

The Wonderful World of Books: Librarians, Publishers, and Rural Readers

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Convened in 1951 by the Cooperative Extension Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Conference on Rural Reading explored ways to stimulate reading and make books more available in rural America. Bringing together librarians, publishers, government officials, and farm and civic organizations, the conference reflected the major challenges facing the library profession in the early 1950s. From a small meeting on rural reading in 1951 to a nationwide promotion of a conference-inspired paperback, *The Wonderful World of Books*, published in 1953, the conference mirrored the very changes it sought to address: the shift from rural to national concerns, from specialized to mass audience, from books to non-print media.

Organized in cooperation with publishers and librarians, the Conference on Rural Reading, held in September 1951, marked a midway point in decade-long efforts to expand the market for books and to secure federal aid for public library service. In the early years of the postwar era, economic concerns and societal changes had prompted self-scrutiny among librarians, publishers, educators, and farmers. The Conference on Rural Reading focused the overlapping interests of these groups on the promotion of books and reading. Just as census figures revealed the decline of the nation's farm population and television threatened the demise of the book, publishers and librarians joined forces to promote reading in rural America.

Although officially sponsored by the Extension Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the conference grew out of a conversation between Theodore Waller, executive director of the American Book Publishers Council, and Luther Evans, Librarian of Congress. Waller and Margie Malmberg of the American Library Association worked closely with Eunice Heywood of the Extension Service who convened a planning committee in spring 1951.¹ Also represented on the committee were the National Education Association, the American Farm Bureau Federation, the National Grange, the National Home Demonstration Council, the

American Institute of Co-operation, and the land-grant colleges. In various combinations, these groups were already working together on a variety of issues. In 1950 a liaison committee between librarians and publishers had begun to consider copyright questions, postal rates for books, and censorship.² The ALA was cooperating with the National Education Association on funding for rural schools. In late 1950 Waller had met with the National Home Demonstration Agents in hopes of using county agents to promote reading among farm families.³ While each organization had its own priorities, by 1951 their shared interests had crystallized into the related issues to be addressed at the conference: how to stimulate reading and make books more readily available in rural America.

On 4 September 1951 M. L. Wilson, head of the Extension Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, issued an invitation to the conference. "Knowing of your interest in the intellectual benefits that come from the printed word," he wrote, "we are extending to you a cordial invitation to attend a small conference here in Washington which we hope will have a significant influence upon rural reading habits."⁴ Appropriately, more than one hundred conferees convened the three-day meeting on 24 September 1951 in the Jefferson Auditorium of the Department of Agriculture. Participating extension workers, publishers, librarians, and educators could all claim Thomas Jefferson as their patron saint. Farmer, author, book collector, Jefferson had seen the American farmer as the embodiment of American values and the surest safeguard of the new democracy. In his elegiac keynote address, Carl Woodward, president of the University of Rhode Island, played on these themes as he recalled the titles in the home library of his family's New Jersey farmhouse. "Nothing has contributed more to the wholesome, progressive atmosphere of the farm home than do the books and other reading material that have come into it," he observed.⁵ As the nation faced the threat of world communism, he said, America must have

an enlightened, intelligent, clear-thinking rural citizenry, whose vision reaches beyond their own special interests and their own community; who are informed about current world affairs, who understand America's new responsibility of leadership, and are aware of the threat of false ideologies to our free democratic institutions.⁶

In his 1948 study, *Farming and Democracy*, Yale University president A. Whitney Griswold had noted the irony in such uses of the agrarian symbol.

It is the daydream of city-dwellers, the inspiration of poets and artists, the biographer's security of youth of great men. It stands for democracy in its purest and most classic form. For millions of Americans it represents a better world, past but not quite lost, one to which they may still look for individual happiness or, maybe, national salvation.⁷

According to Griswold,

The same sources that document the agricultural boom document a rural disadvantage in living standards and cultural opportunities—in housing, medical and health facilities, schools, and libraries—even greater than the disparity of income. These things are as much the essence of the farmer's way of life as his independence and his landscapes. The boom has not yet made good to him the democratic promise of equal opportunity in either the economic or cultural sphere.⁸

In addressing the reading needs of rural America, conference participants faced this contradiction between agrarian symbol and rural reality.

Despite growing affluence in rural America, the facts documenting its inadequate supply of books and library service were well known. In *The Geography of Reading*, published in 1938, Louis Round Wilson had mapped the inequitable distribution of public library service and other means of communication, including bookstores, radio stations, and newspapers.⁹ A 1948 survey of weekly newspaper publishers conducted by *The American Press* showed that 67 percent of the towns having weekly newspapers had no bookstores. Book club memberships and pocket books sold on newsstands or in drug stores were the main sources of books in rural America.¹⁰ According to the ALA's 1948 National Plan for Library Service, "The rural resident in America has been the forgotten man in library service."¹¹ More than 35 million Americans, 27 percent of the population, were without public libraries. Of those, 91 percent lived in small villages or the open country. Over half the rural population lacked public libraries. Of the 661 counties without libraries, many were rural; three-quarters were in the South.¹²

In a further irony, America in 1951 could no longer even think of itself as a rural nation. As the conference planning committee met, 1950 census data showed that America's farm population had reached its lowest point since the government began keeping such figures in 1910. The estimated total of 24,335,000 for April 1950 was nearly five million below the number recorded in the 1940 census.¹³ While farm population had declined, however, farm income had risen as a result of greater farm

productivity and agricultural price supports. Those who remained on the farm faced a different way of life.

