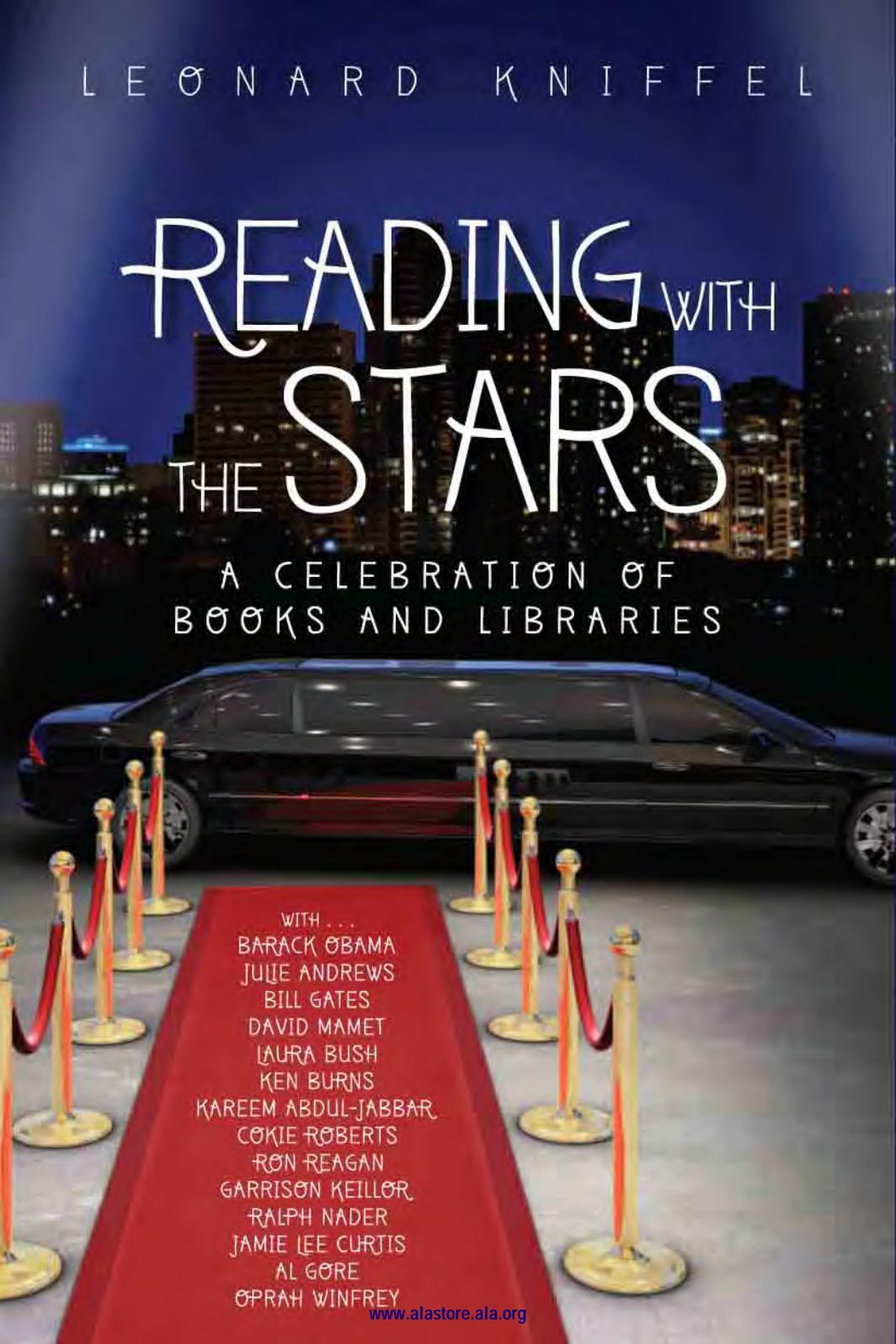


LEONARD KNIFFEL

READING WITH THE STARS

A CELEBRATION OF
BOOKS AND LIBRARIES



WITH . . .
BARACK OBAMA
JULIE ANDREWS
BILL GATES
DAVID MAMET
LAURA BUSH
KEN BURNS
KAREEM ABDUL-JABBAR
COKIE ROBERTS
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JAMIE LEE CURTIS
AL GORE
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“My Alma Mater,” by David Mamet

