


DONALYN MILLER
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The
Joy
of
Reading

A cartoon illustration of a young girl with long, wavy brown hair, wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt, blue jeans, and grey sneakers. She is sitting inside the large yellow letter 'J' of the word 'Joy', reading a green book. The word 'The' is written in a yellow cursive font above 'Joy', and 'of' is written in a yellow cursive font below 'Joy'. The word 'Reading' is written in a large, yellow, rounded sans-serif font at the bottom.

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To Tobey, thank you for your belief
in this book for so many years.

Our bag of scraps is finally a
quilt because of you.

—DM



To the #QuarantineBookClub—
Thanks for your friendship and for
all of the incredible books
we have shared.

—TL

Salvation is
certainly among
the reasons I read.

Reading and writing have
always pulled me out of the
darkest experiences in my life.
Stories have given me a place in
which to lose myself. They have
allowed me to remember. They
have allowed me to forget. They
have allowed me to imagine
different endings and better
possible worlds.

—Roxane Gay



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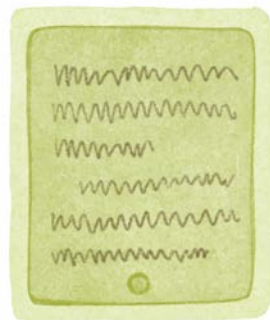
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A LETTER TO READERS

How long has it been since you curled up with a good book and read for an hour? How often do you read solely for your own interests and tastes? How is your reading life going these days? Did the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic influence your reading habits? Are you reading less or more as a result? Long before the ongoing pandemic, you may have stopped reading for pleasure during other times in your life—due to more urgent priorities like finishing a degree program, changing jobs, or caregiving for young children. How long has it been since you fell into a book and the world fell away? Have you emotionally connected with something you read this year? When was the last time you felt reading joy? When was the last time you shared this joy with your students or your children?

Close your eyes and travel back through your reading memories. What books do you remember that still stick to you? What reading experiences have entertained you, provoked you, taught you, inspired you, reflected your life, or connected you with others? We hope you can identify some joyous reading memories, even if *joy* is challenging to define or express.

Sadly, the reading joys we teachers and librarians may know often don't match the reading experiences of many students. Too many kids tell us they find little value for reading outside of school or work or even that they *hate* reading. Large-scale surveys of young readers bear this out. According to Scholastic's (2019) "Kids and Family Reading Report," a snapshot of thousands of school-age children and adolescents and their caregiving adults, many young people report losing interest in reading between third and fourth grades. This "decline by nine" has long-term consequences for students' reading development. Without strong reading interest and motivation, older students find literacy instruction more difficult (Biancarosa and Snow 2006; Hiebert 2015).

Where does this apathy or disdain for reading start? What reading experiences lead young people to dislike reading? What resources, mind-sets, and conditions do kids need to become more engaged readers? Why does reading for pleasure often take an insignificant role in conversations about teaching young people how to read or the lifelong benefits of reading? Like you, we seek methods and resources because we worry about kids who cannot find any value from reading.

Focusing on the conditions that create engaging reading communities at school and home, we have studied reading motivation and joy for most of our careers. We have observed and experienced engaging reading cultures in schools across a variety of demographic groups and North American regions as well as in several international schools. We've visited countless classrooms and school libraries in elementary, middle, and high schools, learning alongside teachers and librarians. We have developed positive reading communities in our classrooms and helped other educators build theirs, too. We have learned a lot during our combined sixty-three years in education as elementary and middle school teachers, literacy coaches, researchers, authors, and staff developers. We have additional experiences as parents, grandparents, and readers ourselves.

All these experiences have taught us one clear truth: *It is possible to teach children how to read well without killing their love for reading in the process.*

This book is our best attempt to help teachers, librarians, administrators, and families build positive, nurturing reading communities in their schools and homes. We offer a compilation of all our conversations, inquiry, reading, and learning about reading joy—what creates it and what damages it. As teachers ourselves, we also acknowledge that forces outside of your classroom or school often place obstacles in your way, and we have tried to provide support and resources to help you navigate these challenges as well as you can. We are grateful for the colleagues, families, and kids who have taught us and learned with us along the way. We hope this book validates you, challenges you, and offers ideas and resources to use with young readers right away. We look forward to exploring reading joy with you in the pages ahead.

—Teri Lesesne and Donalyn Miller
Summer 2021

**It is possible to
teach children
how to read
well without
killing their love
for reading in
the process.**

1

Joy What Is It Good For?

Talking with a group of fifth graders, Donalyn invites the kids to think about what reading joy feels like to them. The students chat with each other first, then write in their notebooks for a few minutes—reflecting on their reading lives. Later, several kids share their thoughts and experiences:

Kim: Reading joy is endless time to read and piles of books. I can read whatever I want.