In part, the Department of Agriculture had hastened the agricultural revolution which now seemed to threaten rural America. Its Extension Service, through county and home demonstration agents, provided for "the diffusion of useful and practical knowledge to the people, particularly to the rural people, of the United States."¹⁴ Farmers improved their techniques with the help of the USDA *Yearbook* and bulletins from state agricultural experiment stations. The Rural Library Committee of the Department of Agriculture issued lists advising rural residents what to read, and because of the difficulty in obtaining the recommended titles, other agencies, such as state libraries, helped distribute the publications.¹⁵ The 1947 list, for example, filled thirty-four pages and included scholarly monographs, government publications, farm and education pamphlets, and such novels as Louis Bromfield's *The Farm*, Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*, Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings's *The Yearling*, and Conrad Richter's *The Trees*.¹⁶

Concerned that it had not tapped the rural market, the American Book Publishers Council had worked with farm organizations to explore it. At the Conference on Rural Reading, Maurice Wieting described cooperative efforts between the ABPC and the Ohio Farm Bureau starting with a 1948 conference on "Books and the Rural Reader" at the Ohio State University College of Education. A survey of 4,000 Ohio rural residents showed that book reading on farms was seasonal; that farm women read somewhat more than farm men; that those with more schooling read more; that fiction was the most popular type of reading, followed by travel, historical novels, biographies, and poetry. Forty-three percent did not read books; 39 percent most often got books from a friend or a neighbor, while 36 percent visited a library; 21 percent went to bookstores; and 16 percent ordered books through the mail.¹⁷ In 1949 the 1,500 advisory councils of the Ohio Farm Bureau discussed book needs. Most in demand were better local library service and better written materials on new farm methods and contemporary problems.¹⁸

Just as publishers sought to expand the rural market for books, librarians sought to stimulate rural demand for public library service. Rural America not only represented the area of greatest need for public library service, it also provided precedents for federal programs to assist farm communities. New Deal programs, including the Works Projects Administration and the National Youth Administration, had introduced library service to rural communities; the Tennessee Valley Authority demonstrated the usefulness of cooperation among local libraries in county and regional library systems.¹⁹ Central points of the ALA's National Plan had rural implications, particularly the need for state

planning for library service and the importance of larger service units for increased effectiveness. Federal legislation creating land-grant universities, agricultural experiment stations, and cooperative extension programs demonstrated how federal assistance could promote state planning and enhance local service. These efforts were featured in USDA bulletins on rural library service, prepared in cooperation with the ALA.²⁰

Because the gap between library service in rural and urban areas stemmed largely from disparities in income, librarians sought ways to equalize expenditures. In 1946 Representative Emily Taft Douglas of Illinois introduced a bill providing funds for demonstration projects in communities without libraries. Sponsored by the ALA, the bill would authorize \$25,000 to each participating state for four years to show how library service might reach underserved, primarily rural, areas. Douglas saw the problem as a national one.

Books have become a necessity in an unstable world and we cannot afford to deny large numbers of our people the chance for this basic means of education. Nor can the big cities, with well-stocked libraries, be oblivious to the lack elsewhere. The cities are forever being repopulated by people from the country, and the quality of urban citizenry is therefore dependent on the quality of the whole country.²¹

In emphasizing service to rural areas in their quest for federal funds, librarians also made a shrewd political choice. The demonstrable insufficiency of rural library service was matched by the undeniable political power of the farmbelt. Although other areas suffered from inadequate library service, the concentration of rural and poor states in the South meant that librarians would turn to southern congressmen for political support and would emphasize the rural aspects of the problem. As various bills for federal aid were introduced, the rural focus became more pronounced. Testimony in support of federal aid to libraries at hearings organized in 1948 by the ALA was dominated by representatives of organizations, including the National Grange and the National Farmers Union, which later participated in the Conference on Rural Reading. A similar library demonstration bill was narrowly defeated in 1950 despite broad support among farm and education organizations. At the Conference on Rural Reading, however, M. L. Wilson cautioned participants against mentioning the Library Services Bill. "This conference naturally is not concerned with legislative matters, nor does it have a specific kind of program which it seeks to propagandize."²²

Thus, in the early 1950s librarians and publishers each sought, in the phrase of critic and commentator Gilbert Seldes, to create an audience.²³

Librarians sought to do this by federal legislation which would demonstrate the value of library service to underserved areas. They were confident that communities which experienced library service would be willing to continue its support. Publishers sought to create a new reading audience by expanding the market for books in underserved areas using new means of distribution and cheaper formats. The expansion of public library service was one way to accomplish this.

