

Looking For Our Literacy Roots In All the Right Places

Rick Erickson, Wayne Otto, Alice Randlett, Bernie Hayes, Tom Cloer, David Gustafson, Ken Smith

The Proposal

Two or three years ago one of the panelists started to read *The Ethnography of Reading* by Jonathan Boyarin (1992); but he soon found it was one of those books that once put down is hard to pick up again. So it sat on the shelf, unread but not forgotten.

But when Cindy announced the 1997 conference theme, “Finding Our Literacy Roots,” he knew just the place to look. He dusted off the unread book, scanned the Table of Contents, read the editor’s Afterword, and sampled a few chapters. But after a couple of hours, even with a well defined purpose for reading, all he’d found out was that the text just didn’t seem to be very accessible. Desperate, he started to read the editor’s Introduction.

Toward the end of the introduction, Boyarin shares an insight from one of his contributors: “When we concern ourselves with the ethnography of reading we are doing precisely what we study.” And then he shares an insight of his own: “We still need an ethnograph of the ‘solitary reader’ whose stereotyping we decry, but who we spend so much of our working time being.” That’s when he realized that the place to find literacy’s roots was in the hearts and minds of literate people. He e-mailed a colleague and they agreed that a good way to get at those roots might be to ask people to think about the books—by making their own Top Ten list, say—that had the most profound impact on the development of their personal literacy. But they were wrong.

When they tried to think of their own top ten, they both soon realized that they’d read too many books for too many reasons to ever come up with a worthwhile list. But they also found, independently, that as they looked for the roots of their personal literacy, they kept coming with “literacy events” that did have profound and memorable effects on their development as literate beings. As they shared some of these stories of significant literacy events they realized they were examining the stuff that personal literacy is made of. They were finding their literacy roots.

The Problems Court format appeared to be an appropriate way for a panel of literate people to find their literacy roots by sharing their stories of significant “literacy events.” About 30 participants, including the presenters, presented an array of stories about these events. The papers that follow present an insight into the literacy roots of literate folks.

Rick Erickson’s Literacy Stew

When I began searching for literacy events the right place to begin seemed to be the brain. When I approached a fellow racquetball player, who just happens to be neurologist in the SIU School of Medicine, he was skeptical. But when I offered to be a risk free subject in his new brain mapping project he said, “Sure.” Here, for the first time in public, is a scan of a professor’s brain. As you can see in Figure 1 the lobes, regions, atoms, glands, and particles are labeled by their function.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Neurologists believe the relative size of the areas indicates the importance of each brain function. For example, the service commitment and new teaching idea atoms are very tiny while the need for flattery from colleagues gland and the committee avoidance lobe are quite large. Of particular importance to our literacy roots topics are the literacy roots cells, which are located just beneath the office with a window region. Those of you who are professors know that consulting fees, travel money, and offices with windows are the things we spend most of our time thinking about, so this brain scan has high face validity in this room. When the neurologist scanned my brain in depth the following script was downloaded on their computer and here is the text.

When I poke my literacy root stew the smell activates ancient memories. One sniff, and there's a 1950's *Mad Magazine* and the framed "What Me Worry?" face of Alfred E. Neumann hanging over my Carroll College bunk. Alfred's Ted Koppel look-alike face cheered me up and gave me hope during dark hours of doubt, fear, and hangover. And there, right next to "What Me Worry?" is an old *Playboy*---a gift certificate subscription from Agnes, my mother in law, circa 1961. I remember discretely hiding them under the couch or my side of the bed to protect my crew cut, teacher clean image. An image almost tarnished in the Spring of '61 by Charlie, a sixth grade student I caught sharing his dad's *Playboys* with his classmates on the playground. When I confiscated them he startled me for a moment with his retaliation of "I'm telling everyone I found them in your car." For an instant I panicked. Did he know I had a supply back at the apartment? But I recovered quickly, grabbed the magazines, and called his mother who told me to throw them away. I tossed them, but not until I looked to see if I had missed any Gahan Wilson's weird cartoons or a good Jean Shepherd story. Both *Mad* and *Playboy* were born in the '50s, about the same time my natural supply of testosterone raced through my body. So it is no surprise that these male-oriented literacy sources were imprinted somewhere in my brain. Those old funny books supplied me with a diet of male oriented fiction and foolishness that laid the foundation for my lifelong passion for satire, humor, good prose.

After a cautious lick I take another poke at my literacy stew and an old blue print plat of the Country Club Addition to the City of Escanaba rises to the top. I drew that while working in the summer in the city engineer's office. My early love of drafting aimed me at architectural engineering as a freshman in college. During four college summers in the late '50s I turned surveyors' notes into inked maps that eventually became legal documents. My skills as a technical artist provided me with college money but it didn't help me in the engineering curriculum. My engineering literacy roots were killed by calculus and I switched to elementary education. Fond memories of my draftsman days remain, but I have no regrets about cutting my technical literacy engineering roots and planting new ones in the school forest.

So, I stir the old map under and there floats an old reading workbook with my name on it. It's the winter of 1948 and I am in fourth grade at the old Franklin School in Escanaba, Michigan. As I poke at the dog-eared cover I recall how my teacher, Miss Marino, rescued me from a lifetime of stupidity--a certainty when one cannot alphabetize words by the third letter in the workbook. Outside it was warm and overcast and the wet snow on the playground was just right for good snowball fights. Instead of going home, whipping icy missiles at cars, girls, and the house on Second Avenue where the witch lived, I sat sobbing in my desk, convinced I was doomed to dumbness. Miss Marino was out in the hall among the wet snowsuits settling an argument between Norman and Clyde. They both claimed ownership of a right hand leather mitt we called

a chopper. After restoring the chopper to the original owner, she came back to the room, sat down and saved my life by showing me how to sort the words. I was amazed that even the third letter would be important to this task--and after about ten minutes of work I put all the words in the right order. Miss Marino smiled, I wiped my runny nose, ran to the cloak room, put on my overshoes, hat, coat, and gloves, and ran all the way home without even making a snowball--happily cured of my letter order disease.