Hailey: Reading joy is feeling like the author is talking right to me. Like they see me.

Joseph: Reading joy is going on adventures in my head.

Hoyeon: Reading joy is learning something new. I feel smarter.

Isaac: Reading joy is using my imagination.

Brian: Reading joy is laughing when something funny happens to one of the characters.

Kellee: Reading joy is talking to my friends about the books we like.

Benji: Reading joy is listening to someone read a good story.

Kelvin: Reading joy is when I feel like the characters would be my friends if they were real.

Marcos: Reading joy is finding new graphic novels to read.

Alex: Reading doesn't feel like joy to me. It feels boring.

While reading joy varies from reader to reader and from one reading experience to another, we can see some commonalities and trends when talking with readers about what sparks joy for them. How can we continue to support young people as readers through childhood and adolescence? Let's back up and define what we mean when thinking about reading joy, then explore ways that educators and caregivers can foster reading joy for more kids.

What Do We Mean by Joy, Anyway?

Working with adult learners and kids, the two of us often guide other readers through the process of creating their reading autobiographies. A reading autobiography is a time line of a person's reading experiences—both positive and negative—from their first memories to the present. Reading autobiographies have been around awhile: Dr. G. Robert Carlsen collected reading autobiographies from his young adult literature graduate students more than fifty years ago (Carlsen and Sherrill 1988). Dr. Alfred Tatum (2009) formulated the concept of "textual lineages" to describe the texts that his adolescent Black male students found meaningful to them—the texts that shaped them. Dr. Tatum used these time lines to learn more about his students and to inform his decision-making about what texts students might share in class or read independently. Reading autobiographies can generate self-reflection and teach us about our own and others'

reading lives. We might be unaware of how a book is changing us while we are reading it and might only recognize its lasting impact years later.

Retracing our reading lives back a bit offers us this opportunity to learn more about ourselves and how specific books and reading experiences helped create who we are now.

A reading autobiography encourages readers to revisit their reading experiences and identify turning points, trends, gaps, or touchstones in their reading histories. While we often live our reading lives in the present and the

“We read books to find out who we are. What other people, real or imaginary, do and think and feel . . . is an essential guide to our understanding of what we ourselves are and may become.”

—URSULA K. LE GUIN

future, that is, the books we are reading right now and what we plan to read next—readers benefit from traveling back through the books we have read in the past such as childhood read-alouds, books we borrowed during trips to the library, whole-class texts we read (or didn't) in high school, the three years we read nothing but board books shared with our toddlers or research for grad school—all of our reading experiences up to this point. The texts we read have the potential to “not only reflect, but may also produce the self” (Moje et al. 2009, 416). Examining past reading experiences shows us the moments and texts that influence not only how we see ourselves as readers but also how we see ourselves. What we read can shape who we are.

This connection between our literacy and our identity runs through all of us. Our literacy experiences—whether joyful and engaging or boring and painful—influence our orientation toward reading, define the value we place on reading and how we see ourselves as readers, and often direct what texts we read. What we choose to read and how much time and effort we invest in reading (or don't) affect who we are. Literacy shapes identity and identity shapes literacy. We can't separate the two.

Every book we read offers potential benefits—knowledge, escape, entertainment, insight, and so on—but some books transform us in fundamental ways. Let's imagine we are sitting together—getting to know each other. As readers, our conversation might drift to the books we enjoy or feel strongly about in some way. We two will start:

Reading The Velveteen Rabbit when she was five or six, Donalyn discovered for the first time that books could evoke powerful emotions. She wept when the rabbit was lost. In elementary school, she read every Marguerite Henry book in the school library—feeding a passionate interest in horses and sparking a desire to become a veterinarian. As a teenager with a library card and freedom to read what she wanted at home, Donalyn burned through fat tomes from the best-seller lists (or anything turned into a television miniseries), like Pulitzer winners Lonesome Dove, by Larry McMurtry, and Alex Haley's epic history, Roots. At school, she trudged through assigned texts like The Scarlet Letter and Huckleberry Finn in English class. As a new teacher, reading Nancie Atwell's In the Middle and Ellin Keene's Mosaic of Thought shaped how she saw teaching and learning. Aware now that her childhood and early adult reading experiences skewed toward white, male authors, Donalyn has committed to reading more texts written by women and nonbinary creators,

especially women of color. She reads across age ranges, formats, genres, and voices—appreciating everything from graphic novel memoirs like *Almost American Girl: An Illustrated Memoir*, by Robin Ha, to the international best seller *My Sister, the Serial Killer*, by Oyinkan Braithwaite. These wide reading experiences have expanded her worldview, increased her knowledge of the world and its people, helped her confront her biases and prejudices, enriched her life, and provided countless hours of reading joy.

