a book

For young people who enjoy reading, immersing themselves into whatever they're reading is just as important as it was for previous generations. It allows a world to unfold gradually in their minds – at their own pace and with plenty of room for them to have their own thoughts. You can set a book aside whenever you want and imagine how the story might continue, and what you would do if you were one of the characters. When you read you're entirely on your own, free from your everyday world. That's something no medium other than a book can do.

Two things often get mixed up in the discussion about the decline of reading. Young people have never had to read as much as they do nowadays. Nearly every computer activity requires them to read. You need to be a fast reader if you play video games. So when people complain that young people don't read any more, they mean they don't read books, especially literary books. But the annual JIM study on the daily media habits of young people in Germany shows that the use of printed books has remained stable, even in the social media era. For the past two decades, around 40 percent of young people between the ages of 12 and 19 have regularly read a printed book.

97 percent of young German-speakers between the ages of 12 and 19 use the internet daily. The figure for printed newspapers is almost half that – at 21 percent. It's even lower for printed magazines – at 14 percent. I find it interesting that young people find their regional daily newspaper to be the most trustworthy among print media.

The picture book market is flourishing

It is well-known (and always has been): The more educated a family is, the more the children read, which makes it an educational issue. But we shouldn't forget that, while we often think every young person in the 1950s read, this was, of course, definitely not the case. For many centuries, only an educated minority read. Only starting in the 19th century did the number of readers increase, but even then the figure was not high. In all the commotion about the current level of reading, we shouldn't act as if in the past everyone was sitting around the fireplace reading.

I can see some trends in the youth book market. First, the market for young adult books is generally good. And second, there is a trend that should please machine manufacturers for the graphics industry: The picture book market, in which apps, interestingly enough, do not work very well, is flourishing. In this segment, publishers are being bold and pushing the boundaries artistically – for both children and adults.

I don't believe that digital media are basically poison for printed media. And we now know from a number of studies that media usage is complementary. As Umberto Eco and Jean-Claude Carrière write in their 2010 book, "This Is Not the End of the Book," there have been fears before that no one would look at cathedrals anymore because they could now see pictures of them in books. But this didn't happen – just like the theater and the cinema didn't disappear because of television. I believe that people are happier when there is a larger media offering.

Children should discover the book as something valuable

I always read academic material on a computer because I don't want to print it out for environmental reasons. If I can read something open access in the library, I don't print out a hundred pages. Or I buy – when this is an option – the printed book or borrow it from the library. I much prefer working with books because it's easier to get an overview. You can add notes, while reading and writing at the same time on a computer is more arduous. But, honestly, I admit that the e-book has a great advantage: I can enter a search term and find it quickly.

Keyword e-books: Unlike with adults, e-books have never really caught on among the younger generation in German-speaking countries. In Germany, the share of e-books among young people was just 4 percent in 2018, according to the JIM study. I also have a typical example from our family: My two daughters were given an e-reader by their grandparents, but they lie around at home unused. I'm the only one in the family who uses an e-book – for research purposes.

In German-speaking countries – and here things are a bit different from the USA – we have a traditional educated middle class culture. Many parents want to give their children the opportunity to discover the book as a medium, as something valuable and as a longstanding European value. They have the feeling that books are connected with education – not only because of what is in them, but also because books are a cultural asset. Parents and grandparents are very willing to dig a bit deeper into their wallets for high-quality books. Most kids eventually get a smartphone sooner or later. But a lot of parents would prefer them not to be staring at a screen all the time.

Innovative books have a great future

I therefore see great future opportunities for the younger generation with regard to print. Print will even out and it's not – as the 40 percent figure among young people I cited before shows – losing ground everywhere. I am convinced that innovative books have a much greater future than those that are guided by Netflix. Innovative books include, for example, picture books that have text and image compositions or that play with formats, or novels that are told from the perspective of different characters.

Publishers would be making a big mistake to think "Kids love Netflix, so let's do Netflix in a book." This wouldn't work because literature has very different media options than TV and it should take advantage of these. Literature involves not only exterior tension, but above all empathy.

I personally still really love reading. Sitting down in the evening, focusing and reading a book for a while is still one of life's great pleasures for me. I'm currently reading a genre known as nature writing – a sort of travel literature in which authors talk about their travels in the natural environment and their experiences with animals. There is a trend in literature to use poetic language to ask questions like "What is our interior existence" and "What is around us?" – and I find this incredibly exciting.

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