“A Renaissance in Washington,” by Ralph Nader

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INTRODUCTION

Celebrities have been loving libraries for a very long time, posing for the American Library Association’s ubiquitous READ posters, writing testimonials, and giving impassioned speeches about their childhood experiences in that most American of American institutions, the public library.

I remember my first close encounter with a movie star. It was in 1991 and I was a brand new associate editor at *American Libraries*. Oscar winner Glenn Close was in Chicago for the world premiere of her latest film, *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, during the ALA Annual Conference. I snapped photos and buzzed around the periphery of the crowd that surrounded her in the Hilton Hotel as she chatted with the ALA president and other bigwigs. Someone from the ALA staff asked me if I’d like to meet Close, up close. I deferred, thinking to myself, “What in the world would I say to a movie star?”

It took me almost 10 years to get over that attitude and to understand that if movie stars and business moguls, sports stars and stars of the political stage, wanted to volunteer their time to make public service announcements, pose for READ posters, or deliver keynote addresses for ALA, it had little to do with me and much to do with what I represented: the libraries of the United States of America.

There is much to love about celebrities who use their notoriety to promote reading. Of course they want to sell their books, but it's more than that. Looking back on the first decade of the 21st century, it is validating to realize that celebrities—from movie stars to presidents—have chosen to invest their valuable time in the cause of literacy and lifelong learning.

Over the past 10 years, many celebrities have spoken out in support of reading and many agreed to interviews with *American Libraries*. Some gave generously of their time and were gracious and warm; others were more officious and distant. But all were sincere in their willingness to speak out for libraries and the important role they play in the vitality of our nation's educational and cultural future. Now, more than ever, we need their voices, on the record and echoing to all who doubt.

Vartan Gregorian, the great champion of libraries and president of Carnegie Corporation of New York, said at the 2009 I Love My Librarian awards ceremony at the New York Times that librarians must never underestimate their power, the power to offer the rich and famous of today something no one else can: immortality. If in a hundred years, anyone remembers the celebrities in this volume, it will be because librarians preserved the record of their lives, their contribution, and their art. ★



BARACK OBAMA

44th president of the United States of America



1

BOUND TO THE WORD

“Our prosperity as a nation is directly correlated to our literacy.”

Barack Obama was a U.S. senator from Illinois when he keynoted the American Library Association’s annual conference in Chicago in 2005. He had already exploded onto the American political stage with a stirring speech at the Democratic National Convention the year before and was enjoying growing popularity as an idealist and a unifier. I wish I could say I knew the minute I met him that he had “President of the United States” written all over him. Charismatic and articulate as he was, I might have, had I the confidence that my country was ready to elect an African-American man to that exalted post.

I showed up in the Green Room at McCormick Place convention center and strolled up to him, introduced myself, and shoved a tape recorder in his face. He smiled and said he’d be happy to talk to me. He listened to my questions and pondered each of them for a moment, folding his arms and resting his chin on one hand.

Photo by Pete Souza, courtesy of the White House.

“Can you share your memories about what libraries meant to you as you were growing up?” I asked.

“I lived overseas for several years in Jakarta, Indonesia, when I was young,” he replied, “and having access to books—English-language books in particular—was just a huge prize. So when I came back from Indonesia, the first place I wanted to be was in a library. It just always seemed to be a magical place where, if you wanted to sit there, you could learn about everything in the world.”

I asked him to talk more about the effect libraries have had on him. To my surprise, he gave me an answer that virtually ended up crediting a librarian at the New York Public Library for launching his political career.

