

What are you reading?

READING THE *London Review of Books* on a patio in Vancouver on Canada Day weekend, I noticed a young woman sit down just in front of me and open up a small, yellow-fringed hardcover book. Its distinctive shape, colour and the chapter headings (“Telltale Letter,” “Unexpected Clue”) brought two names to mind: Carolyn Keene. Nancy Drew.

When my neighbour made moves to leave, I couldn’t resist a couple of questions. I was curious why someone in their 20s was reading Nancy Drew (my own reading of Franklin W. Dixon’s Hardy Boys books ended by about Grade 6). Was it academic research on pop culture or background reading for a thesis on pseudonymous authorship?

“I couldn’t help noticing your book. You really seemed to be moving through it,” I said. “What are you reading? That isn’t Nancy Drew, is it?”

Well, of course it was, and when I asked why she was reading Nancy Drew, she didn’t flinch: She reads so much dense material at school that she enjoys Nancy Drew because it’s a refreshing, easy break. Plus, unlike other novels, it’s written for kids so she doesn’t have to worry about the moral calibre of the content.

Well, that would qualify as summertime reading.

The following morning at church, the 20-something man leading worship pulled out his iPhone and announced that no, he wasn’t about to start texting, he wanted to read a passage of scripture. Well, whatever works for him. But having spoken with many so used to reading text on all manner of screens, it’s unclear to me that the actual structure of a book (or magazine or newspaper) makes sense to them. A generation of readers is emerging that can’t see the package for the pages, if you will, so attuned are they to scrolling through a run of text rather than one arranged in sequence. While my neighbour on the patio might have been reading a book, she’s an anomaly. Plugging the chapter heads into Google yields

the title—*The Whispering Statue* (1970)—via Google Books, Scribd and in e-reader format.

It’s not just the form of the book that’s unfamiliar to many younger readers. It’s the challenge of living with a past that sits there in black and white, looking back at the present and on occasion making it feel uncomfortable.

A case in point was a discussion that erupted on Facebook last year that saw several young parents dissing Dr. Seuss for titles such as *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins* (1938) and especially *If I Ran the Zoo* (1950), with its now-discomfiting references to the nerd and the helpers in Zombama-tant—the ones, you’ll recall, with “their eyes at a slant”). I was so curious at the cryptic references being made in works that hadn’t tainted my youth that I sought them out at the library. So popular were they that the librarian and I couldn’t find them. When I told her why I was looking for them, she was disgusted. She stormed away, then came back even more incensed, saying that people should have thicker skins and recognize that some things they read will offend them.

She was still fuming when I left, but when I stopped in at a bookshop a few days later I was told the books are sold with a caution to parents about the content.

The permanence of books and the witness they bear to our changing ways of seeing the world are two themes in this issue of *Amphora*. With that in mind, what are you reading this summer, and how? Are you having any interesting discussions regarding your choice of reading material or the format in which you’re reading it? Send in your thoughts to pmitham@telus.net, and the best submissions will run in the next issue as we prepare for that next great season for reading—winter.

~ Peter Mitham, editor