Among themselves, however, publishers debated the existence of a rural market and whether it was unique. Robert West Howard, writer and editor for various farm publications and a conference participant, argued that as farm communities became less isolated and more affluent, "an annual market of one billion dollars for the right kind of books is waiting in rural America." According to Howard, "A whole lot more than the shift from horse-to-tractor, kerosene-to-electricity, party-line-to-video, one-room-school-to-consolidated, root-cellar-to-deep-freeze, country-buyer-to-country-farmer-owned-co-operative has occurred during the past thirty years."²⁴ To deal with the technological changes transforming rural America, Howard felt that farmers needed more works

in the realms of soil-research, of photosynthesis and photo periodism, in family-living and home-making, in better crops and better livestock, in better distribution and more direct contact between the grower and the consumer, in nutrition, in community-action, in safer highways, less juvenile delinquency and greater equanimity of the human spirit.²⁵

William Miller, in his study of the book industry for the Public Library Inquiry, challenged this view of the rural market, arguing that if such a market existed, publishers and authors would already be issuing books for it.²⁶

The commercial, mass market side of the book world was represented at the Conference on Rural Reading by Sanford Cobb, head of the Book Department at Sears, Roebuck and Company. Sears already reached farm families through its mail order catalog and book clubs offering a potpourri of classic tales, reference works, pulp fiction, mysteries, westerns, and detective stories. Cobb's view of the rural market was firmly grounded in the bottom line:

I am a little ashamed to tell you this, but our best-selling adult fiction in the Sears, Roebuck catalog is the Zane Grey, Grace Livingston Hill reprint series. If I were a missionary and not a merchandiser, I would throw those things out of the catalog and give people the things that I thought they ought to have. If I did

that we would be out of the book business, and then my missionary work would not have done any good at all.²⁷

But the rural market for books, like rural America generally, was increasingly affluent, sophisticated, and diverse. As Cobb admitted, "We are not doing so well in adult fiction. I think if we are going to sell fiction in the rural markets we will have to get different books."²⁸

During the war Sears had appealed to the changing rural reading market with the People's Book Club, founded in 1943 with Simon and Schuster and the Consolidated Book Publishing Company.²⁹ Unlike the Book-of-the-Month Club, which relied on the judgment of its editorial board, the People's Book Club relied on the reactions of its members, polled by Dr. George Gallup. Not surprisingly, the choices strongly resembled those of other book clubs, with offerings such as the latest best-seller by Frances Parkinson Keys, *Here Is Your War* by Ernie Pyle, and *The Robe* by Lloyd Douglas. Response to the club seemed to confirm the existence of an untapped rural market. Aiming for 100,000 members, it drew 250,000 in its first year. Questionnaires sent to members produced a more detailed profile of that market and supported many of Louis Round Wilson's earlier findings.³⁰

The success of the People's Book Club and the sale of cheap books through the Sears catalog suggested that librarians and publishers might reconsider their approach to rural readers. At the conference, Cobb suggested that impersonality was part of the appeal of clubs and catalogs.

I have had the opinion for a long time that there are people who are afraid of books and afraid of people who deal with books. There are many people who are afraid to go into a public library and ask a question because they will show their ignorance. There are many people who won't go into a book store because some snooty clerk makes them feel uncomfortable.³¹

To stimulate reading, Cobb thought that people should learn that books are fun.

One of the things that have to be done is to remove the fear of books from people. You can take a quarter book on the train with you and throw it out of the window when you have finished. You don't have to look upon a book as a sacred article to be held until you die and then passed on to your children and grandchildren.³²

At the conference others joined Cobb in his implicit criticism of librarians. Since most people relied on the recommendations of friends, one

participant suggested that ordinary readers rather than librarians write book reviews for farm periodicals. Margaret Scoggin of the New York Public Library employed that technique on the radio show, "Young Book Reviewers," which featured teenagers reviewing and recommending books. "They learn," she said, "that books are not sacrosanct and that their opinions are valuable; they learn also that no criticism is valid unless they can explain why they do or do not like what they criticize. . . . Not reading alone, but critical reading is the cornerstone of all education."³³ Young people in rural areas, she concluded, should be consulted in planning for public library service.

To share their own experiences and formulate recommendations for further action, conference participants divided into smaller work groups. In discussions lasting four hours, they tackled the two major problems posed by the conference: stimulating interest in reading and making reading materials available to rural people. Although the conference eschewed political purposes, many of the recommendations from the work groups supported aspects of the library demonstration bill.

The work group chaired by ALA president Loleta Fyan compiled a lengthy list of things already being done by public libraries, schools, and universities to stimulate rural reading. It concluded that efforts by public libraries, such as bookmobiles, book and art exhibits, reading clubs, carnivals, and storytelling, needed to be used more generally and adapted widely to local conditions. While this group did not recommend extended public library service to promote reading, it did advocate the employment of trained librarians to replace volunteers, adequate salary scales to make library jobs attractive, and programs to inform young people about the library profession as a career.³⁴

In contrast to this upbeat assessment, the work group chaired by Marjorie Luce, state home demonstration leader from the University of Vermont, found that public libraries were failing to make reading material available to rural people. To the question "Are present library facilities in rural areas being fully used?" it responded with stark realism and disappointment.

Your discussion group is fully aware of the valiant services given in the field of the rural library by our small corps of underpaid and often unpaid librarians. We offer them our deep thanks and our future support. In furtherance of that support, we conclude that the answer to the first question above is "no."³⁵

Recounting the statistics of unserved communities and unfunded libraries, this group saw failure in every area, even in those aspects most frequently touted by rural library enthusiasts.