The old fourth grade workbook sinks and a whole stack of reading workbooks appear in the center of the stew pot. It's the early '60s and these are my fifth grade students' workbooks that I used under the scrutiny of Mary Willett's supervisory routine in Neenah, Wisconsin. Mary liked me as a teacher. When she visited my room on my very first day as a teacher I had the kids sitting on the floor in rows doing some math problems. Someone had messed up and there were no desks in my room when school opened the day after Labor Day. Mary was impressed that I had the kids under control and could conduct school with no desks. But as much as she liked my teaching, she liked control better, and when she visited our classrooms she would always examine the reading workbooks stacked on the windowsill in the back corner. She expected teachers to use every page and correct all responses with a red pencil. Unannounced, Mary would enter the class room, say hello to the children, watch us teach for a bit, then head for the stack in the back to see if we were up-to-date on all of the correcting. If there were any pages not yet corrected, she would direct us to stay after school and catch up. She used the workbook routine to see if we were getting kids through the basal, and any kid with five 100s in row got a little certificate from her. Mary's strict workbook surveillance was widespread and whenever you saw another Neenah elementary teacher you immediately asked, "What page are you on? Are you caught up on your correcting?" I wiggled out of Mary's workbook scrutiny by approaching her with a study comparing two treatments of workbooks. The control treatment was Mary's workbook routine and the experimental treatment (my plan to avoid her surveillance) involved skipping some activities, doing others together with the kids. After one school year of my method the reading test scores showed I didn't harm the kids and Mary allowed me do the workbooks the way I wanted. As for the rest of the Neenah teachers, I do not know what happened. All I recall is that I was free to use my own judgment about what pages to do together or have the kids redo. I guess Mary trusted me and was satisfied when I kept sending her names of kids with five 100s in a row. I'm convinced that my childhood and teacher experiences are the roots of my general disdain for the dead language of workbook exercises.

Another poke in my literacy stew and look, there's *Call It Courage* and *The Kid Comes Back*--juvenile fiction I found on the shelf under the ceiling steam radiators in the basement of the Carnegie Library. In my youth I read all the Armstrong Sperry and John R. Tunis books I could find.

Tunis was a master at getting at the psychological and social dilemmas that confront athletes. As high school jock myself, fiction by Tunis was real because I was experiencing some of the same things he was writing about. Later, as a professor I read Tunis's biography and discovered he had overcome a literacy dilemma associated with formal schooling. He says that although he was a successful freelance writer all his life he never finished college because he could not pass freshmen English at New York University.

I think it is ironic that a guy who couldn't pass English could write books that got me hooked as a lifelong reader. Of course another reason I fell for reading is due to simple geography. The old Franklin School and the Carnegie town library were on the same block, separated by the

playground fence and the alley. Everyone I knew went home for an hour or so at lunch time and the school doors were not opened until the bell rang. So we headed for the basement of the library where I looked for the Sperry and Tunis books on the shelf under the radiator on the south wall. Funny how the smell of that old library wafts up from the stew.

Another poke in the pot and, oh--no, there is a 1973 JER reprint of my dissertation research nested in the cover of my 1995 teacher-as-change-agent book. Before I can poke them back into the broth I see they are stuck together. Maybe it's because they are the products of the only sabbaticals I've ever had. The first one, in 1971, allowed me to finish a doctorate while the second, in 1992, gave me time to get a good start on the book. While both sabbatical leaves were productive, I fondly remember the first one when Elvira, the UW reading faculty secretary, gave me a key to the file room office down the hall from Ken Dulin's office around the corner from Dick Smith and Wayne Otto. The building housed the Air Force ROTC, and if there was no anti war bomb threat, I could park my Honda motorbike in the back, go to my office, and devote all my time to reading and writing or gazing over University Avenue at the UW dairy cows. In comparison to my hectic elementary principal work, the piece and quiet of uninterrupted time to research, read, write was like a luxurious Vail ski vacation. After passing the preliminary exams I remember spending three weeks studying and checking out the references of one seminal article that was the basis for the dissertation. That first sabbatical, across from the UW dairy farm, planted my literacy roots in academia forever. But at the time I had no inkling that I would soon be on my way to the wilds of West Virginia.

Another stir of my literacy stew brings a small, but potent, onion-like vegetable to the top-- why it's a West Virginia wild ramp. One bite of those little devils and there is no mouthwash that will fix your breath. Instantly I taste and smell a back packing breakfast of ramps and Spam cooking on my one burner in the Dolly Sods wilderness. How did I get from that little office overlooking the UW dairy farms to a campsite in the green mountains of West Virginia? To make a long story short, a wise and good friend looked me directly in the eye one day and said, "Rick, leave town." So I did. And as far as I know I was the last reading professor in America to enter academia at the associate level with tenure. As far as I know I may be the only person in this room whose been a full professor twice but never an assistant.

A final poke in my literacy stew uncovers some papers covered with young childish writing. It's the latest work of my grandchildren Jeff, Maggie, and Nell who are well on their way to literacy. When I read to them, and they read and write to me, my diminishing grandpa-aged tastebuds are revived. Knowing that the family literacy genes are alive in the grandkids tells me that my literacy root stew is just about done. And if I know anything about my cooking, and your tastes, I'm going to have to eat it myself. Who else but the cook would eat stew flavored with funny books, work books, and real books?

Wayne Otto's Top Ten Literacy Events

When I started looking for the roots of my personal literacy, I soon got to thinking what I always get to thinking when I try to dig up the quack grass in my garden: Boy, this stuff sure is mixed up, intertwined, and convoluted. I could see that trying to do a comprehensive job of tracing my literacy roots would be as frustrating and futile as trying to trace the quack grass roots in my garden. So I decided to abandon the quack grass analogy and go with a Top Ten List instead.

