

CZECH READERS AND THEIR READING HABITS IN 2007

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Trávníček, J. *Čteme? Obyvatelé České republiky a jejich vztah ke knize*. Brno: Host, 2008, 208 stran. ISBN 978-80-7294-270-1 (Host. Brno), ISBN 978-80-7050-554-0 (NK ČR. Praha)

Following several recent Czech and international surveys of Czech pupils' reading habits, the first representative survey focused on readers above 15 years of age took place in 2007. The survey was a joint project of the Institute for Czech Literature, the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic and the Czech National Library. The results of the projects have been put together and summarised by the literary scientist and university teacher Jiří Trávníček in the book *Čteme? Obyvatelé České republiky a jejich vztah ke knize* (Do We Read? Czech Citizens and Their Attitude to Books).

The survey focused on several basic issues, predominantly on the attitude of Czech readers to books and the factors influencing their "reading behaviour", i.e. reading, buying books and visits to public libraries. The survey also dealt with social and demographic factors influencing the attitude of Czech readers, and the dependence of reading on these variables (i.e. sex, age, education, population density and income). Taking into account the methodology of relevant surveys from abroad and experience from implemented local research, the survey focused on social and cultural trace, i.e. the signs left by reading and reading related activities allowing us to judge what and how much is read, as well as, what is borrowed and bought.

The total number of 1551 respondents participating in the project were divided into three groups. After further explanation and interpretation of statistical data, the readers were assessed according to social and historical experiences influencing their reading culture.

The author notes that the youngest generation of readers (15-35) developed its attitude toward books in entirely different circumstances. Their path to books has not been obstructed by ideological barriers as it was the case of the middle and older generations of readers; however at the same time, they have the least number of guidelines and value criteria helping them to recognize a good book.

J. Trávníček suggests that the school system has its share of responsibility for this situation. Not only has the system been losing its authority by giving up the strictly defined common educational aims which included compulsory reading, but also, by its inability to react in a sufficient degree to the reading interests of pupils. Although the overall attitude of the youngest generation to reading according to J. Trávníček exceeds the expectations of their parents and grandparents, it is very unsettling to find that 14 % of the Czechs from 15–24 years of age do not read a single book per year. When the oldest and youngest generation of readers are compared it becomes evident that books and reading have lost their status. The attitude of the young generation is more pragmatic. In contrast to the oldest generation, the young readers perceive the author as their partner or as somebody who competes for their leisure time, and they are very well aware of this.

The survey confirms an exceptionally close relation between reading and education and the fact that education plays a key role in differentiating between readers and non-readers – there are three times the number of non-readers among people without completed graduation examinations (29 %). Exceptionally interesting are the reasons the respondents gave for the absence of reading – 21 % said a lack of time, 17 % of non-readers said that reading is a boring activity, 13 % obtained necessary information from news media and 5 % of non-readers did not know what to read.

The survey shows as well, that 21 % of non-readers do not enjoy reading. This clearly indicates that the contemporary school has not yet been able to fulfil the goals of the education of readers declared in the curricula documents.

The survey unequivocally proves the instrumental role that family plays in reading habits. 49 % of the respondents answered that their home environment with people reading influenced them the most. J. Trávníček sums up that reading in the family represents a basic social and cultural pattern which, when well established, develops in further life cycle phases but is difficult to initiate if not developed.

The commentary on the school influence concludes that school can develop the social and cultural pattern inherited from the family, but it will hardly instil it if it has not been set. This is confirmed by another finding that only 12 % of readers have been influenced by an inspirational teacher.

Of special interest are the answers volunteered by the respondents beyond the set questions. They described the circumstances creating their barriers to books (namely cost, organisation of public libraries, health, a lack of time),

their specific reading interests or their general lack of interest in reading. Their answers show that weak reader's reading habits are poor because there is no personal (internal) motivation. In other words, a weak reader reads because he is forced to (for professional or study reasons) and a strong reader reads because he wants to. External reasons like study or work may bind them to books, but when the internal reasons are absent, reading does not develop; and when external reasons have ceased to exist, reading often ebbs away.

The findings confirming motivation as an important presupposition of reading development should be of foremost importance in all considerations concerning optimal school education in reading.

The individual chapters clarifying the selected methodology and terminology, the commentaries on the data and their interpretation within a wider context provide a logically structured scientific text linking literary and scientific, as well as, sociological and librarian viewpoints. The book reads very well, transforming the report on the survey into a unique, exceptionally absorbing almost adventure literature about the state of Czech literacy and book culture.

This publication is designed for all those who, for professional or private reasons, are interested in reading and the culture of reading in Czech society. However, it should be analysed in detail by teachers and the students of the teaching profession for a number of inspirational stimuli concerning the education of readers at primary school.

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