

# Review Articles

## Research in Readability

*Readability: An Appraisal of Research and Application.* By Jeanne S. Chall. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University, 1958. xiv, 202p. \$4.00, cloth; \$3.00, paper. (Ohio State University Studies, Bureau of Educational Research Monographs, Number 34.)

Those who could profit most from a reading of this monograph are undoubtedly those least likely to expend the effort. Mrs. Chall's careful and exhaustive study of research on readability is a much-needed corrective for those who take the mechanical application of the formulas as the panacea for all reading ills for all kinds of materials at all reading levels. The trouble with the book for such an audience is that reading it is hard work (apparently no readability formulas were applied here), and it takes away the simplified, mechanical solution on which they like to rely.

Those who resist readability formulas in the first place, or who think the whole business is better handled by the application of common sense to both writing and evaluating books will not see the value of the Chall study; it will probably seem to them like a mountainous labor for such mouse-size results. For, with the elaborate caution of the true social scientist, Mrs. Chall comes—tentatively, and pending further investigation—to such conclusions as this:

Effects of either mechanical or more creative simplification depend upon the difficulty of the original and revised versions in relation to the ability of the subject being tested.

*First*, when the original version is beyond the reading ability of the subject, and changes bring the material within their ability, the possibility of finding positive results is greater.

*Second*, when both the original and simplified versions are too difficult for the readers or are already within their comprehension, the effects of changes tend to be smaller.

In the author's place I think I would have tossed caution to the winds and stated that

this conclusion does seem highly probable.

Most librarians will probably not be sufficiently interested in methodological problems to follow Mrs. Chall's detailed appraisal. The book's value for them, doubtless, will lie mainly in its exhaustive classified bibliography of readability studies, and in the support it gives to the librarian's tendency to trust his own judgment more than the application of mathematical formulas. "The measurement of readability has lagged behind judgment . . . on sources of [reading] difficulty," Mrs. Chall admits, and she confesses that although the authors of readability formulas have devised their techniques for the use of teachers, "it is doubtful whether teachers" [and she might have added librarians] "have made much direct use of the formulas. . . ." This is hardly a cause for wonder, for it appears that most of the validation studies have tested a formula by checking its estimates of reading difficulty against the judgment of librarians and teachers! If the formula is no better than a subjective judgment—or if, indeed, it is good only to the extent that it parallels such a subjective judgment—it would be foolish indeed for the teacher or librarian to spend his time ("The samples based on every tenth page took an average of eight hours") applying the formulas.

It is quite clear from Mrs. Chall's study that the literature-by-slide-rule abuses in the field of readability have stemmed from the misuse of the formulas rather than from the formulas themselves. The formula makers have been more than cautious, and have worked continually at testing and re-testing for weaknesses, shortcomings, and limitations. The better researchers in this field have continually attacked the unimaginative and mechanical application of the word list or the formulas. When Edgar Dale took to writing simplified texts for the Army Literacy Program, for example, "readability principles, rather than readability formulas as such, were used as a guide." This would be a useful model for any of us to follow, when we write as when we evaluate the writings of others.

Mrs. Chall's objectivity—in appraising the comparative strengths and weaknesses of the several formulas, and in frankly assessing the limitations that must be placed on use of the findings concerning readability—is particularly praiseworthy when one realizes that she and Edgar Dale are the devisers of one of the leading readability formulas now in use. As an objective lesson to the young researcher, this monograph serves a most important peripheral purpose in its demonstration of the reservations the careful scientist places on his own generalizations, and of the zeal for greater accuracy and validity with which he constantly tests his findings. The most valuable criticisms of readability study have come from the readability researchers themselves, who have subjected their work to the sharpest scrutiny in their search for the most accurate and reliable methodology. Any library school which boasts a program of research should require the reading of this monograph as an object lesson in the rigorous self-appraisal that characterizes scientific method.—*Lester Asheim, University of Chicago, Graduate Library School.*

## An Unhurried View?

*An Unhurried View of Erotica.* By Ralph Ginzburg, with an introduction by Theodor Reik and preface by George Jean Nathan. New York: The Helmsman Press, 1958. 128p. \$6.50.

Few people have the courage to admit in print to a knowledge of erotica. When such an individual does appear, and when his publication professes to evaluate and weave "choice samples of English erotic literature into an interpretive and explanatory text" (p. 14), librarians who are harassed by the difficulties of dealing sanely with the vexed question of "open shelf vs. closed shelf" in the matter of purple books must need sit up and take notice. Alas, in this instance as in so many previous ones, they will find no help.

With this review in mind I have studied the work in question hopefully and meticulously, but at the end I am forced to conclude that I can find no adequate excuse

for its existence. Its thesis is unsupported by exceptional information, impressive logic, or even novelty of opinion. Ralph Ginzburg's *Unhurried View of Erotica* flits fitfully and nervously from one faded blossom to the next. The "choice samples" are mainly from such obvious sources as Ovid's *Art of Love* in an unidentified translation but presumably that by J. Lewis May; Sedley's more mincing poetry; Defoe's *Moll Flanders*; Cleland's *Fanny Hill*; and the like. Many books one would like to see discussed are not mentioned. Only the most cursory attention is paid to the compulsion that has driven many ordinarily sober-sided authors to produce facetiae (Kipling, John Donne, William Blake, to mention only the first few to come to mind). The case (such as it is) for freer circulation and less stringent censorship of what the author calls "erotica" presents the same tired old arguments that have been stated far more convincingly by others.

Ginzburg's opus is dedicated "To the further liberation [24 pt.] / of man's healthier [36 pt.] / instincts" [48 pt., letter-spaced]. There is an introduction by a psychologist, Dr. Theodor Reik, who comments that "it is certainly unnecessary in this age of psychoanalysis to state that this book has great scientific value" (p. 8), and goes on to defend on psychoanalytic grounds the author's confused inclusion of "the scatological interest in the area of erotica" (pp. 9-10). The late George Jean Nathan adds in a short preface that the book "will go a long way to analyze and purify censorship of its muddy stink"—a promise which the text makes no discernible effort to fulfill.

What very definitely *has* happened, though, which Dr. Reik apparently feels must be defended, is that Mr. Ginzburg's "unhurried view" (which, after allowing for lists, quotations, blank pages, and the like, boils down to hardly more than fifty pages of widely leaved comment) wilfully expands a word that has a very precise meaning to include every connotation that is contained in the term "dirty story." He takes, he says, the definition of erotic as given in *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*—"Of, relating to, or treating of sexual love" (p. 20). "This is, admittedly," he apolo-