Teri's first memory of reading was sitting on her grandfather's lap while he read *Pat the Bunny* to her. Because the book is interactive, Teri learned that reading aloud might evoke responses. During her tween and teen years, Teri fell into the unconscious-delight phase of reading development. During these years, Teri tore through series books; *Cherry Ames* and *Nancy Drew* were her favorites. Later she dove headfirst into Stephen King and others in the horror genre. But when Teri began teaching middle school, she realized she lacked knowledge of what her students found good reading. Taking a young adult literature course changed Teri's reading once more. She sought out books her students recommended she read. She scoured the best-seller lists for teens and built her classroom library to include books that might provide joy for her students.

BOOK STACKS

Middle School Fantasy & Sci-Fi Series

Arc of a Scythe

Neal Shusterman

Grishaverse

Leigh Bardugo

Raybearer

Jordan Ifueko

LEGEND

Marie Lu

The Nsibidi Scripts

Nnedi Okorafor

In the opening letter, we invited you to consider your reading life for moments of joy. Now, we invite you to go deeper. Think about your own reading life from your first childhood

memories to the current day. What books and reading experiences might form your reading autobiography? How does reading fit into the story of your life? Which books have shaped who you are and how you see the world? A reading autobiography is not simply a list of memorable books, but it often starts there. After revisiting your reading memories for a few moments, jot a

quick list of ten books or so that stand out in your memories for some reason. Don't overthink it. You don't have to impress anyone with this list! If it helps, make a time line in your mind and revisit different ages. Use some of our guiding questions to spark your thinking.

Reflecting on your brainstormed list, what do you notice? What reading experiences stand out to you? Did you revisit some books or experiences you'd forgotten? Does this list evoke memories of the people in your life who have shared books and reading with you (relatives, friends, colleagues, students)? How have your reading habits and preferences changed over time? Do you see gaps in your reading life? Were there times when reading was difficult or you didn't want to read? Why?

While creating a reading autobiography, readers often identify books or memories that evoke reading joy—audiobooks we listened to during family road trips, nightly read-alouds as a child or caregiver, traditions like rereading the same picture book on the first day of school, the influential teachers and librarians who read aloud and shared books with us, and the books and reading experiences we have shared with our own students and children. Along with the positive reading experiences and memories, people revisit time periods in their lives when they didn't read much, suffered through boring reading assignments, or felt shame or failure as a reader.

READING AUTOBIOGRAPHY GUIDING QUESTIONS

What is the first book you remember reading?

What read-alouds do you remember? At home? At school?

What books from your childhood or teen years do you remember reading?

What was the first book you read where you connected with the protagonist or subject?

What books have shaped your worldview or life choices?

What books have you shared with other readers?

Do you have traditions or rituals connected to specific books?



To deepen the reflective benefits of your reading autobiography, you can select one title or reading experience and write about its importance in more detail. What do you recall about the experience or book? Why is it meaningful or influential to you? Under what circumstances did you read or share this book? Do you connect reading it with significant people or events in your life? What does this recollection show you about your relationship with reading? We will share a few of our examples:

*When revisiting a memory of reading joy in her own life, Donalyn remembers a languid summer day when her daughters, Celeste and Sarah, were at the lake with friends, her husband, Don, was at work, and she spent the entire afternoon reading. She had purchased Gayle Forman’s heartbreaking *If I Stay* and Rebecca Stead’s brilliantly plotted *When You Reach Me*, and she read both books from cover to cover—barely stopping for breaks. Donalyn cried, laughed, worried, cheered, and savored a rare opportunity to devour two memorable books in one afternoon. Don came home from work and wondered why the house was growing dark and his wife was nowhere to be found. He only smiled and shook his head when he found Donalyn curled up on their bed, with balled tissues strewn around her, napping after her reading binge!*

*Teri has learned how reading joy can also be a sustaining force: during her lengthy cancer treatment, Teri lost the ability to read for more than a few seconds because of medical side effects and fatigue. When her chemotherapy and radiation treatments ended, she slowly built up her reading stamina and attention, again. First, she began with picture books, but she could read only a few pages. Slowly, she worked up to completing a picture book, then moved on to graphic novels. Again, she could only read and understand a few pages before she had to stop. Finally, she was able to read Hope Larson’s graphic novel adaptation of Madeleine L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time**

**When you love
to read, you can
always find your
way home to it.**

in one sitting. Teri read and enjoyed the original text when she was younger and believes that her background knowledge with the traditional text gave her the scaffolding needed to focus on Larson’s illustrations and format. Teri’s journey back to reading for pleasure reminds us that we

don't fall in love with reading once; we recommit to reading again and again. When you love to read, you can always find your way home to it.

