

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Post-it Notes and Other Aids for Careful Reading

Sanford Pinsker

I am no longer surprised when people tell me that lots of material first published in *Academic Questions* eventually finds its way into newspaper stories and opinion pieces, but I was rather thrown for a loop when I learned that the most cited article we've published so far was *not* about political correctness or academic freedom, *not* about feminist excess or the multicultural follies but, rather, about how many law students misuse the highlighter (Lawrence A. Beyer's "The Problem with Highlighters" [Summer 1990]). Apparently the reservations directed against the now ubiquitous highlighter hit home in ways that many of our other critiques did not.

Curiously enough, at virtually the same time that I first read Professor Beyer's remarks, I found myself having a much-needed cup of joe at our College Center and becoming increasingly fascinated by a very earnest student who occupied the adjacent table. A chemistry book in one hand, a highlighter in the other, he dutifully emblazoned every line on page 158 and then did the same for every sentence on page 159. When he turned the page and continued highlighting away, I was hooked. And when he failed to accentuate a paragraph on page 161, I could no keep my curiosity penned in. "I'm sorry to bother you," I began, "but I've been watching you run your highlighter across every paragraph, every sentence, every word—page after page—and I can't figure out why you've suddenly changed your MO. Is there something about this unhighlighted paragraph that sets it apart from the others you've marked?"

"Sure," the student replied, with the same put-upon tone that ten-year-olds use after they've programmed your VCR, "that stuff probably won't be on the exam, so I don't have to memorize it."

"You mean to tell me that you intend to memorize *all* the material you've highlighted?"

"Yep," he insisted confidently, but then he went on to admit that he generally has trouble as a course grinds on and the material to memorize mounts. Still, it doesn't hurt to start out highlighting like mad, and anybody who doesn't understand this (me, for instance), "just doesn't get it."

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But maybe, just maybe, I did. By definition, to *highlight* means to select matter that's important—the very opposite of what this highlighter-mad student was doing. I could have given him a stump speech about the paradox of “selecting” everything and thereby selecting *nothing*, but because I'm a firm believer in listening to what students say in the neutral turf of our College Center, I was inclined to dummy up. However, I could not resist asking one final question: “Do lots of students share your highlighting practices?” “Sure,” he replied, eyeballs rolling. I apologized once again for my intrusion, thanked him for the conversation, and left, making a mental note to buy as much highlighter company stock as the family coffer could afford. I mentioned my plans to friends suggesting that, given the extent to which highlighting pens are misused, a pure play in highlighter stock would be at least as lucrative as investing in Kodak right before graduation season. After all, graduating seniors are only a fraction of those who abuse highlighters.

As things turned out, however, I let the investment in colored markers “slide,” as my happily highlighting friend from the Student Center would probably put it. Why so? Because people kept telling me—sometimes with glee, sometimes with gloom—that the age of books is nearly over. Instead, we'll have CD-ROMs, palm-sized monitors, and a wide assortment of gadgets that will make it possible to carry the entire Library of Congress in a briefcase. I remain skeptical about many of these large technological promises, but ever since I recognized the uncertain future of the print medium, deciding whether or not to buy highlighter stock has been the least of my worries.

That's why I feel some urgency to say a few kind words about the “book” while such objects are still available in establishments called “bookstores,” and while there are still people who remember the quaint tactile sensation of “curling up with a good book.” I'm not at all sure how readers on the cutting edge will regard the electronic words flashing across their screens, or what changes in readerly skill will be required when moving the cursor replaces turning the page, but to quote a Groucho Marx character, “whatever it is, I'm against it.”

Now that I'm on public record as one of the dinosaurs who prefer life as it was, thank you very much, to life as some technocrats crack it up to be, let me pull off the slow lane of the information superhighway for a much-needed rest stop. Anyone who has ever spent time in quality bookstores knows that there is a place (usually near the cash register) where all manner of bookmarks are for sale. Indelibly impressed upon the consciousness of book-lovers of a certain age was the commandment that thou shalt neither dog-ear a page nor ever crack the spine of a bound volume. Bookmarks prevent the first sin rather nicely, and the second simply never happens, at least not in civilized surroundings.

Most books don't deserve overheated reverence, and there are many ways of demonstrating how important one thinks a particular book is. But no matter how estimable the volume, the tool that serves to mark our place in it fills

a simple need that has existed as long as pages have been gathered together. When clergymen ascend the pulpit for weekly readings from the Scripture, a bright satin strip deftly guides them to the desired quotation. Secular readers of very secular novels do not need bookmarks for quite the same purpose, but who among us has not looked about for something with which to stake out particularly juicy passages so that we may later burst into dramatic recitation of the sort that usually follows an announcement of “Getta loada *this!*”?

I must temper my passion for pagemarks with the caveat that when a strip of paper, leather, or plastic becomes so ornate as to be of value in itself and not for its function, it might be better discarded or stuck in a drawer. Bookmarks should not be pretentious. That is why an invention of recent vintage, which has revolutionized the bookmark business, has won my admiration by its unassuming efficacy. I'm talking about the Post-it Page Marker. This 15 mm x 50 mm strip gently fastens to a noteworthy passage, telling us where we were and how to make our way back. Penny pinchers will insist that they get the same result by tearing up pieces of scrap paper, and they would, more or less, be right. But for those of us who want to hop aboard one of technology's duller edges, page markers are a good place to start. Unlike most Post-it stickers and note pads, there's no room for cute sayings or other visual distractions. The page marker is no more than a marriage of old pragmatism and new fastening technology.

