

Where Have All the Readers Gone? by Caroline Stafford

As you may already have seen elsewhere, the National Endowment for the Arts says data indicate the number of people no longer reading books increased by 17 million between 1992 and 2002. That's a huge number of lost readers!

So what are they doing instead? Watching TV, renting movies of the books they once would have read, listening to books on tape, playing with their computers, and getting their entertainment online. Or have they just lost the habit of curling up with a good book? There's no data to answer those questions. The study goes on to say that only 47 % of Americans read true literature, such as poetry. And yet most of the people I talk with who don't read fiction tell me they read biography, how-to books (which can cover a lot of ground, from how to improve your personality to how to become a better manager) and celebrity stories, which can't always be lumped into biographies.

A trip to any Borders or B&N shows you the wide range of nonfiction material available, and a good bit of it would—in my opinion—not fit into the true literature category. I had a chance recently to speak with quite a number of people who were indeed reading, and most of them had chosen books reviewed in the *New York Times Sunday Book Review* or *The New Yorker*. They indicated that they let these sources choose their reading for them or listen to suggestions from friends (who probably use the same sources). I saw only three mysteries in this group—by Cornwell, Paretsky, and Grisham—although one man had just finished a Todd and passed it on to his wife. I unblushingly talked up our chapter authors and wished I'd had some jackets with me. We need to consider that idea, to swap publicity material.

Back to the NEA: Readership of narrative fiction dropped 7 points, they said, during the period being considered. I assume this includes fiction and mysteries. Again, no sense of where such readers might have gone. Those reading any books at all dropped from 61% in 1992 to 57% in 2002. Still over half the population, but not a very good sign for those of us who hope to make a living writing books. I feel like echoing Peter, Paul, and Mary—Where have all the readers gone? *Newsweek* apparently picked up the story and added that in the same period there had been a 58 % increase in the number of titles published here in the States. So more choices for fewer readers.

All of which says to us, the writers of mysteries, that we need to find more and better outlets for publicity—more and better ways of getting our names out there for the reader to find. Conventions are a great way to get your name in front of your peers and the mystery fans and mystery bookstores. (Affording to go to all of them is another subject!) Another way that Charles and I have found is state book fairs, which can draw upwards of 5,000-7,000 people in a day or sometimes two days. You are not going to reach them all, but if you have a really great display of your titles and a smiling patter for those who come by your table, you increase your odds tremendously. But again, it is what you can do without begging yourself in the process!

Another important factor is getting to know reviewers for such magazines as *Deadly Pleasures*, *Mystery News*, *Crimespree*, and *The Strand*. They can help make or break your career. I

remember when I was in college, taking a creative writing course, listening to the more sophisticated members of the class talk loftily about refusing to prostitute one's art. Nowadays the published author—and wannabe published author—has to learn how to be an awesome public speaker, how to be endlessly creative in setting up a display of her work, how to blatantly and shamelessly publicize her books, and how to smile at people who tell her they are interested in her work, and then add, "But I never read fiction!" One can, with some practice, learn to gnash teeth and smile with great good humor at the same time. I'm still working on that one.