The Book as Home? It All Depends
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What is it to feel difference—to feel a sense of distance from the traditional happily-ever-after portrait of parent and child reading together at night? Such a narrative has been instantiated in the public mind as the right way to be. It’s not just one possibility, but the predictive indicator not only of assured school success but also of a guaranteed, life-long love of reading. In Arizpe and Style’s opening Handbook chapter on reading in the home, the literary world Jane Johnson crafted for her children clearly demonstrates this narrative. Yet, in this chapter, Shirley Brice Heath, ethnographer and author of the groundbreaking Ways with Words—deconstructs the romance and tells us in a highly personal way what no bedtime story means. The intertwining of her childhood identity with her evolving adult academic identity and community work braids together a tale of multiple surprises and serendipitous turns narrating the many paths we take to reading.

No Way to Read

He left our interview, puzzlement written on his face. He walked across the campus parking lot, crowded with students, speaking to no one. For more than a week, I heard nothing from him until he confronted me outside the classroom where I was about to begin teaching. “I don’t believe you. What you tell me goes against everything we believe about learning to love reading.”

Ken Macrorie, teacher, essayist, editor, and inspiration for so many young writers in secondary school English classrooms, had asked to interview me for a book he was writing on language educators. I was flattered. It was 1985, and we were both faculty members at the Bread Loaf School of English, Middlebury College. This program brought secondary English teachers together to study literature and writing toward a Master’s degree. When I joined the Bread Loaf faculty in 1982, Ken was a legend in English education. His books had inspired the “I-search” paper, an approach to undertaking research essays that had taken a generation of high school students to success with the elusive school-favored genre (Macrorie, 1985, 1988).

In the summer of 1986, Ken expected to complete a book of biographical essays based on his interviews with scholars he viewed as key influences in the field of language education. He began our interview by telling me how much he had enjoyed the stories from eminent men and women who were to be in his book: James Britton, Janet Emig, James Moffett, and others whom I had long admired. Ken told me that each of his previous
interviewees had credited childhood teachers and favorite works of children’s literature with shaping their desire to become language educators. Now Ken turned to me.

“I really have no story about favorite books.”

Ken prodded: “Tell me about a teacher who instilled your love of literature.”

I shook my head and looked out the window of the classroom where we sat together with Ken’s audio recorder. I searched my memory. Nothing came to meet Ken’s expectations.

He persisted: “What about your favorite books as a child?”

“But, Ken, there weren’t childhood books as favorites—my grandmother’s Bible, and she could not really read.”

Ken forged ahead, certain now that it must have been teachers who brought me to a love of children’s literature during my elementary school years. They must be the inspiration for my life’s work in language and literacy. I continued to shake my head, and the interview ended shortly thereafter.

I could not tell Ken the story he wanted—yet another in the chain of accounts from eminent academics whose childhoods had been worlds away from my own. I kept my dissent silent then.

This chapter breaks that silence. Now I tell my story—one sure to resonate with narratives similar in consequence if not in detail for some readers of this volume. My story does not belong just to me. It has much in common with the unique tales that I hope children all over the world will stand up and tell at some point in their lives.

Their stories and mine come not out of anger but from a sense of difference. Our childhood histories are not laced with bedtime stories, favorite books, academic ambitions, family models of reading, and a circuit of moral and personal valuations in support of children’s literature. Our families have not traveled for leisure or lived in exotic parts of the world. Like me, these children have lived their early lives in small spaces, with few possessions of lasting worth, and with frequent moves from place to place. When asked where they live, they answer, “I stay at my grandmother’s house some of the time, and other times, I’m…” Their addresses represent households, not homes; these households have few if any books.

Adults in their lives cannot step back from the demands of work to tell stories or to sing songs with children. Except for the occasional Golden Book or Disney-film-inspired book picked up at the grocery checkout, books have no real claim on the budgets of the households in which they live. Their neighbors and friends find it hard to believe that some people “collect” books. Children like me encounter books randomly, usually only when someone else has made the book selection for whatever reason. We are not guided to cherish books and the time they might allow us to demand from adults for reading together. If and when we do find our way to books written especially for children, it is likely to come later in life, when some unexpected change of status or accidental acquaintance makes it possible for us to bond with such books. Someday these children with few books and bedtime stories in their early lives may, as I did, become enthusiastic converts and steadfast promoters of bedtime stories, book shelves, and collections of books for their own children and for the children of others. But perhaps not.