These, then, are--in more or less chronological order--the Top Ten literacy events (or, in some instances, the person, place, or thing) of my life...so far. Taken together, these events are the roots of my personal literacy.

NUMBER TEN: My Little Sears, Roebuck Desk

When I was four or so--before I started school--I fell in love with a little desk and chair in the Sears, Roebuck catalog. I pestered my folks until they got it for me, and then I spent many happy hours sitting at my little desk by the window of our apartment upstairs over the Farmers' Store that overlooked busy Highway 10 and, across the intersection, the wild and wonderful Wolf River writing in my BIG 5 tablet. Since I had only vague notions about the formalities of handwriting and spelling, of course nobody else could read my stuff. No matter, though; it's how I got my start. Things haven't changed all that much. Now people could read my stuff, but hardly anybody does.

NUMBER NINE: Richard Haliburton's books of marvels

There were four grades in Mrs. VanOrnum's room when I started school--first grade through fourth--and there were a couple of cases filled with books in the back of the room. My favorite from the very start was Richard Haliburton's *Book of Marvels* and, in due time, Richard Haliburton's *Second Book of Marvels*. They were thick books with lots of pictures of people and places around the world and my heart's desire was to learn to read the words. Mrs. VanOrnum, bless her sweet soul, had the wisdom to let me keep looking at the pictures and the skill to help me learn the words.

NUMBER EIGHT: Edris Lind

When I started second grade, I somehow got the impression that I would be expected to write cursive, and only cursive, style. By then I knew manuscript, but I didn't know cursive; and I hadn't yet caught on to the fact that Mrs. VanOrnum would never expect us to perform what we hadn't been taught. I thought my brief academic career was, alas, ended, nipped in the bud. With visions of being drummed out of school in disgrace stark in my mind, I wept. Lucky for me, Edris Lind, a fourth grader and a master of the cursive style, not only took note of my distress but also took responsibility for making me whole. She spent an entire recess teaching me the basics of cursive writing; and she pointed out the handwriting chart over the blackboard where each letter was displayed in both manuscript and cursive style, just in case I forgot. Edris went on to a career in nursing, continuing to make people whole; and I went on to develop a personal style of handwriting that is as illegible as the scribbles I produced at my little Sears, Roebuck desk.

Lucky for me it wasn't Virginia Fisher, another fourth grader whom I loved from afar, who took compassionate note of my distress. With Ginny tutoring, I couldn't have given cursive writing the undivided attention it needed at the time.

NUMBER SEVEN: Schleibe's Drugs

In my home town, Mr. R. F. Schleibe was the local druggist. He kept a tall rack of comic books toward the back of his store. In those days 64 full color pages of action packed comics cost one thin dime, the tenth part of a dollar. Which may sound like a bargain today, but in those

days a dime amounted to at least an hour of mowing lawn or two hours of pestering Pa for the dole. They were pricey, but we loved them and we would read any and all we could get our hands on. Lucky for us, Mr. Schleibe kept a clandestine stock of coverless comics in the back room. He was supposed to tear covers off from unsold comics, turn in the covers for credit, and destroy the rest. But benefactor of the literate arts that he was, he sold them to us for a mere two cents each! Five comics, 320 pages of action packed adventure, for one thin dime. Each of us bought what we could, and then we traded. We honed our reading skills and stretched our imaginations.

NUMBER SIX: The five little Peppers

By the time I got to fifth grade I was a frequent visitor to the Fremont Public Library, which occupied a single room in the Fremont Village Hall, and I got started reading a series of books about this family of kids, the five little Peppers, and how they grew. All I remember is that there were quite a few books in the series and that their covers were green. The stories were mindless and boring, but somehow I believed that I'd have to complete the entire series in order to maintain my good standing in academia. So I read every one of those boring, green books, in spite of the irreparable damage it did to my eyesight and my social standing amongst my peers. It took years for me to realize that meeting the challenge of the five little Peppers is what made it possible for me to persevere through the mindless and boring tasks of high school, college and graduate school.

NUMBER FIVE: Nancy Drew and Mrs. Peters

In eighth grade I experienced the joy of being a member of a literate community. Somehow the entire class, all six or seven of us, got hooked on the Nancy Drew mystery series. We read the four books that were in our library, we bought what we could, we traded, and we all sleuthed together with Nancy. We learned that different people could experience the same story in different ways. Mrs. Peters, our teacher, had the good sense to let us go with Nancy; she was a cheerful person and a gifted teacher who saw no need to spoil our fun by insisting on developing our "taste." Mrs. Peters, bless her sweet soul, was way ahead of her times.

NUMBER FOUR: The United States Marines

The Korean War ended when I was in boot camp, so, having no need for my skills as a rifleman, the Marine Corps sent me to the Marine Corps Institute at the Navy Yard in Washington, DC. Our mission was to teach correspondence courses for Marines the world over. One of the courses I taught had to do with increasing one's reading skills, particularly speed. Up to then, in spite of the fact that I'd been an English major in college, it had never occurred to me that "reading" could or would be a specialty area in education. So one thing led to another and I wound up with a career in reading education. It all began at the Marine Corps Institute.

NUMBER THREE: Graduate School

Black walnut trees have roots that produce a substance that is toxic to many other plants. Plant a black walnut tree in your garden and you'll kill the tomatoes and lots of other stuff. I mention this here because graduate school was a black walnut insofar as my personal literacy roots are concerned. Graduate school got me reading about reading; but it effectively killed off most any other personal reading. Over the next couple of decades, I suppose I learned a few

things about how, but I didn't learn or experience much of anything about why. With the insight of hindsight, I see graduate school as one of the roots of my literacy, but mainly a negative one. I don't think it has to be that way, but that's how it turned out for me.