Reflecting on these reading experiences, we can identify moments of reading joy: the delight in reading a book in one sitting, the emotional and intellectual journey of reading great stories, the pleasure of reaching a personal reading challenge, the comfort and nostalgia of revisiting a childhood favorite.

For an individual reader, creating a personal reading autobiography or time line can reveal powerful experiences that have shaped who you are as a reader, educator, caregiver, and person. As teachers and librarians, we can collect reading autobiographies from many readers and evaluate them for commonalities and differences. This snapshot of readers' attitudes, habits, preferences, and experiences across a reading community informs our understanding of readers' needs and the supports needed to engage them with reading. You might identify avid readers from less interested ones or recognize trends in books influencing their education and identity development. You can begin to understand their reading preferences and gaps and the activities they like to do before, during, and after they read.

Reading autobiographies offer rich opportunities for discussion. After brainstorming their personal lists of influential titles, readers can share their lists with a partner or small group. Some readers will find they have books in common. Intrigued by books their discussion partners share, people may jot down suggested titles they want to read. After all, these titles are powerful for at least one reader we know! Occasionally, readers discover that books they hadn't liked were influential to their discussion partners. Facilitating this activity with groups of educators many times, we have never seen a single title appear on everyone's list. So much for that classic canon everyone needs to read as part of our cultural and social heritage. It's clear that people who read for a lifetime build personal canons (Miller and Kelley 2013), which can include books we share in common with other readers and books that matter to us for personal reasons alone.

Leading adults through the process of creating a reading autobiography in a workshop, PLC meeting, or literacy program offers opportunities for reflection and insight into the importance of reading joy in our reading lives. If we identify positively as readers, we undoubtedly have more instances of reading joy in our histories than negative experiences.



“Books make people
quiet, yet they
are so loud.”

-Nnedi Okorafor

Our children are collecting reading experiences in our classrooms and homes right now. How are these experiences shaping the people and readers they will become? Are they reading books that might form their personal canons? Do we celebrate every book a child reads as one more potential touchstone on their reading journey? Do our children have gaps in their reading histories? How can we help them find some positive reading experiences? Most of all, how can we provide them space and time to reflect on the books they read and consider how these books shape and represent who they are?

For K–12 students, reading autobiographies work best as a midyear or end-of-year reflection. By framing the activity within the boundaries of the current school year, teachers have more influence over classroom reading conditions and experiences. Additionally, we have learned that we must forge one-on-one relationships with students as readers and people before asking them to reveal their reading lives and share them with others. Sharing details of their reading lives carries vulnerability and risk. Better to wait until you have formed a supportive reading community. We have led these activities with students of various ages and backgrounds and have found the most success with older students—upper middle school and high school. Be prepared—older kids often share a *lot* of negative reading experiences.

For students with reading difficulties or poor reading experiences, reading autobiographies can reinforce feelings of frustration and failure. Individual interest surveys, reading reflections, and one-on-one reading conferences offer safer, low-risk options for students to share their reading successes and challenges with you. (We will discuss interest surveys in Chapter 5.) Publicly sharing the differences between the kids who enjoy reading and those who don't undermines the establishment of a nurturing, inclusive reading community—our long-term goal.

**“I just don't
find reading
fun and it is very
boring to me.”**

—CASSIDEE, 7TH GRADER

Why Does Joy Matter?

Sadly, the very joy that feeds reading engagement can be treated as insignificant in school. Data-driven policies and high-stakes testing mandates create cultures that value narrowly defined skills. While effective models

**There's more
to reading than
school-based value
systems for it.**

of reading comprehension instruction include direct instruction and goal-setting, they are not the only factors at work: effective instruction also considers students' engagement with text through reading widely and in volume, discussing and analyzing texts, or writing responses (Duke, Ward, and Pearson 2021). Engagement—a driver of reading joy—fosters reading motivation and interest (Guthrie, Wigfield, and You 2012). Increased reading motivation sparks reading volume and variety (Fisher, Frey, and Lapp 2012), which correlates with higher test scores (Sullivan and Brown 2015). Avid readers possess broader vocabularies and background knowledge (Wasik, Hindman, and Snell 2016; Sullivan and Brown 2015; Cunningham and Stanovich 2003). Graduating strong readers benefits society through higher educational attainment (Krashen 2004), which increases productivity, according to the Economic Policy Institute (Garcia and Weiss 2015). It follows that reading opportunities encouraging joy are not a waste of instructional time or teacher concern.