“People always mention libraries in terms of just being sources for reading material or research. But I probably would not be in Chicago were it not for the Manhattan public library, because I was looking for an organizing job and was having great trouble finding a job as a community organizer in New York. The Mid-Manhattan Library had these books of lists of organizations, and the librarian helped me find these lists of organizations, and I wrote to every organization. One of them wound up being an organization in Chicago that I got a job with.”

Asked to tell me something that he was not going to say in his speech at the conference, he said, “You know, I have a soft spot in my heart for librarians.” Then he quipped, “Although I’ll probably mention this in my speech, I have been known to misbehave in libraries.”

“What’s your main message to librarians?” I asked.

He tilted his head thoughtfully and replied, “That our prosperity as a nation is directly correlated to our literacy.”

It was then time for his speech and I joined the crowd in the auditorium where, along with some 5,000 others who heard him talk that day, I was completely blown away. His talk wasn’t some

canned puffery with “library” occasionally thrown in for relevance. This speech was anything but boilerplate, and it demonstrated an understanding of the sacred mission of the profession. It earned Obama a standing ovation.

The next day, I got on the phone with Obama’s people and asked if I could adapt the speech into a cover story for *American Libraries*. Calling librarians guardians of truth and knowledge as well as champions of privacy, literacy, independent thinking, and most of all reading, here are the president’s own words, as they appeared in the August 2005 issue.



IF YOU OPEN UP SCRIPTURE, the Gospel according to John, it starts: “In the beginning was the Word.” Although this has a very particular meaning in Scripture, more broadly what it speaks to is the critical importance of language, of writing, of reading, of communication, of books as a means of transmitting culture and binding us together as a people.

More than a building that houses books and data, the library represents a window to a larger world, the place where we’ve always come to discover big ideas and profound concepts that help move the American story forward and the human story forward. That’s the reason why, since ancient antiquity, whenever those who seek power would want to control the human spirit, they have gone after libraries and books. Whether it’s the ransacking of the great library at Alexandria, controlling information during the Middle Ages, book burnings, or the imprisonment of writers in former communist bloc countries, the idea has been that if we can control the word, if we can control what people hear and what they read and what they comprehend, then we can control and imprison them, or at least imprison their minds.

That's worth pondering at a time when truth and science are constantly being challenged by political agendas and ideologies, at a time when language is used not to illuminate but, rather, to obfuscate, at a time when there are those who would disallow the teaching of evolution in our schools, where fake science is used to beat back attempts to curb global warming or fund life-saving research.

At a time when book banning is back in vogue, libraries remind us that truth isn't about who yells the loudest, but who has the right information.

We are a religious people, Americans are, as am I. But one of the innovations, the genius of America, is recognizing that our faith is not in contradiction with fact and that our liberty depends upon our ability to access the truth.

That's what libraries are about. At the moment that we persuade a child, any child, to cross that threshold, that magic threshold into a library, we change their lives forever, for the better. It's an enormous force for good.

I remember at different junctures in my life feeling lost, feeling adrift, and feeling that somehow walking into a library and seeing those books, seeing human knowledge collected in that fashion, accessible, ready for me, would always lift my spirits. So I'm grateful to be able to acknowledge the importance of librarians and the work that you do. I want to work with you to ensure that libraries continue to be sanctuaries of learning, where we are free to read and consider what we please without the fear

At a time when book banning is back in vogue, libraries remind us that truth isn't about who yells the loudest, but who has the right information. — BARACK OBAMA

that Big Brother may be peering over our shoulders to find out what we're up to.

Some of you may have heard that I gave a speech last summer at the Democratic convention. [Cheering erupted at this point.] It made some news here and there. For some reason, one of the lines people seem to remember has to do with librarians, when I said, "We don't like federal agents poking around our libraries in the red states, or the blue states for that matter."