NUMBER TWO: Jan Binkley

In 1985, ten years before I retired, Jan asked me if I'd be interested in writing the research column for the *Journal of Reading*. I said, okay, I'd give it a try. It didn't take me long to realize that "reading research" really doesn't have much of anything to do with actual reading, neither the performance of it nor the teaching of it. So I started reading real books and I started writing about what that was like, and I began to see reading in a whole different light from the one that got dimmed in graduate school. And Jan, bless her sweet heart, saw what was happening and encouraged it. Jan nurtured an important root of my personal literacy that had withered and almost died.

NUMBER ONE: Eleni

Eleni is my oldest daughter. For years she listened to my stories about Fremont, the place where I grew up. When I retired, she told me I ought to be writing those stories down, and she kept after me until I started writing them down. I like writing them down; writing them down is a whole new root to my personal literacy. I look for myself in places where I'd forgotten I'd been. But I sure do miss that little Sears, Roebuck desk.

Bernard L. Hayes Pays Tribute to John R. Tunis

A major event in my development as a reader can be traced to my discovery of a series of books in the early 1950s. I am a "reader" who must give credit for a substantial share of my literacy roots to the reading of books by John R. Tunis. I can't remember how I discovered Tunis. It may have been Mrs. McCormick, my wonderful fourth grade teacher, or the Wilson Elementary School librarian (however, most of what I remember of her is the 2 cents a day fine for overdue books that I regularly had to pay). Most likely, it was a forgotten elementary school classmate who recommended Tunis' books to me. However, once introduced to Mr. Tunis' stories, I couldn't get enough of them. I can remember checking out a new book, reading it straight through, and wondering how long it would take him to write another one.

John R. Tunis is the author of sports stories for young readers and he is one of a kind. Through his classic baseball novels of the 1940s, *The Kid from Tomkinsville*, *World Series*, *The Kid Comes Back*, *Keystone Kids*, *Highpockets*, Tunis has probably made good readers of millions of young people.

Bruce Brooks, the author of *The Moves Make the Man*, a 1985 Newbery Honor Book, paid tribute to Tunis in a 1986 commentary that appeared in *The New York Times*. While mistakenly stereotyping Tunis' books as "Boy Books," his words nevertheless clearly describe the impact certain books may have on the literacy roots of young readers and certainly the impact Tunis' books had on mine (1986).

Tunis was born at the dawn of the Age of Reform, in 1889, in Cambridge, Mass.; he died after the sun set on the Age of Aquarius, in 1975. In between, he hustled a breathless living as the quintessential freelance writer in the golden days

of American magazines, mixing reports on the Wimbledon finals, Mussolini, the working women of France and drinking habits on luxury liners, all on a single research trip if possible.

Today the journalism of which Tunis was so proud isn't around, even to wrap the fish; neither, really, are the 22 sports novels he wrote between 1938 and 1964 as a sideline. The books are mostly out of print. But any boy lucky enough to have a librarian who is slow to clear the shelves for rummage sales can find under "T" the baseball game--and the reading class--of his dreams.

Tunis' baseball books create a world intuitively known to every boy who has played catch with his father's mitt or listened to his grandfather's tales of Yanks and Dodgers of yore. The novels bring the world to life through the general literary felicities of clear language, precise characters and intriguing drama--but more than any others, they exemplify the special ways in which sports books teach boys to read well.

They make a reader want to get everything that's in that grand world of old baseball, and to get it a boy calls on tricks of intelligence he never knew he had. Tunis forces a reader to concentrate and evaluate information cunningly, because the triumph of a character never feels assured, and heartbreak might await the sucker who counts on it and cruises through the book with his lights dimmed. Tunis' commitment is to his story, and it includes surprise slumps and injuries, often just when the stage is set for heroics.

For a man who made most of his living in the world of big-time sports, Tunis is no booster. He writes about people, not celebrities, and if they are ugly or lucky instead of all-powerful, he doesn't hesitate to show it. Example: In *The Kid From Tomkinsville*, even when the clutch hitter Roy Tucker does get big doubles, he has no idea where he's hit the ball until his first-base coach points it out--all he feels is a blind smack of contact, and he runs in the chaos of screaming fans, scrambling fielders and his own ignorance. Nothing romantic and assured about it.

Tunis broadens his readers' attention, makes them pick up important things from unexpected sources: a key tip in the plot is as likely to come from a second-rate newspaper reporter the reader overhears around the batting cage as from the omniscient narrator. He makes his readers keep their wits and emotional balance: his characters are so moody and impetuous that a reader has to take a step back and be coolly observant, or risk sharing their misery and confusion. A reader is tempted to share Roy Tucker's night of self-pity because his recent injury justifies such melancholia, but Tunis intends the stronger reader to see through the frustration, as Roy himself eventually does. Tunis resists what Henry James called "the platitude of statement": he makes his readers curious about things--morality, motivation, faith--that cannot be explained, instead of showing them only things that can be. These are all great lessons, not in life, not in baseball, but in reading.

Perhaps Tunis knew this secret about boys and reading: it takes a game to know a game. Reading, like baseball, is something you have to play. You pick up strange equipment (words, sentences, chapters), you wag and flex them as

characters wag new bats and flex new gloves. You make a few early errors, drop a couple of subtle dependent clauses. But soon you get the hang of the game--you start to notice the foreshadowing, to feel the punch of short sentences and the stretching grace of long ones, to heft the balance between dramatic scenes and cool narration:

"Roy hesitated. He was on his toes, yet he hesitated in starting. Fear, or something stronger, that instinctive desire to protect his weakness which was now almost habit, kept him from making a sudden forward leap. Held in place a fraction of a second, he was slow off the mark. But once away, his movements were fast. Racing in, he stabbed the ball with his bare hand, whirled, and forced the runner on second back. Now the long throw to first."