Additionally, we cannot lose sight of our higher aspirations for students: sending people out into the world who find comfort, entertainment, edification, inspiration, provocation, and joy from reading improves the quality of their lives and relationships with others (Dodell-Feder and Tamir 2018). Reading even reduces stress levels better than relaxation methods like listening to music or playing video games (Lewis 2009)! Mason, an Illinois seventh grader, describes the stress relief of reading during the COVID-19 pandemic:

I use reading to take away my stress and anxiety. This year has been the worst for me mentally and with covid, school, and sports I am mentally not alright but reading keeps me sane. After practices I sit in my bed and read with normally a cup of tea by my side to help me sleep. I often sit in my bed and read before bed and sometimes I read extra when I can't sleep at night. Recently I have felt better mentally by reading and I will continue to read for the end of time.

Mason's commitment to keep reading "for the end of time" shows that he values reading for far more than its academic benefits. If our goal remains educating the whole child by attending to their cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development, it seems that fostering lifelong

reading behaviors would help more young people reach their full potential and health. There's more to life than school and work. There's more to reading than school-based value systems for it.

The two of us have spent most of our careers in education trying to justify pleasure reading to adults, so that they will let their kids and students choose what they read more often. In our work, we've learned that it can be difficult to identify and explain the links between reading joy, reading motivation, and reading proficiency without first considering what is at work. We have invited you to travel back through your reading life and identify joyful moments of yours. Now, let's travel back one hundred years and look at an earlier attempt to name and frame reading joy.

The Lack of Reading Joy in School

Unfortunately, you don't have to talk with many kids to learn that for some young people, the self-direction and support needed to experience reading joy at school don't exist. Even when families and teachers support young readers' independent reading lives, students carry the accumulated

boredom and failure from any prior negative reading experiences, which makes them suspicious of efforts to engage them with reading in the future. Talking with a group of seventh and eighth graders recently, Donalyn heard a less than joyful perspective on reading:

“Reading is a school thing.”

“The only reason to read is for school.”

“Why would I read when I don’t have to?”

“Reading is boring.”

“It takes too long to read a book. We spend weeks reading one [in class]. I don’t have time.”

“I can’t get to the library.”

We hear similar complaints from elementary, middle, and high school readers all over. Not only is reading a chore, but many kids tell us they are overwhelmed and uninspired by the stuff they have to complete while they read and when they finish reading

“I think what makes reading good is the silence because it’s hard to focus when it’s loud and reading is nice and silent.”

—CAMERON, 5TH GRADER

a text. Beyond the work of reading, students must create piles of evidence to prove they read and understood each discrete part of a text—annotations on sticky notes, reading response entries, graphic organizers, essays, book reports, projects, computerized comprehension tests, and more. Every once in a while, kids get an English teacher or a librarian who seems to really like reading and kids might find a few books they like that year, but positive reading experiences are few and far between. This is not a new phenomenon.

Over several decades, George Norvell surveyed thousands of his college students about what they liked to read—in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. His bottom line: what was assigned in school was seldom what students enjoyed (Norvell 1990).

For too many young people, reading is tedious and joyless. They read, but they are not invested *readers*. Schools (and homes) exert a powerful influence on the development of children’s and adolescents’ reading identities—how they perceive themselves positively or negatively as readers or view reading in general (McCarthy and Moje 2002). While educators should collaborate with families to support and extend literacy

development at home, we must also take responsibility for how we present reading at school and ensure that we provide positive, nourishing, engaging reading experiences, too. We adults cannot relegate pleasure reading to the margins and hope that kids pick up a love of reading on their own.

Sadly, in too many schools and classrooms we visit, adults seem suspicious when kids (and other adults) enjoy reading too much. The reading, or work attached to the reading, must lack rigor or waste instructional time if kids are enjoying what they're reading. Ignoring or disrespecting how many adults read romances, murder mysteries, celebrity biographies, and magazines, some educators and caregivers become the reading police when scrutinizing kids' reading. If kids discover a book and like it, the book must be "trash" or lacking literary merit or value. In a study of middle schoolers' reading preferences and behaviors, Wilhelm, Smith, and Fransen (2014) found that when reading genre or light fiction such as horror, fantasy, and romance, students engaged in intellectually rigorous conversations about the books they read. Students also expressed higher enjoyment and interest in reading when encouraged to read whatever they wished from time to time.