Little cooperation exists among service clubs, fraternal organizations, government agencies, and farm organizations in exploring the realms of greater library service. . . . For the very reason that exceptional results have been achieved in rural library services in some areas through cooperation between PTA, Home Demonstration Councils, Extension Service, and local libraries, we feel that rural libraries as a whole have failed to explore this potential.³⁶

While this group's report, drafted by Robert West Howard, gave the gloomiest assessment of current library service in rural areas, it also painted the rosiest picture of future library potential. Urging real cooperation among community organizations, it saw an enhanced role for library and librarian in virtually every aspect of community life.³⁷

While neither work group specifically endorsed federal aid for rural public libraries, both favored larger units of library service. Fyan's group concluded, "State libraries need to be greatly strengthened so that they can do a more adequate job of stimulating the improvement of local libraries and of serving as a source of reading materials."³⁸ Luce's group concluded that

although it is the group's firm conviction that the control of library facilities, and both moral and financial support of the library, must remain at the community level, belief exists that rural libraries will not adequately develop until larger units, such as the county unit, function with the local unit to improve the latter's service.³⁹

Statewide planning and county or regional library systems were fundamental aspects of proposed library legislation.

In seeming paradoxes, improved local library service required action at the national level; the promotion of reading among farmers required the use of the nonprint mass media. Almost every conference speaker alluded to the potential impact of radio, television, and films on rural reading. Speakers saw, with some ambivalence, that the same media of mass communication which brought farm families into the mainstream of American life also threatened to diminish the hours left for reading. Woodward described the change:

Whereas, in our family homestead we would spend an evening around the living-room table, with mother reading aloud to the family circle, today, my nephew who operates the farm, packs his family in his car and drives to town to see the movies. Or if it isn't the movies, there is the radio, or a television feature, that occupies the evening. Although he is a college graduate, and he and his

children have access to more books and periodicals than I had as a boy, I don't believe they are doing as much real reading as I did. . . . They are living in a different day and age. Who will say which was better off? Whatever the answer, any appraisal of the place of reading in rural life today must make allowances for the competition of the movies, radio, and television as sources of both information and entertainment.⁴⁰

Many conference participants reported how radio and television were already being used to promote reading and to help make books available in rural America. Representing the Children's Books Council, Margaret McElderry observed that local radio stations often gave air time for story hours and discussion of books for children. The National Broadcasting Company promoted books nationwide on "The Carnival of Books" program. Home demonstration agent Mary Switzer, from Erie County, New York, reported that "Reading is Fun" was one of the most successful programs of the Extension Service television broadcasts.⁴¹ Like Scoggin's radio show, it featured children, rather than librarians, as book reviewers.

The work group chaired by Lulu Evanson of the North Dakota Farmers Union concluded that "Most of the present book-reviewing services are of little value and many times are unavailable to rural people."⁴² Only a few farm publications, like *The Progressive Farmer*, carried book reviews directed to the interests of rural readers. Where television had been used, it had been effective, and her group recommended a greater use of local radio and television stations for book reviewing. Similarly, Wieting's group on the commercial distribution of books recommended that more should be done to play up the values of reading in radio, television, and the movies.⁴³ At the end of the conference, T. V. Smith of Syracuse University evoked the same halcyon vision of rural life as had Carl Woodward at its start. In a talk entitled "Our Reading Heritage," Smith described himself as a confirmed addict of radio and television even as he defended the role of books in bringing information, providing inspiration, and furnishing sublimation. "Books, more than anything else," he said, "give you a new dimensional enlargement of the life of imagination. . . . It is of a more enduring form, and it is more realistic in its amplitude than that which you get out of other mediums of culture."⁴⁴

Publication of the conference proceedings as a government pamphlet in March 1952, and its subsequent transformation into the mass market paperback bestseller, *The Wonderful World of Books*, mirrored these shifts from rural to national concerns, from specialized to mass audience, from book to nonprint media. *Extension Service Circular No. 472, Report on Conference on Rural Reading, September 24-26, 1951* filled forty-eight double-

columned pages in small type. Without illustration, the circular was intended primarily as a record of the conference for members of the planning group and for conference participants.⁴⁵ According to a January 1952 memo from Extension Service staff member Harry Mileham, 60 of the 1,134 copies were to go to experiment station libraries, 180 to state library commissions, state departments of education, and the ALA, 100 to the American Book Publishers Council, 130 to registered conference participants, and 300 for requests already on hand. Most of the rest were to go to Extension Service directors, editors, sociologists, public policy people, home demonstration and 4-H leaders, and land-grant college libraries.⁴⁶

From the early stages, however, organizers of the Conference on Rural Reading had aimed to reach a wider audience. In a letter to the planning committee on 10 September 1951, chair Eunice Heywood reported that Alfred Stefferud, Lester Schlup, Caroline Sherman, and Ralph Shaw had already agreed to do preliminary work on plans for a conference report.⁴⁷ The foreword to the Extension Service circular explained:

Plans are underway to supplement this report with a book of permanent value for use by extension workers, librarians, discussion groups leaders, high-school teachers, parents, children, and others interested in encouraging people to read books. It will be prepared with the widest possible readership in mind.