What some people may not remember is that for years, librarians have been on the front lines of this fight for our privacy and our freedom. There have always been dark times in our history where America has strayed from our best ideas. The question has always been: Who will be there to stand up against those forces? One of the groups that has consistently stood up has been librarians. When political groups tried to censor great works of literature, you were the ones who put *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Catcher in the Rye* back on the shelves, making sure that our access to free thought and free information was protected. Ever since we've had to worry about our own government looking over our shoulders in that library, you've been there to stand up and speak out on our privacy issues. You're full-time defenders of the most fundamental liberty that we possess. For that, you deserve our gratitude.

But you also deserve our protection. That's why I've been working with Republicans and Democrats to make sure that we have a Patriot Act that helps us track down terrorists without trampling on our civil liberties. This is an issue that Washington always tries to make into an either-or proposition. Either we protect our people from terror or we protect our most cherished principles. But I don't believe in either-or. I believe in both ends. I think we can do both. I think when we pose the choice as either-or, it is asking too little of us and it assumes too little about America. I believe we can harness new technologies and a

new toughness to find terrorists before they strike, while still protecting the very freedoms we're fighting for in the first place.

I know that some librarians have been subject to FBI or other law enforcement orders asking for reading records. I hope we can pass a provision just like the one that the House of Representatives passed overwhelmingly that would require federal agents to get these kinds of search warrants from a real judge in a real court just like everyone else does.

In the Senate, the bipartisan bill that we're working on, known as the SAFE Act, will prevent the federal government from freely rifling through e-mails and library records without obtaining such a warrant. Giving law enforcement the tools they need to investigate suspicious activity is one thing, but doing it without the approval of our judicial system seriously jeopardizes the rights of all Americans and the ideals Americans stand for. We're not going to stand for it. We need to roll that provision back.

In addition to the line about federal agents poking around in our libraries, there was another line in my speech that got a lot of attention, and it's a line that I'd like to amplify this afternoon. At one point in the speech, I mentioned that the people I've met all across Illinois know that government can't solve all their problems. And I mentioned that if you go into the inner city of Chicago, parents will tell you that parents have to parent. Children can't achieve unless they raise their expectations and turn off the television sets and eradicate the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white.

To some, that was perceived as speaking solely to the black community. I'm here to suggest that I was speaking to a basic principle, a worry, a challenge, a concern that applies to all of America. Because I believe that if we want to give our children the best possible chance in life, if we want to open the doors of opportunity while they're young and teach them the skills they'll need to succeed later on, then one of our greater responsibilities as citizens, as

educators, and as parents is to ensure that every American child can read and read well. That's because literacy is the most basic currency of the knowledge economy that we're living in today.

Only a few generations ago it was possible to enter into the workforce with a positive attitude, a strong back, willing to work. And it didn't matter if you were a high school dropout, you could go into that factory or work on a farm and still hope to find a job that would allow you to pay the bills and raise a family.

That economy is long gone. And it's not coming back. As revolutions in technology and communications began breaking down barriers between countries and connecting people all over the world, new jobs and industries that require more skill and knowledge have come to dominate the economy.

Whether it's software design or computer engineering or financial analysis, corporations can locate these jobs anywhere in the world, anywhere that there's an internet connection. As countries like China and India continue to modernize their economies and educate their children longer and better, the competition American workers face will grow more intense, the necessary skills more demanding. These new jobs are not simply about working hard, they're about what you know and how fast you can learn what you don't know. They require innovative thinking, detailed comprehension, and superior communication.

But before our children can even walk into an interview for one of these jobs, before they can even fill out an application or earn the required college degree, they have to be able to pick up a book and read it and understand it. Reading is the gateway skill that makes all other learning possible, from complex word problems and the meaning of our history to scientific discovery and technological proficiency. And by the way, it's what's required to make us true citizens.