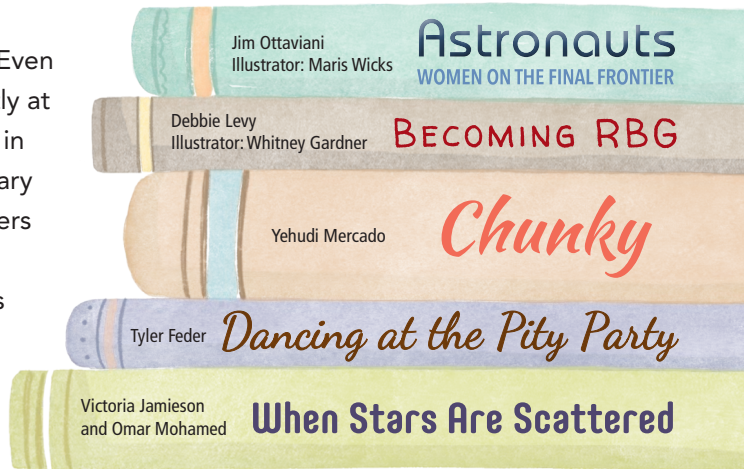
It seems some adults want kids to read when the adults can control and define the reading conditions, but they don't trust kids to choose anything of value to read without their oversight. The skills and knowledge acquired through self-study like independent reading are often disregarded or ignored.

It's important to note that embracing self-teaching does not negate effective literacy instruction: explicit modeling and practice help students become confident, competent readers. Even children who read independently at an early age require instruction in language, comprehension, literary elements, and the skills of readers and writers.

Of course, learning to read is not easy for everyone. Donalyn's older daughter, Celeste, has been identified with dyslexia, dyscalculia,

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Graphic Novel Memoirs & Biographies



and dysgraphia. Learning to read was challenging and as an adult, Celeste still finds reading laborious. Family read-alouds, lots of books at home, and support for her reading choices helped keep Celeste interested in reading. She also benefitted from tutoring in word recognition and comprehension strategies and metacognition. And, of course, what worked for Celeste might not work for another striving reader. As with any methodology applied to human beings, one size does not fit all. Individual learning challenges and the unique learning needs of neurodiverse people require educators to become good kidwatchers and diagnosticians—trying out strategies in collaboration with the child and their family members and reflecting on results.

Yet, no matter the challenges, all children, *even striving readers*, benefit from joyful reading, classrooms filled with books, a teacher who promotes reading, time to read self-selected books, and support for both learning to read and their reading identity development (Pressley, Graham, and Harris 2006; Allington and Gabriel 2012; Harvey and Ward 2017).

Educators' control of children's reading lives seemingly extends into home and summer reading, too. Parents and caregivers often rely on guidance from educators when directing their children's reading lives at home. Even those of us who grew up in the era of controlled vocabulary primers, round-robin reading, SRA cards, and book reports when we were students were spared this level of invasive control over our reading lives: school mandates for reading ended at the school door. Outside of school, our reading lives belonged to us. Limited only by our parents, we could read whatever level, author, or genre we wanted. Today, however, a teacher's disdain for graphic novels or emphasis on leveling, for example, can negatively influence caregivers' opinions of what their children should read and how to measure their children's reading development. This further reinforces to children that reading is a school job and not an act that has any personal meaning for them (Miller 2009).

Too many educators and caregivers perceive that the only way to guarantee young people read "quality literature" is if we dictate what they must read and how they must read it. Who gets to decide what is quality literature and what isn't? The relationships young people can build with reading simply aren't considered in the equation. Imagine sitting in language arts class completing worksheets on your whole-class novel, then filling out a graphic organizer on an article in your basal textbook, then

taking a computer test on your library book. Why would any kid enjoy reading when it seems to require an endless pile of tests and work? Sadly, their parents endured similar classes. Now, they dislike reading, too. Some kids become readers in spite of school or a lack of home support, but, unsurprisingly, many don't. Intentionally or unintentionally, the adults in many children's lives send a message that reading joy is a side benefit—rare and unexpected—but not a legitimate or expected outcome of learning to read for most people.

Kids are hearing this message loud and clear. Too many kids tell us that the primary purpose of reading in their classes is to complete assignments with what they read. They believe that what they turn in to their teacher or show their parents or caregivers when they are done with reading is most important—the book report grade, the essay, or the worksheet. In their minds, no one cares about what happens inside readers when they read. No one talks about reading joy with them. Too many young people (and their caregivers and teachers) believe that the only reading measures that matter are a kid's performance on standardized tests and class assignments. It's a wonder *any* kids make it through school and still love to read.

In families where reading is encouraged, caregivers complain they often fight negative messaging about reading from school. When their children experience reading as a chore at school, it erodes positive reading experiences at home or can supplant them entirely. Sometimes, caregivers become subversive to keep children's love of reading alive: Donalyn refused to buy her younger daughter, Sarah, the five novels she was assigned to read for high school summer reading until the Fourth of July because she wanted Sarah to have at least a month of her school vacation to read whatever she wanted. While it might seem strange to promote reading by *not* buying books, it worked.