While the volume would include chapters by people attending the conference and speeches delivered at the conference, other experts would be invited to contribute as well.⁴⁸

Chosen to edit this expanded version was Alfred Stefferud, a former Associated Press correspondent and the editor of the *Yearbook of Agriculture*. In his article, "Billion Dollar Furrow," Howard had quoted Stefferud to support his point that publishers lacked an understanding of the book interests of rural readers:

"Farm people," roared Alfred Stefferud, ". . . are not given to buying books, but that is not a deficiency on their part. Which of the current books should anybody read? Surely not all these sex-historical books, not the turgid books on sociology and economics and foreign relations which mean so little, not those sweet things on the beauties of nature. One cannot force upon farmers spurious culture, escape stuff, alarums and excursions in remote areas on remote subjects. . . . An honest, serious publisher who knows how to manufacture a durable book and sell it in the right way has a

tremendous field . . . [ellipses in text] one so big that no one knows its size because no one has entered it."⁴⁹

In the introduction to *The Wonderful World of Books*, Stefferud explained the origins of the volume and the current importance of reading to all Americans:

We came together, about a hundred of us, to talk about reading and, after talking, to do something to encourage more people to read. . . . Now, more than ever, we felt, a reminder is needed that books can instruct and help us in a competitive world, in which more and more knowledge is needed to keep up with scientific developments; that we need their advice on problems and worries besetting us in education, in politics and foreign affairs, in domestic issues and economics, in agriculture, and in social matters; that they can provide fun and relaxation and inspiration in our distraught times; that in a world of television, radio, automobiles, of getting and spending and laying waste our powers, books can give us perspective and depth and fulfillment."⁵⁰ The volume was dedicated: "To those who bend twigs—the librarians of America, teachers, Extension workers, leaders—and to the twigs themselves we dedicate this book."⁵¹

Most remarkably, publication of the volume was a nonprofit enterprise made possible by the same coalition that had convened the conference, in particular the Extension Service, the American Book Publishers Council, and the ALA. A list of organizations participating in the conference demonstrated the cooperation of farm, library, publishing, education, and religious groups; the acknowledgments explained their contributions. Two aspects were especially important. Participation by the American Book Publishers Council facilitated contributions by writers who had not attended the conference but who donated chapters for the enlarged volume. Financial support from the Sears, Roebuck Foundation freed the editor from the constraints of publication under government sponsorship. In the introduction, Stefferud explained that although the book had its genesis in a government-sponsored conference, its preparation, writing, editing, and publication were personal undertakings, "involving no time taken from official duties or outlays from official funds. Responsibility for it rests on us as citizens, not as Government employees. For the publishers, writers, and editors the book is a non-profit enterprise."⁵² Thus, *The Wonderful World of Books* afforded publishers an opportunity to promote books beyond rural America and librarians a chance to advocate federal aid for public library demonstration projects.

Published jointly in February 1953 by Houghton Mifflin and the New American Library, *The Wonderful World of Books* bore little resemblance to its drab and serious forerunner. With lively drawings by Robert Osborn throughout, the volume seemed to embody the advice from Wieting's conference work group: "Reading should be fun, not a chore."⁵³ In vivid contrast to the Extension Service circular, it was bound in red and yellow cloth and decorated with an Osborn drawing of an open book with arms and legs extended and a huge smile. The message was unmistakable: books are your friends, reading is fun. The smiling book greeted the reader on the title page as well. The table of contents continued the same friendly tone: Books Are Friends, The Pleasures of Reading, Reading Among Friends.

The new volume retained a core of selections by conference participants, opening with Smith's address on "Our Reading Heritage" and an offering by Robert West Howard. Almost every section included something from the conference: Margaret Scoggin on reading for teenagers, Richard Crohn of the New American Library on "Good Reading for the Millions," ABPC president John O'Connor on the publishing industry, Sanford Cobb of Sears, Roebuck on getting books by mail, Ruth Gagliardo of the PTA on "Parents, Teachers, and Libraries." The section "City and Country" featured remarks by Caroline Sherman of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Woodward's keynote address, Wieting on the Ohio Plan, and another selection by Howard. Stefferud did not include, however, Robert Leigh's presentation on the Public Library Inquiry, thus omitting the idea that the public library was to serve the reading needs of influential members of society. *The Wonderful World of Books* provided tools so that everyone could make use of libraries and enjoy the pleasures of reading.

The materials added by Stefferud were also telling. Much of the discussion at the conference had been critical of the quality of public library service, particularly in rural areas, but government sponsorship precluded calls for federal aid to libraries. Free of governmental constraints, Stefferud added a major section, "Libraries Are For You." Chapters on the USDA library and the Library of Congress demonstrated ways in which the federal government was already involved in libraries. The ALA, which had helped plan the conference but played a backstage role at the meeting itself, was strongly represented. Helen Geer contributed "ALA's Seventy-Five Years of Service"; Margie Malmberg, a member of the conference advisory committee, recounted "How Our Libraries Developed"; ALA president Fyan added "Your State Library Belongs to You." Harry Lydenberg, of the New York Public Library, described library work as a profession; Beatrice Russell told how to start a public library; and Gretchen Schenk explained the financing of small libraries. Each

reiterated the need for coordinated, well-funded libraries staffed by professionals. Three chapters, including "We Need a Library!" by Winona Wheelock Sparks, advocated rural bookmobiles. Stefferud even included a chapter by Alabama Senator Lister Hill. A supporter of federal aid for library demonstration projects, Hill had introduced a bill in the Senate in 1946 to match Douglas's bill in the House. His article, "Freedom and Responsibility," called on publishers to recognize their role as instruments of education.⁵⁴

Just as *The Wonderful World of Books* served the interests of librarians in promoting federal library legislation, it served the interests of publishers in promoting books and reading to the widest possible audience. Just as it added contributions that bolstered the case for the Library Services Bill, it added representatives of the mass media to extend the reach of publishers. These additions suggested two things relevant to both librarians and publishers: that new communication media might be used to encourage reading and that mass market techniques might be used to promote serious and important works.