In a knowledge economy where this kind of skill is necessary for survival, how can we send our children out into the world if

they're only reading at a 4th-grade level? How can we do it? I don't know. But we do. Day after day, year after year. Right now, one out of every five adults in the United States cannot read a simple story to a child. During the last 20 years or so, over 10 million Americans reached the 12th grade without having learned to read at a basic level. These literacy problems start well before high school. In 2000, only 32% of all 4th-graders tested as reading-proficient.

The story gets worse when you take race and income into consideration. Children from low-income families score 27 points below the average reading level while students from wealthy families score 15 points above the average. While only one in 12 white 17-year-olds has the ability to pick up the newspaper and understand the science section, for Hispanics, the number drops to one in 50; for African Americans, it's one in 100.

In this new economy, teaching our kids just enough so that they can get through *Dick and Jane* is not going to cut it. Over the next 10 years, the average literacy required for all American occupations is projected to rise by 14%.

It's not enough just to recognize the words on the page anymore. The kind of literacy necessary for the 21st century requires detailed understanding and complex comprehension. And, yet, every year we pass more children through schools or watch as more drop out. These are kids who will pore through the help-wanted section and cross off job after job that requires skills they don't have. Others will have to take that help-wanted section over to somebody sitting next to them and find the courage to ask, "Will you read this for me?"

We have to change our whole mindset as a nation. We're living in the 21st-century knowledge economy; but our schools, our homes, and our culture are still based around 20th-century and in some cases 19th-century expectations.

The government has a critical role to play in this endeavor of upgrading our children's skills. This is not the place for me to lay

out a long education-reform agenda; but I can say that it doesn't make sense if we have a school system designed for agrarian America and its transition into the industrial age, where we have schools in Chicago that let high school students out at 1:30 because there's not enough money to keep them there any longer, where teachers continue to be underpaid, where we are not restructuring these schools and financing them sufficiently to make sure that our children are going to be able to compete in this global economy.

There is a lot of work to do on the part of government to make sure that we have a first-class educational system, but government alone is not going to solve the problem. If we are going to start setting high standards and inspirational examples for our children to follow, then all of us have to be engaged.

There is plenty that needs to be done to improve our schools and reform education, but this is not an issue in which we can just look to some experts in Washington to solve the problem. We're going to have to start at home. We're going to have to start with parents. And we're going to have to start in libraries. We know that children who start kindergarten with awareness of language and basic letter sounds become better readers and face fewer challenges in the years ahead. We know the more reading material kids are exposed to at home, the better they score with

READ MORE

Recommended by BARACK OBAMA

- ★ *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, by Mark Twain
- ★ *The Catcher in the Rye*, by J. D. Salinger
- ★ *Goodnight Moon*, by Margaret Wise Brown and Clement Hurd



reading tests throughout their lives. So we have to make investments in family-literacy programs and early-childhood education so that kids aren't left behind and are not already behind the day they arrive at school.

We have to get books into our children's hands early and often. I know this is easier said than done, oftentimes. Parents today still have the toughest job in the world. And no one ever thanks parents for doing it. Not even your kids. Maybe especially your kids, as I'm learning.

Most of you are working longer and harder than ever, juggling job and family responsibilities, trying to be everywhere at once. When you're at home, you might try to get your kids to read, but you're competing with other by-products of the technology revolution, TVs and DVDs and video games, things they have to have in every room of the house. Children 8 to 18 spend three hours a day watching television; they spend 43 minutes a day reading.

Our kids aren't just seeing these temptations at home, they're seeing them everywhere, whether it's their friend's house or the people they see on television or a general culture that glorifies anti-intellectualism. . . . That message trickles down to our kids. It's too easy for children to put down a book and turn their attention elsewhere. And it's too easy for the rest of us to make excuses for it, pretending if we put a baby in front of a DVD that's "educational," then we're doing our jobs. If we let a 12-year-old skip reading as long as he's playing a "wholesome" video game, then we're doing okay. That as long as he's watching PBS at night instead of having a good conversation about a book with his parents, that somehow we're doing our job.