As the canny old coaches begin grudgingly to say of the rookie on page 150, "Hm. This kid can play," a boy begins to admit his own new confidence and talent for what he's doing. And when the rookie breaks through with a heads-up play on page 240, proving he's arrived, the boy with the book proves the same, with no less elation and savvy. He too has become a new star, at the game he'll come to recognize more and more openly as the greatest indoor sport of them all. Who's next on the schedule? Twain? Conan Doyle? Hemingway? Bring them on--this kid can read. (p. 20)

As Rick's proposal for this Problem Court states, "The roots of our literacy were formed by "literacy events," those memorable incidents that affected our development into literate beings." Certainly, my discovery of the stories that John R. Tunis told was a literacy event that helped me become a reader.

Reference

Brooks, B. (1986, April 6). Children's Books; Playing Fields of Fiction. *The New York Times*, p. G20.

Tom Cloer's Appalachian Roots

I spent all my formative years in Appalachian sawmill camps. I was part of a nomadic extended family of sawmillers with camps on Turniptown Creek in the Hills of northern Georgia, on Shooting Creek in Western North Carolina, and on Stinking Creek in the high East Tennessee mountains. My home-rooted language was unadulterated Appalachian. It was really much later that I learned English as a second language.

My paternal Grandpa and Grandma, whom I worshipped, were two of my language models that I revered and tried to emulate. Grandma's folks had moved into Hanging Dog (my birthplace in Western North Carolina) and had intermarried with the Wolf Clan of the Cherokees. Grandma was uncanny when it came to catching native trout. As a constant companion, she taught me with explanations that would have been indecipherable to anyone outside the camps.

Grandma's pronoun for second person plural was "you-uns," and anything belonging to "you-uns" was "yorenses." Example: "Hits up to you-uns to git the fish; hit's yorenses job." Grandma would interchange parts of speech very easily and change verbs and nouns: "You can git you one

more giffin of fish now." Or, "Fish gitten ain't settin down work." Of course the most easily recognized influence on our dialect was the Scotch/Irish influence on the "r" sound. Grandma had to "arn" her clothes for footwashing service at the Northcut Baptist Church and hang them on the "clotheswarr" (clotheswire or clothesline). She couldn't wear clothes "all gaumed up." "Meller" was one of Grandpa's favorite words. It means "beat til mellow" as in "I'll meller his head if he messes with yorenses log trucks." or "You want yore head mellered?" "Ary" was substituted for "any" and "nary" for "not any" as in: "Nary one of em wanted their heads mellered, and ary one of you'uns coulda done it."

While our isolation in the mountains affected our individualism, speech, and independence, it did not stifle imagination so critical to literacy. Our listening skills were well developed from the radio. My first viewing of a television came well after I had learned to read and had been in school several years. I can remember the anticipation of hearing such treats on the radio as: "Lum and Abner," "The Great Guildersleeve," "The Lone Ranger," and the most suspenseful program ever, "The Screaking Door." Listening has something to do with imagination and is a similar receptive language process to reading; its early development is related to later reading achievement (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985).

Another important factor in my literacy roots was dramatization and storytelling. I can remember the dramatization of revival meetings we had witnessed where evangelists conspired and perspired, sinners jumped and ran forward, and feet were washed by the humble brethren. We "acted out" revivals, weddings, funerals, vocations (teacher, sawmiller, etc.), and anything else we could imagine.

Storytelling was a regular evening pastime. Telling haint tales was my favorite; these would start about dark. I can remember running barefoot one-half mile from one end of the sawmill camp to the other in only 15 seconds after it had grown dark and the last scary haint tale was finished. I am convinced that listening to others tell stories in those camps, and my retelling of those stories had a tremendous impact on my love of writing.

Another impact that I am sure was critical to my early literacy was the presence of verbose female cousins in the sawmill village that read to me, engaged in drama with me, told stories to me, and wrote stories in my presence. I was astonished at how glibly they did each of those things. I venerated them and tried to emulate their ways. They have since become successful entrepreneurs and own their own companies. They were intelligent, creative, and imaginative, and were good influences.

The quintessential influence, however, came from a goddess of affirmation and pedagogy called Mrs. Hipp, my first teacher in "town school." I remember vividly my first day in this big town school. With fear and trepidation, I had boarded a bus and ridden many miles from the sawmill camp to a huge brick school with more children than I thought existed on earth. These boys in town school all wore "real pants" or pants that came half-way up. I wore overalls and brogans from the sawmill commissary, a sort of Wal-Mart in a closet that the lumber company established to meet our every need. As my older brother took my sweaty hand and led me apprehensively to still another brick building, heaven opened its portals and Mrs. Hipp greeted me at the door. It was both the most frightening and the most influential moment of my life. It was to concretize forever my self-esteem, my zeal to learn, and even my sexual development. Mrs. Hipp was the most beautiful, the best-dressed, and by far the sweetest-smelling female I had ever imagined. She hadn't made her clothes; they looked like real clothes from a town store. Her

eyes danced as if she had a thousand stories to tell me. Her smile would open prison cells, mend a thousand hearts, and raise the academic dead; I wanted to marry her after that first day.

"I've been waiting to meet Tom," she beamed. "I heard he was coming and I wanted him in my class. He'll be fine here, Nat (my brother). I will put his seat up close to mine where the two of us can be close."

Mrs. Hipp was the first woman I had ever heard speak standard English, and she did so eloquently. She was a lady of high culture with a head full of sense and a heart of gold. I count myself very lucky to have crossed paths with her.

As I think back about those early literacy roots, I don't believe methodology played much of a part. What accounted for the variance was Mrs. Hipp's persona. When she was reinforcing me, the heavenly choirs would crescendo and reach their zenith as she exclaimed "I'm proud you're in my class!" Everything she did was supernatural to me. She was patient, empathetic, always modeling how to do what she asked, and always eager to help after releasing responsibility to me. She prophesied that I and the others would do well, and then she forthrightly fulfilled her own carefully choreographed prophesies.