Again the volume used a light-hearted approach to make its case. Opening the section "The Pleasures of Reading," Bennett Cerf contributed a chapter, "It's Fun to Read." Pioneering editor of the *Modern Library*, as well as a popular writer and radio personality, Cerf described the most unfortunate people in the world as "those who have never learned the soul-satisfying pleasure of reading good books."⁵⁵ Like Cerf, contributor Gilbert Highet combined a serious interest in literature with efforts to reach a broad popular audience. Professor of Latin at Columbia University and author of *The Classical Tradition*, Highet was more widely known for his radio broadcasts sponsored by Oxford University Press.⁵⁶ He was represented in *The Wonderful World of Books* by two of his radio talks, "The Historian's Job" and "The Making of Literature." Indeed, just as Highet's radio talks made perfect chapters in Stefferud's anthology, the book itself resembled radio programming: fast-paced, short presentations, direct, congenial, informative and non-threatening. *The Wonderful World of Books* not only promoted the reading of books through mass market techniques, but used the nonprint format as a model to make itself agreeable and accessible to the broadest possible audience.

Beginning with an article in November 1952, *The Wonderful World of Books* was mentioned frequently in *Publishers' Weekly* as the centerpiece of an industry-wide promotion for the following spring.

What promises to be the biggest promotion of the book business ever staged is in the planning stage these days, aimed for a nationwide launching on February 25. Highlight of the promotion and focal point about which it all hinges is "The Wonderful World of

Books” a collection of reading for pleasure, profit and inspiration, written by leading educators, librarians, publishers, authors, book-sellers and farm leaders.

Scheduled to appear simultaneously in clothbound and paperback editions,

The book will be sold at bookstores and newsstands in this country and abroad and will be backed by an industry-wide promotion program rivaling if not actually exceeding anything of its kind ever done before. All profits from the sale of both editions will be turned back into advertising, promotion and publicity for the book.⁵⁷

An article in the 10 January 1953 issue of *Publishers' Weekly* entitled “The Widespread Promotion for ‘The Wonderful World of Books’” detailed plans for the advertising campaign. Publishers had prepared 100,000 circulars for trade and organizational promotion and a special circular for bookstore use. Each featured Robert Osborn drawings and pictured the cover of the paperback edition with the text:

This is a book that can change your life and the lives of those around you. With its help you can win greater success and happiness, benefit from the world's wisdom and knowledge, explore fascinating realms of adventure and entertainment and make valued new friends—all through the magic of reading.⁵⁸

Facing pages in the same issue of *Publishers' Weekly*, again with Osborn drawings, featured suggestions for book projects from the “Things To Do” section of *The Wonderful World of Books*.⁵⁹

The planned publication in simultaneous clothbound and paperback editions attracted wide attention. Much of the postwar concern about the availability of sexually explicit material had focused on the enormous sale of paperback books, or quarter books, particularly those sold on newsstands. The publishing industry had been intensely criticized for exploiting this market with lurid covers even on the most stolid literary classics. In December 1952 the Gathings Committee, specially constituted by the House of Representatives, had looked into the dangerous influence of these cheap, readily available publications.⁶⁰ Although the committee's final report did not call for stricter censorship laws, the publicity surrounding the hearings spotlighted the darker side of book merchandising.

In contrast the appearance of *The Wonderful World of Books* in a \$.35 edition highlighted the benign, respectable aspect of the paperback

trade. The New American Library stressed this respectability in *Publishers' Weekly* ads showing how its Signet and Mentor series made available at a low cost to large audiences such indisputably worthwhile works as Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*⁶¹ and Albert Schweitzer's *Out of My Life and Thought*.⁶² *The Wonderful World of Books* appeared in two of these ads. One, in the 17 January 1953 issue, featured what the NAL considered its own list of "ten Signet and Mentor Books published during 1952 which illuminate aspects of the New American Library's publishing program that have particular significance to booksellers, librarians, publishers and authors." Along with a dramatic version of Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*, science fiction by Robert Heinlein, and *The Seven Storey Mountain* by Thomas Merton was *The Wonderful World of Books*, "The Non-Profit Book of Any Year," listed tenth, although it had not yet been published.⁶³ The ad for 31 January 1953 began, "When publishers, booksellers, librarians, educators and the government all get together to promote a book—that's news." It ended:

We hope you will read THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF BOOKS and then sell it, recommend it or even give it away. Because we wager that anyone who reads a copy of THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF BOOKS will be powerless to resist the impulse to go out and read, buy and give away many more books by many more authors. And that, we believe, is one of the noblest impulses of them all!⁶⁴

Writing in *The Saturday Review*, Aaron Sussman linked the work of the Gathings Committee with the publication of *The Wonderful World of Books*. "While Congress was indulging itself with its own special brand of book burning, another committee, no less powerful, but wiser, more tolerant, and infinitely wittier, was proving that books are one of the seven pleasures and that great things are done by devotion to one idea. The idea, in this case, was *to do something to encourage more people to read*." After a glowing review, Sussman concluded,