We know that's not what our children need. We know that's not what's best for them. And so as parents, we have to find the time and the energy to step in and help our children love reading. We can read to them, talk to them about what they're read-

ing, and make time for this by turning off the television set ourselves.

Libraries are a critical tool to help parents do this. Knowing the constraints that parents face from a busy schedule and TV culture, we have to think outside the box, to dream big, like we always have in America, about how we're going to get books into the hands of our children.

Right now, children come home from their first doctor's appointment with an extra bottle of formula. They should come home with their first library card or their first copy of *Goodnight Moon*. I have memorized *Goodnight Moon*, by the way: "In the great green room there was a telephone . . ." I love that book.

It should be as easy to get a book as it is to rent a DVD or pick up McDonald's. What if instead of a toy in every Happy Meal there was a book?

Libraries have a special role to play in our knowledge economy. Your institutions have been and should be a place where parents and children come to read together and learn together. We should take our kids there more.

We should make sure our politicians aren't closing libraries down because they had to spend a few extra bucks on tax cuts for folks who don't need them and weren't even asking for them.

Each of you has a role to play. You can keep on getting more children to walk through your doors by building on the ideas

Right now, children come home from their first doctor's appointment with an extra bottle of formula. They should come home with their first library card or their first copy of *Goodnight Moon*. — BARACK OBAMA



that so many of you are already pursuing: book clubs and contests, homework help, and advertising your services throughout the community.

In the years ahead, this is our challenge, and this has to be our responsibility. As a librarian or a parent, every one of you can probably remember the look on a child's face after finishing their first book.

During the campaign last year, I was asked by a reporter from the *Chicago Sun-Times* if she could interview me about the nature of my religious faith. It was an interesting proposition. I sat down with the reporter, who asked me some very pointed questions about the nature of my faith, how it had evolved. Then the reporter asked me a surprising question. She asked me, "Do you believe in heaven? And what's your conception of it?"

I told her, I don't presume to know what lies beyond, but I do know that when I sit down with my 6-year-old and my 3-year-old at night and I'm reading a book to them and then I tuck them in to go to sleep, that's a little piece of heaven that I hang on to.

That was about a year ago, and what's interesting now is watching my 6-soon-to-be-7-year-old reading on her own now. My 4-year-old will still sit in my lap, but my 7-year-old, she lies on the table and on her own. She's got the book in front of her. She's kind of face down, propped up. And I say, "Do you want

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me to read to you?” “No, Daddy, I’m all right,” she says, and there’s a little heartbreak that takes place there.

Yet, when I watch her, I feel such joy because I know that in each of those books she’s picking up, her potential will be fulfilled. That’s not unique to me. It’s true of all of us who are parents. There’s nothing we want more than to nurture that sense of wonder in our children. To make all those possibilities and all those opportunities real for our children, to have the ability to answer the question: “What can I be when I grow up?” with the answer “Anything I want. Anything I can dream of.”

It’s a hope that’s old as the American story itself. From the moment the first immigrants arrived on these shores, generations of parents worked hard and sacrificed whatever was necessary so that their children could not just have the same chances they had, but could have the chances they never had. Because while we can never assure that our children will be rich or successful, while we can never be positive that they will do better than their parents, America is about making it possible to give them the chance, to give every child the ability to try. Education is the foundation of this opportunity.

The most basic building block that holds that foundation together is the Word. “In the beginning was the Word.”

At the dawn of the 21st century, where knowledge is literally power, where it unlocks the gates of opportunity and success, we all have responsibilities as parents, as librarians, as educators, as politicians, and as citizens to instill in our children a love of reading so that we can give them a chance to fulfill their dreams. That’s what all of you do each and every day, and for that, I am grateful. ★

“At the dawn of the 21st century, where knowledge is literally power, where it unlocks the gates of opportunity and success, we all have responsibilities as parents, as librarians, as educators, as politicians, and as citizens to instill in our children a love of reading.”

— BARACK OBAMA



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