I am fully convinced that the single most important school ingredient in the literacy development of most young males is an olfactory variable. I am in my sixth decade of life; I was only six when I first met Mrs. Hipp. Yet, I remember to this day and will till I die the ingratiating smell of that woman. She had upon her neck and arms the sweetest nectar of the gods. Her breath was like a fragrant yellow rose blooming, flowering, and flourishing in my face. When she touched me tenderly, I had a hundred sweet passions to surge through me.

Caine & Caine (1997) point to emotions as being so critical to learning. Emotions and cognitive processes literally shape each other and can't be separated. Emotions give meaning, color meaning, and warp and weave through everything we do in schools. Mrs. Hipp knew how to create community. Our brains are social brains (Caine & Caine). Part of who I am depended on finding a way to belong in Mrs. Hipp's class. My learning was profoundly influenced by the nature of the social relationships within which I found myself in her classroom. She created true learning communities where we were valued as individuals. If we are really looking for our literacy roots in the right places, we better darn sure look toward emotion as an incontrovertibly profound, immutable, and unyielding effect in our early literary lives. I hope others were as lucky as I.

References

Anderson, R. C., Hiebert, E. H., Scott, J. A., & Wilkinson, I. A. (1985). *Becoming a nation of readers: The report of the commission on reading*. Washington, DC: The National Institute of Education.

Caine, R. N. & Caine G. (1997). *Education on the edge of possibility*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Alice Randle's Laryngitic Snapshot of Early Reading Highspots

Laryngitis left Alice with no voice for telling her story. Undaunted by this condition she filled a large flip chart with the following chronology, and to the delight and amazement of everyone, she pantomimed down the list with a blazing display of silent story telling! There was little doubt as to her meaning as each item was accompanied by just the right facial expression, or mouthed lip movement, or hands touching the important body part. Alice's story-telling genius was revealed as everyone in the Sandpiper room immediately knew what impact each literacy event had on Alice at each age. Here is Alice's list. You'll have to supply the pantomime.

Age	Texts and People
2	The Funnies
5	1928 <i>Book of Knowledge</i> Old parents, much older brothers (Circled for emphasis)
7	<i>Ladies Home Journal</i>
8	Nancy Drew
9	<i>Roller Skates</i> by Ruth Sawyer
12	<i>Forever Amber</i> and <i>Tales From the Crypt</i>
16	<i>Peyton Place</i> <i>Silas Marner</i> (Marked with international code for NO)

David Gustafson's Organic Literacy

1953--"Are you boys sleeping yet?" came the gruff voice from the other side of the wall. In one Olympic moment I clicked the flashlight off, collapsed the blanket cave, threw the covers back, and slid my book under my pillow while answering in an innocent voice: "Yah, Dad!" (Like how does he expect a sleeper to answer?) This was followed by another voice: "You'll strain your eyes and ruin your eyesight if you keep reading with your flashlight!"

"I'm not reading, Ma!" came my argumentative voice.

"He is too, Ma!" proclaimed Jack, my lousy older brother.

Then Pa entered the bedroom...all developmental literacy efforts ceased...for the moment at least. ZZZZZZ.

Move ahead to grade 10 (1956-57) at Salvatorian Seminary, St. Nazianz, Wisconsin where one holy boy is studying for the Catholic priesthood. Picture a large studyhall with 60 students sitting at their wooden desks intently studying since this is a STRICT studyhall where no talking or letter writing is allowed--just study. This studyhall is monitored by the very serious school

DISCIPLINARIAN (That really was his title!), Father Ronald Bullingham. Transgress the rules and he is the one to inform you of your one-way bus ride home--a man to be feared! Now center in on row 3 - 5th desk. Watch the redheaded kid sitting at his desk which has a drawer in the middle and a bookshelf alongside. See the Latin grammar book and notes on his desktop. Also take note that the desk drawer is opened slightly, and though it might appear to a roving disciplinarian that "Gus" is studying his Latin diligently, his eyes are actually peering into the open desk drawer. Now peek into the drawer...VOILA! There you find the *Riders of the Purple Sage*. Zane Grey lives on! Oh, oh, here comes Father Ronald. Surreptitiously edge the drawer shut with your stomach. Back to Latin, cowboy!

So where did this shifty lying weasel wind up? What debilitating disease had permeated his psyche and destroyed his true innocence? How had this happened? On December 11, 1997, an article written by Tamara Henry titled "Literacy Skills Require Upkeep" appeared in the *USA TODAY* newspaper. She cited Albert Tuijman of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (a group of nations that work jointly on policies related to education). He said that literacy has been found to be ORGANIC--developing and changing over a life span rather than simply being acquired when you're young and kept for life, like the ability to ride a bike. Obviously this stuff is like cancer. It attacks many of us, renders us defenseless, and affects us all throughout our lives.

Yup! I think I have been and still am a victim of this organic phenomenon. It has obviously taken over both my body and mind much like a creature in a Sigourney Weaver alien film. How did this happen? How did it overpower me and cause me to lie and sneak? Let me tell you my story so that you might learn from my experience and possibly remain whole.

It all started on a Sunday, two weeks before Pearl Harbor, in my parent's bedroom at 609 Lake Avenue, Ironwood, Michigan. One minute it was a family of four and the next minute--surprise--it was five! Four literates, or at least partial ones, and one totally illiterate--me. Little did I know that this was the beginning of my makeover.

Having a second grade teacher for a mother meant being surrounded by books and being read to. It meant having paper, pencils, and chalk. Early writing samples (evidence of a clear case of developmental dyslexia) are still in evidence on the inner closet walls at 609 Lake Avenue. Two books especially remembered are *Little Black Sambo*, with it's moveable parts, and *Pinocchio*, which contained realistic pictures from the Disney film I had seen. Little did I know this would be my first experience with the question: Did you see the movie or read the book first?

Early school experiences included sending for a decoder ring so I could crack the code that eluded me. Fortunately, Helen Jalonen, second grade teacher supreme, entered my life and set me on course for a literate future. Or did she release an alien demon or pass on a virus to me that has possessed me ever since? I think I blame it all on my mother and Helen Jalonen who schemed together. Suddenly Dick and Jane, along with the netherworld of Golden Books, took control of me and held me in their grasp for many years.