Donalyn remembers the parents and caregivers of long-ago students who told her they signed their children's reading logs on Monday nights or Friday mornings—an act of compliance, not meaningful documentation of home reading. What right do schools have to dictate children's and adolescents' reading lives at home or during vacations, anyway? Too often educators blame caregivers when children and adolescents

**“The
moments of
happiness we enjoy
take us by surprise.
It is not that we seize
them, but that they
seize us.”**

—ASHLEY MONTAGU

show reading apathy, but we all must take responsibility for the conditions we create or ignore that may disengage children.

Increasing Your Book Knowledge: So Many Books, So Little Time!

We know we cannot read *all* the books published in any given year. But we also aspire to continuously expand our knowledge of the current books available of relevance to our students and instruction. We are conscious of the need to read across genres and forms and improve our ability to evaluate children's and young adult literature. And we rely on our students to, in part, guide our reading by observing their interests and needs as readers and seeking their book recommendations. Here are a few suggestions for making the most of your limited reading time and resources:

- **Accept your inability to read everything you want.**

There are thousands of books published every year. You cannot possibly read every book that looks interesting to you. You are going to miss some great books. You are going to read some amazing books, too. Enjoy your reading life and set aside your FOMO (fear of missing out).

- **Build a relationship with your public library.** When school libraries are not funded or kept current, teachers often lack access to the books needed to increase their book knowledge, just like students. Acquire a

public library card and use interlibrary loan for any titles unavailable in your local branch. Introduce yourself to the youth librarian. Solicit recommendations for your students and for yourself. If you discover new books of community interest, suggest them to the staff—after all, you are serving the same families. Working together benefits kids and makes your shared goals easier to attain.

- **Abandon books that are not working for you.** Life is short. There is always another book. Don't waste your limited reading time and mental energy reading books you don't enjoy. What do you need from a book? How long will you read a book before deciding not to finish? What do you notice about the books you abandon? What do you notice about the books you finish? Set personal guidelines and feel free to ditch a book if it doesn't meet your needs. Embrace abandoning a series, too, if it's feeling like a slog.
- **Expand your book knowledge with reviews, blogs, social media connections, and award lists.** With limited money to purchase books and limited time to read them, you want to spend your resources wisely. Reading review publications like *Horn Book*, *School Library Journal*, *Booklist*, and others provides high-quality background information on thousands of books. Recognizing that many professional reviewers and bloggers are white, seek out review sources led by educators and scholars who are BIPOC, such as the *American Indians in Children's Literature* blog and the Brown Bookshelf website. While you can't read every blog and book review site, find a few that offer credible, comprehensive, easy-to-access information. Which titles have been reviewed positively in several places? Who are the authors and illustrators creating exemplary books? Researching artists and their books broadens your working knowledge of what's available for children to read and the current trends and issues in children's publishing. You don't have to read every book to stay on top of ongoing conversations. Check your public library network or ask your school librarian about book review publications or resources. Which books seem like a good fit for your students? Which books fill a need in your community? (Refer to Chapter 2 and to Appendix A for additional resources for locating and evaluating books.)
- **Take recommendations.** We have both learned to rely on recommendations from trusted readers—including our students. When you see five middle schoolers



passing the same book around, you can assume the book has high interest for readers their age. Find out why. Besides, when you take recommendations from other readers, you reinforce your reciprocal relationship as readers in the same reading community. You have something to offer and so do they. Book recommendations also help us to determine *when* to read a book: a book may sit unread for months, but when a friend recommends it, we will often dig it out and prioritize it.

- **Alternate book lengths.** Intimidated by the five-hundred-page epic fantasy tome on your shelf? Pick a shorter book. Your reading stamina flags? Pick a shorter book. You haven't finished a book in a month? Pick a shorter book. Making pace through a book quickly fills you with a sense of accomplishment and keeps your reading momentum going when you cannot make a long-term commitment to a lengthy book.
- **Read representative titles.** You don't have to read every Jason Reynolds book (although you really should) to discuss his work or recommend it to others. Read noteworthy examples across his range, including fiction like *The Boy in the Black Suit* and poetry like *Long Way Down*. Which books appeal to a wide range of readers? Which books reflect an author's style or writing craft? What makes an exemplary graphic novel? Reading representative classics, award winners, and favorites across genres and formats shapes your criteria for evaluating texts and keeps your reading life interesting by exposing you to new genres, formats, writing styles, and information.
- **Read with your ears.** Do you listen to music or podcasts while exercising or working? Do you have a long commute or spend time traveling? Downloading a few audiobooks to your phone or device provides boredom insurance and opportunities to squeeze in a few more books. Ask your public library about its audiobook databases. Search by narrator when you find an enjoyable performer and research noteworthy audio productions from the Odyssey and Audie award lists.
- **Put yourself first from time to time.** No matter the demands on your book knowledge from your students and reading communities, read some books for you. Your entire reading life doesn't have to fulfill some outside purpose. Read that detective thriller, self-help book, or romance novel. Research your fascination with

climate change or Spanish cooking. Reread beloved favorites. You are more likely to engage others with reading when your reading life is personally fulfilling and joyful. Feed your reading preferences through your own reading, not students'.