Serious books are read to be *reread*—as books change us, we change our minds about books. They are also meant to be heard in the special way that happens when language on the page moves through the eye and brain to the heart. Which brings me to why I'm so optimistic about the pedagogical rewards from use of the Post-it Page Markers. In the larger squabbles about what books undergraduates should read, many professors have swapped the richness of literature for a mess of sociological porridge. The result, as Andrew Delbanco reports in his recent collection, *Required Reading*, is that his normally quick Columbia graduate students fall silent when a Melville seminar turns to the matter of his style. More intimate with the likes of Derrida and Foucault than with the rhythms of the Bible or Shakespeare, they miss what is perhaps the only definition of literature that matters: right words in the right order. In this regard, Post-it Page Markers can help, even though I have long ago given up looking for easy fixes, much less panaceas, in the literature business. Furthermore, I suspect that what I'm about to share from my English 101 syllabus probably works better for undergraduates than it would for the presumably sophisticated types one meets in an Ivy League seminar:

I expect you to attend all classes and to take an active part in our discussions. To do this, you will need to come fully prepared. One way to accomplish this—and a way I strongly urge for all your class preparations—is to “pagemark” three places in the assigned readings that strike you as particularly noteworthy. I will not feel at all shy about calling on people to read the material they've chosen (be it a

single word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, or short section) as effectively as possible, and then to articulate why the passage is important in the work's larger context. You may find that notes penned in the book's margins are a good way to begin the sort of dialogue with print I have in mind.

Students soon discover that the good news in the assignment is that virtually *any* passage in a great book can be a worthy candidate for a page marker; the bad news, of course, is that one is forced to select, and worse, to justify one's choice. I've been told that the assignment is a "bitch" (read: difficult), but that it does prompt the lively class discussions that Delbanco only dreams about. That said, however, does this exercise alone turn the tin-eared into people with a richer understanding about how style works in literature as well as how it can influence their undergraduate papers? Hardly. Many more classes—and much, much more reading—is required for that. And there are also such intangibles as talent and literary inclination. But so long as serious books remain at the center of higher education, it is essential that liberally educated people read them with the attention that page markers make possible, with the selectivity that highlighters help to hone, and with the love affair (or quarrel) that a sharp #2 pencil can record.

The jury is still out about whether or not the Internet will change how students learn and how we teach. There is little question that certain web sites can serve up all the information any college student or professional scholar could possibly want, but it is equally true that much one encounters on the vaunted information highway is dubious, if not entirely trivial. In the "old days," just a few years ago, college professors learned the hard truth about "garbage in, garbage out" as they confronted snappy looking student papers with justified right margins and other attributes of razzle-dazzle technology. Undergraduate papers, however, had a nasty habit of remaining undergraduate papers—full of large, unsupported pronouncements and sentences, regardless of the subject at hand, launched with "Since the time of the Greeks, man has thought about X, and we are still thinking about X today." Surely, internet-generated papers will not be much richer, and on particularly gloomy afternoons I suspect they will be even worse.

Post-it Page Markers brighten such days considerably. I pull a tab (in this case, a pale green one) and fix it onto the top-left corner of the page in a book I'm currently reviewing or one that I'll teach in a few weeks. Since I'm following the money trail that winds through the review copy, pale green seems appropriate. Other themes call out for such colors as sun yellow or sky blue. When I've finished the book's final page, I know where to begin my reconsiderations. Granted, page markers don't think, and they certainly don't serve up literary analysis; but they do the heavy-lifting, as it were, that gets a serious reader to the spots he can be "serious" about. By contrast, books that beam themselves into palm-sized monitors have (as yet) no capacity for highlighting, marginal notations, or marking pages for future reference.

That's why a few kind words about low-technology advances such as the highlighter pen and Post-it Page Marker are appropriate. Many of us learned to read, and then tried to teach others how to become engaged readers by focusing sharply on a writer's words. That effort continues, despite the discouraging evidence that many English professors can get through a three-hour Hardy seminar without ever opening up *Jude the Obscure* and close-reading a single passage. For such people I have little hope that the Post-it Page Marker—or anything else for that matter—will help. But for the vast majority of literature professors out to do a meaningful job in the trenches, it is time to rally around the book.

In my most fervent dream, literature professors by the hundreds file into a football stadium lugging along their favorite "texts"—each one highlighted, underlined, and thick with their marginal commentary. It won't be long before such people discover how wide is the spectrum of taste and that everybody doesn't think the same thoughts. What follows (as I imagine the noisy proceedings) will be passionate arguments of the good sort, full of specific evidence and discussions about what ought to matter when we make literary judgments. I realize that many professors wouldn't want to be caught dead in my dream, but also suspect that many others would find it much more exciting than any panel sponsored by the Modern Language Association in the last decade. Those are the same people who probably have laid in a goodly supply of sharpened pencils, highlighting pens, and even page markers—Post-it or otherwise. May their band increase, as a poetic character once declared, because only then can the tribe of serious (rather than solemn) undergraduate readers also grow enough to keep the book business in business.

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