This chapter tells a counter story to that generally told by language educators, widely read authors of fiction and poetry, or scholars, illustrators, and authors of children’s literature. Theirs is the enchanted tale of the literary culture of childhood, told and retold by parents and readers nostalgic for the pleasures that books brought them as children (e.g., Arizpe & Styles, this volume; Hearne & Trites, 2009; Scholes, 1989; Schwartz, 1996; Spitz, 1999; Spufford, 2002; Tatar, 2009; Tucker, 1981). All these works tell us what reading is and what it should be. These are good people thinking good thoughts and wishing for others the good that children’s literature has to give. They (like Ken Macrorie) want others to share their joy, passion, and convictions surrounding the moral, pedagogical, and enriching experiences of reading.

My childhood story reminds us that there is no one age to read, value, and absorb these worlds of children’s literature. In many households, space, time, work, and social relationships ensure that there is no way to read at will and in peace. Children’s literature makes demands; it involves the “witchery” of story; it can lead to “addiction” (Nell, 1988; Rugg & Murphy, 2006). Avid readers, including booksellers, collectors, and scholars, underscore this point in the genre they have created of collections of quotations from others like them who have never recovered from being infected with the “venom of language” that left them in the joyful stupor of the fantasy worlds of early childhood literature (Breakwell & Hammond, 1994, p. 18).

Reading with young children requires time for snuggling and conversing. As children grow in their reading, they need ample space for sprawling bodies and books whose numbers and sizes may overwhelm the capacity of available bookshelves. Children who read books demand time for stop-action attention from adults willing to inspect drawings, watch dramatic re-enactments, and listen to retellings of tales. Childhood reading comes with a price, literal and figurative, in time, space, and commitment by intimates who love their children and value reading as part of the expression of that love.

My narrative reminds us that ways to meet and learn to love children’s literature have always been divergent and multiple and have not necessarily come with attentive parents and grandparents who spend time reading and talking with children. Learning to feel at home and to want to fill one’s home with objects, values, ideas, and even relationships not experienced in childhood comes for some of us only with adulthood. For some, neither the books nor the time and space for conversations about books will ever
come. For others who have these gifts in childhood, the accidents of life can erase their promise.

**Storied Romance**

Literacy educators hold tightly to the long-standing happily-ever-after transformational effects of children’s literature or the beloved teacher who instills a love of books. Since the opening of the 18th century, the Anglo world has repeatedly made use of this romance, weaving it into children’s books and through ideals of family literacy (cf. Lerer, 2008). Chapters in this volume attest to the strong ties that children’s literature holds now and has historically held in the values of middle- and upper-class families. The ideology that links books with leisure, literate identity, and well-roundedness encourages parents to “cultivate” their children in an extended production process (Lareau, 2003). They manage time, space, and talk to ensure their children’s familiarity with books. They look for performances and films, as well as accessories, to extend the characters and contents of children’s books. They take pleasure in their children’s language play, metaphors, and humor derived from bedtime stories. Parents draw on children’s literature to tease, praise, chide, and coax their children (cf. Wolf & Heath, 1992).

Some leisure time of parents goes to reading for pleasure. Family conversations reference books and films, and outings include art museums with paintings whose narrative origins lie in written texts. Parents often believe children can acquire a fondness for science or mathematics on their own, but reading and knowing books must be taught. Educators and child-rearing guidebooks urge parents to read to and with their children. Didactic recommendations proclaim the power of storybooks to instill, inspire, enthral, influence, teach, enable, and direct the ways of children. Children’s songs and musical experiences often echo the lessons of books—from shapes, colors, and letters of the alphabet to moral cautions. The cultural resources that early childhood experiences with books offer are believed to sustain lifelong habits of reading and even to change the lives of children forever (cf. Fox, 2001; Meek, Warlow, & Barton, 1977; Pennac, 2006).

For centuries, upwardly mobile and financially established families of European, Anglo, and Scandinavian societies have believed that reading instills discipline and morality and bears a special relation to ethical action (Miller, 1987). The stories of children’s worlds reinforce religious, musical, and visual values, model and inspire performance, and define not only what to stand for but also how to stand up to the world.

Picture books and illustrated stories, as well as chapter books, demonstrate the wit, curiosity, tenacity, and shrewdness of the young. In all these accounts, the young consistently out-maneuver adults, make friends with non-human creatures, and enlist magic, fantasy, science fiction, and a host of spirits to reshape the world to their will. Children’s literature enables its heroes and heroines to overcome risk, pursue and achieve the impossible, and reconcile contradictions—all while underscoring visions of the world to which adults around them subscribe (Wolf, 2004). Children can be anything they wish and travel anywhere on the “story road” (Hildreth, Felton, Henderson, & Meighen, 1940). Parents, older siblings, grandparents, librarians, bookshop owners, formal educators, authors, and edutainers—teachers all—have faith in the “magic of reading.” Thus, the romance of children’s literature and the wondrous potential of children merge into a unified whole.