To say that "The Wonderful World of Books" is a book worth owning is like saying that life is worth living. It can't be much of a life, however, unless books are involved. If you want the news and gossip, the art and science, the strategy and tactics of books and reading, this is your book. It's worth much more than twice what you'll pay for it, so get two copies, one for a friend.⁶⁵

Organizations that had participated in the Conference on Rural Reading featured *The Wonderful World of Books* in their publications. *Publishers'*

Weekly for 10 January 1953 included Wieting's "A Farmer Looks at Reading," which described a follow-up rural reading conference held in Ohio in March 1952.⁶⁶ The February 1953 *Bulletin* of the ALA reprinted Smith's talk, "Our Reading Heritage."⁶⁷ *The English Journal* ran a boxed ad for *The Wonderful World of Books*: "This book can change the lives of your students . . . Endorsed and sold by the National Council of Teachers of English."⁶⁸ A review in a later issue strongly recommended it.⁶⁹

The Sears catalogs for spring and fall 1953 offered both the clothbound and paper editions to its mail-order customers:

The Wonderful World of Books . . . [ellipses in text] can help you win greater success and happiness, benefit from the treasures of the world's wisdom and knowledge. Friendly and stimulating guide to the rewards of reading. . . . Tells how to find the right book, how to find time to read, how to read intelligently. Illustrated.⁷⁰

The ad recalled Cobb's concern that people feared books and the people who worked with them. *The Wonderful World of Books*, with its friendly tone and cheery illustrations, promised to dispel those fears. *The People's Choice*, newsletter of the People's Book Club, ran a two-page feature on the book and enclosed a prepaid order card.⁷¹

While publishers used *The Wonderful World of Books* to promote reading and book sales, supporters of federal aid for library services used the occasion to promote federal library legislation. On 20 January 1953 Congressman George Miller of California described the book in remarks to the House of Representatives, later printed in the *Congressional Record*. Noting the origins of the book in the Conference on Rural Reading, Miller praised the cooperative effort "among the individuals and organizations of our country which are most concerned with education in its broadest sense." He reported that an entire section of the book was devoted to organizing reading programs and to using and improving local library facilities, pointing out the contributions of T. V. Smith and Senator Lister Hill.⁷²

Arranging to hold a reception at the Library of Congress to mark the publication of *The Wonderful World of Books*, Robert Frase, Washington representative of the American Book Publishers Council, furthered its political aspect. Recalling the early involvement of the Library of Congress in the Conference on Rural Reading, Frase wrote Luther Evans on 22 January 1953, asking if the library might host the celebration:

Verner Clapp was kind enough to say that the American Library Association and we might use the Whittall Pavilion on February 25th, the publication date of THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF

BOOKS, for a reception to mark that occasion. I wonder whether you would care to join in issuing the invitation since the Library of Congress was involved in the Rural Reading Conference from which the book emerged and since the reception was to be held in the library.⁷³

In a letter dated 29 January 1953, Evans agreed.⁷⁴

In a sense, the reception reconvened the Conference on Rural Reading. The invitation drafted by Frase read,

To mark the publication of *The Wonderful World of Books*, edited by Alfred Stefferud, A guide to the wealth of our literary heritage sponsored as a public service by several national organizations as a sequel to the National Conference on Rural Reading, 1951, the Librarian of Congress, the American Library Association [and] the American Book Publishers Council cordially invite [blank space to fill in name] to a reception on Wednesday, February 25th, 1953, the Whittall Pavilion, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Invitations were sent to conference sponsors, organizers, speakers, and participants, contributors to *The Wonderful World of Books*, and members of the press. In addition, the guest list included congressmen and senators from committees that might consider library legislation.⁷⁵

In its feature, "From Day to Day in the Library of Congress," the *LC Information Bulletin* of 2 March 1953 reported that more than two hundred people had attended the event. Distinguished guests included Senators Theodore Francis Green (Rhode Island) and Lister Hill, and Representatives Richard Bolling (Missouri), Joseph Bryson (South Carolina), George Miller, Olin Teague (Texas), and Emanuel Celler (New York).⁷⁶ A member of the Gathings Committee, Celler had filed a minority report, dissenting from its findings, and had sponsored copyright legislation of interest to both librarians and publishers.

On 18 March Senator George Aiken of Vermont introduced another library services bill in the Senate.⁷⁷ Explicitly directed to rural areas, the bill called for \$40,000 for each state for five years to support library demonstration projects. Additional money would be distributed according to a state's rural population and per capita income. In April Carey McWilliams, editor of *The Nation*, invited Luther Evans to write an article on the need for expanded library services.⁷⁸ Evans declined. In a letter to McWilliams dated 5 May 1953, he wrote, "I have testified in Committee for it in the past and will be glad to do so again. I have not felt free, however, to campaign for it in other ways. Hence, it would not be possible for me to write anything for publication. I am sorry."⁷⁹ By host-

ing the reception for *The Wonderful World of Books*, Evans had already done his share in promoting books and reading for rural America.

As its planners had hoped, publication of *The Wonderful World of Books* prompted numerous and varied celebrations of reading. But the nature of these events reinforced the transformation of the Conference on Rural Reading to a nationwide promotion of books by New York-based publishers using mass market appeals and nonprint media to attract readers. The promotional campaign suggested again the irony of holding a conference on rural reading when the future of rural life and the role of the book were both threatened by seemingly irreversible changes in American life. At the same time, the very success of these efforts demonstrated the way in which new means of communication could be used to promote serious reading and the consideration of important issues.

