

Learning to Read by Cynthia James

I remember distinctly how I learnt to read. The process began with my mother teaching me to sing the ABC. There was the alphabet chart with animals; and I was told stories and nursery rhymes, parts of which I still remember by heart.

But then I went to school, and the fun ended. Learning to read became filled with anxiety. There were phonic drills and word families. There were trick words, too, because the exceptions were included. A lot of effort was spent teaching me to read in this way, which was very stressful. A big motivation, though, was 'getting changed,' although this meant going home with more words and sentences to be learnt for the next day.

But there was another kind of reading that occurred at school in these early years. When the serious reading drill was over, it was either story time or the time to go to the library to borrow books. At story time I listened avidly, because the story was always frightful or intriguing. Yet when I borrowed books from the library, I did not read them. I just looked at the pictures.

As I got to nine or ten, though, as soon as I came in my mother's presence, she would ask me to read a passage from whatever was nearby. It was usually a newspaper. Simple words such as "and" and "the" were almost unrecognisable in this material. Perhaps it was the print. While I stumbled over the words she would bawl: "Sound it out!" or "That making sense?" Although it was torture, I know now that these stretching exercises helped me to learn to read.

My mother also made me go and 'pick up [my] book' whenever I did something wrong, or as soon as she saw me having fun. To appease her, I merely opened books and turned the pages. Yet miraculously, in spite of my distaste for reading in elementary school, I managed to learn to read well enough.

There is one reading event in my school career, though, that lives with me to this day. At about age thirteen I forgot how to read. It has caused me in my adult life to re-evaluate what reading is, and also to realise how easy it is to confuse how one is 'taught' to read with how one 'learns' to read.

How did I forget how to read? When I went to secondary school, no one was standing behind my back to make me read, so I discontinued the habit of reading. Soon my schoolwork began to slide. My mother's response was to send me for extra lessons. I was shocked at how I stumbled over simple words I once knew.

That experience has taught me a lot about reading. It has taught me that there is no endpoint to learning to read. The importance of building social interaction and pleasure around reading is also not lost upon me. I know that phonics, vocabulary, and sentence structure are building blocks, but understanding how what one already knows fits into new contexts is essential. Writing, spelling, listening, and touching words with one's

mind and with one's hands are crucial. Also, although learning to read may take place in a group, all the people in that group may not learn to read at the same time or in the same way. But above all, I have come to realise that learning to read is wanting to make sense of the world inscribed in texts on one's own, in a purposeful and meaningful way, without being forced to do it.

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