

Introduction

THE AMERICAN READER aims to put its readers into direct contact with the words that inspired, enraged, delighted, chastened, or comforted Americans in days gone by. Gathered here are the classic speeches, poems, arguments, and songs that illuminate—with wit, eloquence, or sharp words—significant aspects of American life.

When I first assembled this collection, the imagined audience of *The American Reader* was a group of family or friends, sharing with each other a favorite poem or discovering for the first time a stirring speech. In fact, I received numerous letters from readers who told me that they did employ the book in this fashion and that they shared it with their children before bedtime or after dinner. Many teachers, particularly those who teach American history and literature in the fifth, eighth, and eleventh grades used the book in their classrooms, finding it valuable as a supplement to their assigned texts. A prominent educator wrote to say that he received it as a Christmas present and kept it at his bedside, reading a different selection every night; he claimed that like potato chips, “You can’t stop with just one.”

In choosing the contents, I was guided by a principle that Robert Frost described in the introduction to his collected poetry, speaking of a poem: “Read it a hundred times; it will forever keep its freshness as a petal keeps its fragrance. It can never lose its sense of a meaning that once unfolded by surprise as it went.” I looked for entries that almost everyone once seemed to know or still does know, words that have resonated in the national consciousness, words that have a timeless quality for the listener and reader. I

looked for entries that in their time were widely discussed, that possess literary quality even now, and that deserve to be remembered by future generations.

There is one large difference between this edition and the first edition of *The American Reader*, which was published in 1991. The first edition included a selection of several pieces written after 1970. At the time, I said that I was taking a chance on recent works, trying to identify those that “speak to the age of which they are part.” In this revised edition, I am exercising my prerogative as editor and eliminating that section. In effect, I am acknowledging that I have not—after extensive searching—found poems, essays, speeches, or songs written during the past thirty years that both match the literary quality of the earlier selections and resonate in the national consciousness as they do. It seems to me—and I may be wrong—that cultural authenticity is harder to find than in the past. We tend now to turn to social scientists rather than poets and songwriters to express and understand our concerns, and they tend not to write in literary style.

Songs were once shared by children, parents, grandparents, and entire communities; popular songs like George M. Cohan’s “Over There,” Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America,” and Woody Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your Land” were sung by young and old alike, played often on the radio, and remained as part of our national memory for many years. They don’t write them like that anymore. The popular songs of recent years have short lives; they were written mainly for teenagers, with lyrics that are neither important nor memorable. Indeed, the lyrics of some popular music appear to be intended to offend or degrade some group of people. Rather than bringing communities together, the popular music of our time seems calculated to segment people by age and race.

The poetry of recent years is not as alienating as popular music but I have found no entry that can justly stand alongside the writings of John Greenleaf Whittier, Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes, and Robert Frost. American schools used to put great

emphasis on recitations, and students memorized the poems they loved best. Certainly millions of young Americans memorized “‘Shoot, if you must, this old gray head / But spare your country’s flag,’ she said,” from “Barbara Frietchie.” Or declaimed with pride the sonorous lines from Emma Lazarus’s “The New Colossus” that are emblazoned on the Statue of Liberty: “Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free, / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. / Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, / I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” And was there a boy or girl who did not know “. . . there is no joy in Mudville; / Mighty Casey has struck out”? Perhaps in another generation, another editor will find poetry that has the same popular appeal, the same emotional connection with readers. But at the present time, I am unable to identify any contemporary poems that are known and loved by large numbers of ordinary Americans.

With few exceptions, the political speeches of the recent past seem to me to be singularly devoid of lasting significance. There have been no public declarations that approach the dignified cadences of Abraham Lincoln or Frederick Douglass; there have been no individual statements on public policy that attain the moral integrity of Learned Hand on “The Spirit of Liberty” or Margaret Chase Smith disassociating herself from the depredations of Senator Joseph McCarthy. Our presidents in the closing decades of the twentieth century were known more for their slogans, sound “bites,” and off-the-cuff remarks than for the kinds of speeches that once spoke directly to the American public’s hopes and concerns and resonated in its collective memory.

In this age of instantaneous mass communications, words do not seem to be as precious as they once were. We seem to be overwhelmed by information and by a superfluity of words without meaning. Songs have become commodities, written for quick sale and turnover, not as vehicles for communal expression, inspiration and amusement. Politicians seldom speak without reference to focus groups or pollsters to learn what people want to hear; fearful of making a mistake, they use talking points or a text pre-

pared by consultants and writers. Pollsters tell us what we think before we have had a chance to make up our minds; marketing experts divine what we want before we have lost interest in what we already have. This is an age of disposable ideas, of politics-as-entertainment, of a popular culture that celebrates violence and sensationalism and that is made for the instant, not for the ages. In an age like this, it is daunting to find entries for a book whose purpose is to identify classic speeches, poems, arguments and songs, the words that became an enduring part of American culture and that deserve to be recalled, even recited out loud.