The New York Public Library used *The Wonderful World of Books* as the centerpiece of exhibits in nearly all its branches and subbranches starting with the book's publication on 25 February and running through March. In a 10 December 1952 letter to ALA executive director David Clift, John MacKenzie Cory, Chief of Circulation, outlined the library's plans:

The smaller sub-branches will have table displays of the book itself both in the bound and unbound editions; the medium sized branches will have one to three display panels dealing with the book and the large branches will have more extensive displays including related books on sub-topics chosen from the sub-headings in the books themselves. We will be ordering several hundred copies of the bound edition so that there will be copies available both for exhibition and immediate loan, and we will be buying at least 1000 copies of the unbound edition.⁸⁰

Mounted on peg-board, a typical exhibit featured copies of the book and an Osborn drawing of a happy reader.

Similarly, a lecture series offered by the University of Chicago on "Who Reads What—American Reading and Writing in 1953" reflected the promotion's distance from the agricultural origins of the conference.⁸¹ Like the country's own move from country to city, the conference theme migrated from the campuses of state agricultural colleges to the urban home of Robert Hutchins and the Great Books movement. *The Wonderful World of Books* did, in fact, include a chapter on the Great Books by Charles F. Strubbe Jr., president of the Great Books Foundation, which had not been represented at the conference.⁸² The lecture series, sponsored jointly by the University College and the Women's National Book Association, began with a discussion of "The Book and TV" by

George Heineman of NBC-TV, examined “The Crisis in American Fiction” and “The Place of Science Fiction in Society,” and concluded with conference participant Richard J. Chron of the New American Library considering “Democracy’s Library—Paper-bound Books.”⁸³

A radio series, “The Festival of Books,” broadcast over New York City’s municipal station WNYC further demonstrated the urban nature of the promotional campaign. An endeavor of the Committee on Reading Development of the American Book Publishers Council, the program reflected the same participation by publishers, booksellers, and librarians, but lacked the rural focus of other ABPC projects. Originally modeled on WNYC’s art and music festivals, by the time of the broadcast, from 29 March to 4 April, “The Festival of Books” featured programs and speakers drawn from *The Wonderful World of Books*.⁸⁴ Listeners could write to the station for a free copy.

Like the book, these programs adopted a celebratory air to promote serious concerns and popular enjoyment. Panels of experts considered inspirational reading, discussed how to read better and faster, and examined the work of book reviewers. Listeners could learn more about creative writing, book designing, paperbound books, “The Making of a Poem,” and “The Excitement of Editing.” Bennett Cerf explored “The Pleasures of Publishing,” while Gilbert Highet appeared twice to consider “How to Survive 2000 Years” and “The Biography of Books.” Despite its festive air, however, the series did not shy away from the serious, important, or controversial. Former Librarian of Congress and National Book Award winner Archibald MacLeish recited his poem “Act 5.” Actors Frederic March and Florence Eldridge presented readings originally given at the Library of Congress. Judge Curtis Bok, author of a widely cited decision in a Philadelphia censorship case, discussed the freedom to read. Novelist Sterling North commented on book-burning. A panel considered the works of contemporary Negro authors.⁸⁵

In response to the series, WNYC received more than four thousand pieces of overwhelmingly enthusiastic mail. Many requested copies of *The Wonderful World of Books* for use in classrooms. Others praised its approach. One listener wrote, “I expected it to be something like INVITATION TO LEARNING, which is beyond me, but this is just the right key.”⁸⁶ In many cases, the serious nature of the programs was appealing. An older listener wrote, “Tho I’m nearing 75, I enjoyed Tennessee Williams’s reading. U-0-2 repeat it when U have a bigger listening audience.”⁸⁷ Another reported that the discussion of Negro writing “made me set up and take notice, so to speak. Revealing is the word.”⁸⁸ Commenting on the same program, a more critical listener recalled an observation by one of the panelists that “reaching the Negro market and the American market in general was difficult, and that there were not

too many bookstores in the U.S. outside of the large towns.” This listener’s questions echoed the very concerns of the Conference on Rural Reading. “What and how much does America read? So next year why not broaden the geographical area a little?”⁸⁹

Indeed, what had grown to a nationwide campaign to promote books and libraries had its roots in a conference to address concerns about the availability of books in rural America. Underlying the challenges identified by conference planners as unique to rural communities were issues which transcended geography. The transformation of rural life reflected changes in the nation as a whole: the advent of new technology which speeded migration from farm to city, the impact of new means of communication which created a mass market for books but diminished time for reading. The Conference on Rural Reading and the publication of *The Wonderful World of Books* mirrored these changes: the shift from rural to national concerns, from specialized to mass audience, from books to nonprint media. Emphasizing the needs of rural America, librarians sought to improve local library service through federal aid. Seeking a market for books in rural America, publishers launched a promotional campaign using the tools of mass communication to reach a national audience. Librarians and publishers alike used the needs of rural America and the symbols of the nation’s agrarian past to create enthusiasm and support for libraries and books that reached far beyond the farm origins of the Conference on Rural Reading.

Notes

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