Increasing our book knowledge strategically and working to identify and counteract our biases and prejudices improves our ability to locate, evaluate, and share books with our students.

Saying No to Incentives and Competition: Refusing to Undermine Community

In some schools, reading competitions and contests offer the only community-wide attempts to celebrate reading or young readers. Students must reach a certain reading goal such as reading so many books, pages, or hours and document proof or pass an assessment, and when they do, they receive better grades or earn prizes and awards. Children who do not meet such goals receive lower grades, punishment, or the public humiliation of failing to earn a desired reward. Such competitions send powerful messages to both the young readers who “win” and those who don’t: First, that reading is not worth doing unless you can win a prize doing it. Second, if you can’t read well enough to win a prize or if you lack access to resources that would help, you are a failure. Instead of fostering an inclusive reading community, incentives and contests for reading create a culture of reading winners and losers.

Research on the negative effects of external rewards on reading motivation shows that manipulating learners through extrinsic rewards and punishments (including the withholding of rewards) impedes real learning and seems most damaging to long-term motivation when the task being rewarded is already intrinsically motivating—like reading (Kohn 2018). Unfortunately, these misguided contests and competitions continue, often disguised as summer reading programs and “battle of the books” contests that control children’s reading choices and misrepresent why reading matters. Simply put, rewarding reading indicates only that you do not believe reading is innately rewarding, or you do not trust kids with their own reading lives, or both. Why any school would decide to set its students onto such a path of reading shame and failure is hard to understand.

One particular example of the damaging effects of incentives and competition that is close to Donalyn’s heart is the 40 Book Challenge. Donalyn described this student-focused reading challenge in her first book, *The Book Whisperer* (2009). She explained that at the beginning of the school year, she voiced an expectation to her students that they would read forty books from a variety of genres and in a variety of formats. Her classroom centered independent reading, used research-based practices for engaging children with reading, and supported students in forming a vibrant reading community: the result was that students were excited to read as many books as they could. In the decade since

the book’s publication, however, she’s seen the 40 Book Challenge corrupted into a competition

and incentive program in classrooms that don’t center independent reading or support reading communities. The effect has been what you might expect: a joyless rush through as many books as possible, with students competing against each other rather than forming a supportive community. Something that was originally used successfully to expand students’ reading lives and build community had been

BOOK STACKS

Families

King and the Dragonflies

Kacen Callender

The Bridge Home

Padma Venkatraman

The List of Things That Will Not Change

Rebecca Stead

Sea in Winter

Christine Day

The Science of Breakable Things

Tae Keller

turned into something that limited students' reading lives and damaged community, all because it had been infused with competition. Donalyn is unlikely to express how harmful this is to readers better than she did in this 2014 blog post:

The 40 Book Challenge isn't an assignment you can simply add to outdated, ineffective teaching practices. The Book Challenge rests on the foundation of a classroom reading community built on research-based practices for engaging children with reading. Assigning a 40 Book Challenge as a way to generate grades or push children into reading in order to compete with their classmates corrupts everything I have written and said about reading. The 40 Book Challenge is meant to expand students' reading lives, not limit or define it.

The 40 Book Challenge is a personal challenge for each student, not a contest or competition between students or classes. In every competition or contest there are winners and losers. Why would we communicate to our students that they are reading losers? For some students, reading forty books is an impossible leap from where they start as readers, and for others, it's not a challenge at all.

If Alex read two books in 4th grade and reads 22 in 5th grade, I am celebrating with him. What an accomplishment! Look how much Alex grew. He didn't grow because he read more books. He grew because he had 22 successful reading experiences.

Conversely, when Hailey read 55 books in 4th grade, reading 40 books in 5th grade isn't challenging her. Encouraging Hailey to read biographies and historical fiction, which she claims to detest, does more to stretch her than simply reading more books.

Honestly, I don't care if all of my students read 40 books or not. What matters is that students grow and evolve as readers and increase their competence, confidence, and reading motivation through their daily participation in our reading community.

From an equity and inclusion standpoint, school contests also erode communities in school by ignoring the economic disparities and differences in access to resources between our students. Students with piles of books at home, library cards, and caregivers who can attend school literacy events during the day or read the (likely English-only)

contest materials always have the advantage, driving a wedge between groups of students. Contests uphold the power and status of a few (predominantly white and affluent) families, teachers, or administrators and do little to improve the overall literacy outcomes or reading culture of the school. The school community, as a literacy hub for the families interacting with it, should not design programs and opportunities that disenfranchise families and students from engaging with school or with reading.