As choices were made first in 1990 and then again in 2000, the guiding principle for selection of entries was suggested by these questions: Which short pieces should we seek to remember as a nation? What should a reader look for at this time in our nation's history? Who should be added to the pantheon of oft-heard American voices? The voices that I added expanded the pantheon to include men and women, and people of different backgrounds. In my search, I discovered speakers and writers who should be read and heard because of their eloquence and because of the light that they shine on the past and present. I make no claim that these are the only pieces that should be remembered. I could easily have produced several volumes, rather than only one. The number of impassioned speeches, moving poems, eloquent essays, and wonderful songs in the American past is far greater than any one volume could encompass. And of course there are many wonderful literary selections that are not included because they were not written by native or transplanted Americans (like the song "Amazing Grace" and certain well-loved poems). Readers who want more can easily find more in the library, in other anthologies, and in original collections of an author's complete work. The purpose here is not to exclude, but to compile in one convenient place the pieces that have moved Americans and deserve to be remembered and reread.

This collection does not represent every memorable event in American history; some events did not inspire either great oratory

or memorable songs. Nor does it represent every major voice; I did not include, for example, those who preached disunion or hatred toward others.

In shaping this collection, I was mindful of the best school readers of the nineteenth century, like the *McGuffey's Readers* and the *Sanders' Readers*. Compiled as anthologies, they were the kind of book that families saved and savored. In a similar spirit, this collection offers its readers a respite from the bland and the banal. It contains ample doses of principled rhetoric, angry demands, joyous verse, and uplifting sentiment. Although the longer pieces had to be condensed, the words belong to the original speaker. They have not been homogenized or pasteurized for contemporary consumption.

Almost every piece can be read aloud with pleasure. Most of them, at least those written before the mid-twentieth century, were written to be declaimed. Poems and songs, of course, are meant to be recited or sung aloud, not just read silently. Poetry works best when it is spoken and heard. Young people don't read much poetry today; they seldom hear it read out loud or recite it themselves. Most of the poems that they read in school lack the pounding rhythm and the decided rhyme that causes a poem to become a permanent tenant in one's brain.

Almost no one memorizes anything anymore; our nation's pedagogical leaders long ago decided that this was an abomination and an infringement on the rights of childhood. Yet, of course, there are many who do memorize commercial jingles or baseball statistics or the comparative prices of consumer goods. But there is something wonderful about having a poem or a song or the rhetorical crest of a grand speech available for instant recall. When beautiful speeches and poems are memorized, they remain with you as a lifelong resource. Words that are learned "by heart" become one's personal treasure, available when needed. In some curious way, they are committed to "memory" but stored lovingly in the "heart." Certain things are a pleasure to memorize, a pleasure that one may own and enjoy forever. (How well I recall

tramping around the perimeter of Lake Waban in Wellesley, Massachusetts, reciting the haunting words of Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Spring and Fall to a Young Child," a poem not included here because it is not of American origin.)

It has become commonplace to say that books and the other elements of a verbal culture are passé now that advanced technology defines our means of communications. Of course, this is fairly ridiculous because even advanced telecommunications requires letters and words to transmit messages and ideas. It is most certainly convenient to communicate electronically with friends and businesses, but there is no evidence that icons will replace written language. If anything, knowledge of language and the need for accuracy of expression have become even more important than ever.

Some think that reading, too, is obsolete, but book sales seem to be higher than ever, and the newest technologies still depend on reading, writing, and thinking with verbal symbols. Will books survive? I surely hope so, as they are far more pleasant and user-friendly than a blinking screen.

It is true that some people—and what appears to be growing numbers of young people, schooled to appreciate only what is contemporary—live entirely in the present, uninterested in and oblivious to anything that happened before today, indifferent to any words except those they hear in movies, videos, the radio, and television.

But reading is not about to disappear. Despite the ease and immediacy of the electronic media, written language will continue to be indispensable for intelligent communication. Those who cannot use it will find themselves manipulated and directed by those who can. Those who only listen and watch will be at the mercy of those who read, those who write scripts, program computers, interpret news, and extract meaning from the past. No matter how powerful and omnipresent the technology of the future, we will still rely on the power of words and ideas. Those who command them will be enabled to affect the world. Those

who cannot will find themselves excluded not only from jobs and opportunities, but from all those experiences that allow us to reflect on the significance of our lives.

The words here collected reveal an integral part of the dynamic of American life. In a democratic society, the power of persuasion is a necessary ingredient of social change, but it is also a necessary ingredient of the traditions by which we live. As our society has evolved, articulate men and women have emerged to advocate, argue, debate, demand, laugh, and celebrate. Much of what they said and did has relevance for partisans of democratic ideas throughout the world. As we get to know the history of our society and hear the voices of those who created our energetic, complex, pluralistic, and humane culture, we will better understand ourselves and our times.

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