As the organic process kept growing inside me, I became aware of the regular diet of food around my house that caused this "organic thing" to grow: *Hoofbeats Magazine* and the United States Trotting Association *Dams and Sires Yearbook* for my father, who bred and raced horses; *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Our Sunday Visitor* for my mother, and the *Ironwood Daily Globe* and the *Sunday Milwaukee Journal* for everyone. In addition, being the youngest of three

boys, I was surrounded by comic books and "Big Little Books" which were about two inches thick and could fit in the palm of your hand. Rising above all of this was Grandma and her Bible. An everyday ritual that seemed to conceal the alien within her and me.

In my later grades my organic malady dragged me to my oldest brother's Classics Illustrated which he kept locked in a trunk in the attic. Unfortunately he had mounted the hasp incorrectly and I was able to get at the comics by simply unscrewing the screws that should have been covered by the hasp. In retrospect, this seems to have been part of my training in hiding my affliction as described in the beginning of this account and also an important part of my literary development.

In high school at the seminary, Zane Grey held me captive for a year with almost an endless supply of rations for my insatiable appetite. I was totally out of control and possessed by this organic force. From there it was *Collier's Encyclopedia* and then on to the Britannica. Soon it was the *Lives of the Saints* (well, maybe one saint) and then I was swept along by alien supporters such as Steinbeck and Vonnegut.

Later I found myself at Northern Michigan University where, as an English major, I was attacked by Cliff's Notes. From then on at other universities I was always under a steady, but uncontrollable, force-feeding from the organic force. In 1997 I reached the breaking point brought on by a 30 plus year diet of "reading about reading," termed "meta-alienation" I believe. The "organic thing" had consumed me. My only defense was to retire and come to terms with the alien within me.

Today I believe I have achieved peace with the alien. I find that I enjoy feeding him more than ever before. I have found that he is very nourished by a wide variety of magazines, especially those that feature gardening, finance, and fishing. Then again, it seems we both seem to lose track of time when devouring a good novel. In summary, be careful because something is lurking out there and it could take control of your life! It did mine.

Kenneth M. Smith's Reflections on Early Literacy Roots

Reflecting on my early literacy roots became an unexpected emotional experience, and a challenging personal, professional journey. While exploring memories about books and reading during my development from birth through elementary school, and those family relationships which nurtured my literacy development, I rediscovered important values and personal foundation which help define who I am. I also gained a better understanding of how these early reading events affect my professional work as a literacy educator.

My original thought was to explore some current professional references on the evolving literacy process, select a number of suggestions which were being made to encourage families to enhance literacy, and examine my family history as it related to these suggestions. I first skimmed through Morrow's (1995) *Family Literacy: Connections in Schools and Communities*, and found typical parental activities such as read to my child, told stories together, visited the library, read my own book, visited the bookstore, and discussed what we watched on TV. I was doing fine until I realized that we didn't have television until I was in the sixth grade.

While examining Braunger and Lewis' (1997) *Building a Knowledge Base in Reading*, I thought I might use their thirteen core understandings about learning to read as a springboard to

examples from my life which encouraged my literacy development. These core understandings include:

1. Reading is a construction of meaning from written text. It is an active, cognitive, and affective process.
2. Background knowledge and prior experience are critical to the reading process.
3. Social interaction is essential in learning to read.
4. Reading and writing develop together.
5. Reading involves complex thinking.
6. Environments rich in literacy experiences resources and models facilitate reading development.
7. Engagement in the reading task is the key in successfully learning to read.
8. Children's understandings of print are not the same as adult's understandings.
9. Children develop phonemic awareness and knowledge of phonics through a variety of literacy opportunities, model, and demonstrations.
10. Children learn successful reading strategies in the context of real reading.
11. Children learn best when teachers employ a variety of strategies to model and demonstrate reading knowledge, strategy, and skills.
12. Children need the opportunity to read, read, read.
13. Monitoring the development of reading processes is vital to student success. (p. 5)

While starting to explore this option, I became frustrated because my memory was not as systematic, full, or helpful as I had hoped, during these early years. However, I remembered warm close interactions with all my grandparents and our reading of many books. My parents always supported my reading development by providing me with a wide variety of books. I realized that I still had many of these books and a few had been saved by my parents. I have included a listing of these books from my early literacy roots, and these will be the springboard for some thoughts and memories which link my personal literacy journey to a few of the literacy concepts and suggestions listed previously.

My parents were raised in rural Kansas and Missouri. So, through the lives of my grandparents and relatives, I was blessed with the opportunity to know both farm life and the sense of community which exists in small towns. I was born in Chicago in 1943 and lived there until my parents moved back to Wichita, Kansas when I started the second grade. We lived there through my elementary school years.

Books were always valued in my extended family. My grandmother's 1862 *The Country Picture Book for Boys and Girls* was illustrated beautifully with shortened sentences and a

somewhat controlled vocabulary. It was prized by my mother when she was a girl, as was her 1909 copy of *The Story of Jesus Told for Little Children in Words of One Syllable*. Grandma, so the story goes, taught for a time in a one-room school house though she did not have the opportunity to go to high school. My father recalled that he was 4 or 5 years old when grandma read him *The Adventures of Brownie Bear*. Grandma read me that book too. Another important and now well-worn book was Moore's *The Night Before Christmas* with its animated pages. I always received a number of books for Christmas and birthdays during these early years, especially from my great-grandmother.

