



THOMAS ROTT PHOTO

Features Editor Erick Bengel.

SCRATCHPAD

The quest for quiet spaces

By **ERICK BENDEL**
COAST WEEKEND

Over Thanksgiving weekend, while staying at the Sylvia

Beach Hotel in Newport, I came upon a precious rare sight: a roomful of strangers silently reading.

In the warmly lit, amply furnished top-floor reading area, a young girl stretched herself across a sofa, and read. Couples leaned against each other, sipped tea and hot spiced wine, and read. Finally, my partner and I, after surveying this sweet scene, took our places, dug out our books, and read.

No cell phones in use. No inane chatter. No pressure to entertain anyone but ourselves. Just the pages before us, pictures of famous authors bearing witness, and the rain beyond the darkened windows. This was quality time.

We need more public places where people can gather to pursue solitary activities.

Libraries can meet this need, especially when they allow coffee, stay open late-ish, aren't fully open-concept and boast quiet reading rooms where you don't get caught in the crosstalk of unselfconscious patrons.

Cafes can do this as well. A personal problem, however: When I read, I hear a voice in my head reading to me. This means I prefer absolutely no music in my surroundings. Same deal when I write or edit. To work with words — to process information and

evaluate a piece of writing — I have to discern their tone and rhythm. Anything that disrupts the voice makes me feel as if I'm trying to listen to a radio station while another keeps overriding it.

Most cafes, then — likely by design — aren't options for reading at length. Even on a slow day, when the staff are totally cool with a cheap-skate bookworm hogging a table for hours and just buying coffee and maybe a brownie — and many, understandably, aren't — they play music as if it's a matter of policy.

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What about outdoor seating? Great idea — during spring and summer. But fall and winter on the coast do not guarantee hours of rain-free skies. My eyes scan desperately for eaves and covered patios during the cold months and find them in short supply.

Good grief, Erick, why don't you just read at home?

Fair enough. And I do. But fellow introverts who don't want to be shut-ins know what I'm talking about. Sometimes we like to see humanity without interacting with it, make eye contact and acknowledge people without it turning into a thing.

Quiet people can have trouble advocating for themselves in their quest for quiet spaces. We tend to feel weird being ourselves in a world that demands most public pursuits be social ones. When we read or write around others, we don't get the affirmation that comes with, say, playing softball. But when we notice someone else holding a book or notebook — doing something in public that engages their mind and doesn't require a companion — we feel validated.

Which brings me back to the Sylvia's reading area. A no-talking rule didn't have to be enforced (it was, you might say, unspoken). When a pair of women wanted to work on a puzzle in the kitchen nearby, they closed the door behind them. We all knew what we were there to do, and used the space for that which it was intended. We were out and about, but having inward experiences.

And we need more spaces like it — so we can be solitary, but not alone. **CW**

coast weekend

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

arts & entertainment

4 THE ARTS
'Scrooged in Astoria'
'Tis the season for laughter with 'Scrooged in Astoria'

7 COASTAL LIFE
Close to Home
The art of celebration

8 FEATURE
'The Nutcracker'
Eighty dancers, 55-piece orchestra and a 12-voice choir

LAMPING PHOTOGRAPHY



12 DINING
For smaller appetites
Ladies who breakfast for under \$20

FURTHER ENJOYMENT

ART WALKS2
MUSIC CALENDAR5
CROSSWORD6
SEE + DO 10, 11
CW MARKETPLACE..... 15, 16



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New items for publication consideration must be submitted by 10 a.m. Tuesday, one week and two days before publication.

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