My parents and grandparents all valued education and learning. Every generation wanted the next one to do well, to move ahead, to do better than they did. Quiet dedication and hard work were what would get you ahead in life. Wasn't it the Little Engine that said, "I think I can...I think I can."? Our family read magazines, books, and newspapers for pleasure and interest, as well as to learn. Many of my early books reveal the influence of Walt Disney. Disney books were read carefully, and it wasn't long before the movies were out---Bambi, Pinocchio, Johnny Appleseed, Uncle Remus and Donald Duck cartoons. I read comic books, *Boy's Life*, *Life* magazine and the series of books including stories about: Daniel Boone, Albert Schweitzer, Davy Crockett, George Washington Carver, Valley Forge, Dickens' stories, Sam Houston, Robert Fulton, the Barbary Pirates, and *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*.

As far as my own reading ability goes I found some old report cards from kindergarten and first grade. I was "good" but never "excellent" in my reading and spelling. When I checked my literacy grades in second grade, I found that I moved from 2's and 3's (average) in the first quarter, to straight 1's (the best) for the rest of the year. Perhaps the new glasses which showed up on my face in my old pictures at that time had something to do with that.

This journey into my personal early literacy roots prompted very special conversations with my father, and memories of extended family which have been defining influences in my personal, family and professional life. Reading, especially books, was a useful tool for many purposes including learning, work, pleasure, adventure, and for reinforcing warm and caring personal relationships and conversations. Poetry and music and the play of language got their start here in my life. Much of the base for what Braunger and Lewis (1997) say is necessary for literacy existed in my family and fed my early literacy roots. Learning, reading and growing were all valued in my early years and I thank my parents and grandparents for that early nourishment.

References

Braunger, J., & Lewis, J. P. (1997). *Building a knowledge base in reading*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

Morrow, L. M. (Ed.), (1995). *Family literacy: Connections in school and communities*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Ken Smith's Early Literacy Roots

Baruch, D. (1940). *Pinocchio*. Boston: D. C. Heath and Company.

- Bouton, J. (1945). *Poems for the children's hour*. New York: The Platt Munk Co., Inc.
- Brown, J. M. (1952). *Daniel Boone: The opening of the wilderness*. New York: Random House.
- Brown, M. W. (1939). *Little pig's picnic and other stories*. Boston: D. C. Heath and Company.
- Burgess, T. (1942). *Thornton Burgess animal stories*. New York: The Platt & Munk Co., Inc.
- Daniel, A. (1957). *The story of Albert Schweitzer*. New York: Random House.
- Disney, W. (1948). *Donald Duck: Bringing up the boys*. Racine, WI: Whitman Publishing Company.
- Disney, W. (1949). *Johnny Appleseed*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Disney, W. (1947). *Uncle Remus*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Disney, W. (1947). *Uncle Remus stories*. Based on original "Uncle Remus" stories by Joel Chandler Harris. Racine, WI: Western Publishing Company.
- Doane, P. (1941). *Favorite nursery songs*. New York: Random House.
- Doyle, R. J. (1942). *Tuffy*. New York: Simon and Schuster. (With stroboscope photographs by Frank J. Scherschel.)
- Forester, C. S. (1953). *The Barbary pirates*. New York: Random House.
- Gramatky, H. (1939). *Little Toot*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- Gray, T. (1887). *An elegy in a country churchyard*. New York: Clark & Maynard, Publishers. (English classic series with explanatory notes.)
- Gregory, J. G. (1862). *The country picture book for boys and girls*. New York: James G. Gregory Publisher.
- Guelle, J. (1920). *Raggedy Andy stories*. New York: P. F. Volland Company.
- Hill, R. N. (1954). *Robert Fulton and the steamboat*. New York: Random House.
- Hunt, G. P. (1951). *The story of the U. S. marines*. New York: Random House
- Johnson, W. (1953). *Sam Houston: The tallest Texan*. New York: Random House.
- Jones, M. A. (1946). *Tell me about God*. New York: Rand McNally & Co.
- Kipling, R. (1942). *How the rhinoceros got his skin*. Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing Co.
- Kjelgaard, J. (1953). *The coming of the Mormons*. New York: Random House.
- Lawrence, M. (1945). *Susan's bears*. New York: Grosset and Dunlap.
- Lawson, T. W., & Considine, B. (1953). *Thirty seconds over Tokyo*. New York: Random House.
- Lewis, Oscar. (1954). *Hawaii: Gem of the Pacific*. New York: Random House.

L'Hommedieu, D. K. (1943). *Nipper: The little bull pup*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company.

Martin, B., & Martin, B. (1946). *Presenting chicken Chuck*. Kansas City, MO: The Tell-Well Press, Inc.

Mason, F. V. (1953). *The winter at Valley Forge*. New York: Random House.

McSpadden, J. W. (Ed.) (1957). *Stories from Dickens*. Garden City, NY: Nelson Doubleday, Inc.

Miloche, H., & Jane, W. (1944). *The Little Red Hen, Black Sambo, Peter Rabbit*. Racine, WI: Whitman Publishing Company.

Moore, C. C. (1944). *The night before Christmas*. New York: Crown Publishers.

Palmer, R. (1939). *Mickey never fails*. Boston: D. C. Heath and Company.

Piper, W. (1961,1954). *The little engine that could*. New York: Platt & Munk Publishers.

Pistorius, A. (1945). *What bird is it?* Chicago: Wilcox & Follett Co.

Purnell, I. (1944). *Bambi*. Boston: D. C. Heath and Company.

Remy, J. S. (1909). *The story of Jesus told for little children in words of one syllable*. Philadelphia: Henry Altemus Company.

Roche, R. A. (1944). *Adventures of Peter Pupp*. New York: Action Play Books, Inc.

Rourke, C. (1956). *Davy Crockett*. Garden City, NY: Nelson Doubleday, Inc.

Shonkweiler, J. H. (1922). *The adventures of Brownie Bear*. Cincinnati, OH: The Standard Publishing Company.

Smith, R. (1946). *The circus book*. Kenosha, WI: John Martin's House, Inc.

Wehr, J. (1944). *Raggedy Ann and Andy*. Akron, OH: The Saalfield Publishing Company.

White, A. T. (1953). *George Washington Carver: The story of a great American*. New York: Random House.