**Work Narratives**

All romances rely on expectation. Those that extol the promise of picture books and written texts for children expect children and adults to have abundant leisure time free from the time demands of work. Reading is the enemy of chores and household tasks, for unlike storytelling, reading stops all other actions. Literary authors speak of their need to “hide,” “steal time,” “disappear,” or feign deafness to avoid having to stop reading and to obey an adult’s call to tasks. In homes and communities where family members do craft work, gardening, home and yard maintenance, food preparation and clean-up, and animal care, time for reading must be stolen away from chores and responsibilities. To read to or with a young child, adults step aside from the demands of their surrounding work. When youngsters begin to read for themselves, they must do so as solitary beings making themselves at home in their chosen book, disassociated from surrounding demands.

As a child, I had little chance for such disengagement.

For me, stories were told either by my grandmother or created in my own head in the midst of chores on my grandmother’s small farm. I was an only child, born to parents who had caught one another on the rebound from prior too-early marriages. My father was a traveling salesman and refrigerator repairman; my mother a traveling waitress fond of following her favorite customers home. I have never known the full story of their life before me, and by the time I was five, each had decided that for the most part their lives were fuller and freer when I was not around. For my part, their absence was normal, for my life was full of play in work, choice of adventures, and the freedom to create imaginary places, people, and narratives.

I spent most of my early life with my grandmother in rural Virginia (in counties identified in 2008 as those with the lowest life expectancy in the United States). The woman I called “Granny” was really my mother’s aunt, the sister of my mother’s birth mother, who had died giving birth to twins. My mother had the misfortune of being the female of fraternal twins. Her father took her twin brother, leaving my own mother to die. Granny rescued the 3-pound infant and raised her. As soon as possible, my
mother left home, and I was a product of her wanderings that she brought home to Granny.

When my grandfather died, my grandmother and I moved to a two-room tarpaper house without electricity while a cinderblock house was being built between our temporary home and the dirt road that fronted the farm. Our cinderblock house seemed to me a mansion, complete with oil stove and electric lights. Granny had a bedroom; so did I. There was an extra bedroom for my parents on the rare occasions when they came independently or together.

I raised pigs and calves; my grandmother took care of the chickens. We had a garden and a small orchard. The change of seasons, care of animals, and rhythms of planting and harvesting told their own stories—the narratives of life and work for Granny and me.

On Sundays and sometimes early in the morning, Granny sat in her chair at the window of her room, where she had a front-row seat to everything that passed. There she had “good light” for “reading” her Bible. Each day she also sat quietly before picking up one of her several small thin-lined notebooks. She bent her head close down over her work as she laboriously wrote bits of sayings she had learned from her parents and short poems memorized during her few years of schooling. When I sat on her lap, she retold the adventures of Daniel, Jonah, and other young risk-taking males from the Old Testament. My grandmother had barely finished elementary school, and she had gone to the local church up the road all her life. Her grip on reading was precarious beyond the stories she had heard again and again in Sunday School and church services. Bible School had instilled in her and passed on to me a joy in reciting Bible verses while we worked.

We practiced to prepare me for the competitions of Bible School. Across the dirt road in front of our house was the local Black church that had services once a month. Granny and I went to stand at the back of the tiny church with too few pews for the congregation. There, a deacon taught me how to read a hymnbook. Granny and I held the book together and sang our hearts out. Years later I knew I had learned something else standing in the back of that church: the printed word cannot restrain the soaring stories of gospel music, testimonials, and sermons.

Before I started school, the only books that came into my grandmother’s house arrived in our mailbox. They carried inscriptions that read “To Shirley, a little girl who likes to read.” They were signed with names like “Chuck” and “Bob,” acquaintances of my mother. As a child, I sometimes puzzled over how these people I had never met knew of my existence or why they thought I knew how to read or would even like to read. I remember an over-sized book with the strange title “Bambi,” a very long thin book of Mother Goose rhymes, and several Little Golden Books about tails, elves, brown puppies, and ducklings. As strange to my grandmother as they were to me, these books were slipped reverently into shelves behind the front door.

When or how I learned to read, I don’t know. I learned to recite the alphabet song my grandmother sometimes sang as we picked string beans. Their shapes of lines and curls went into letters of the alphabet—a welcome diversion as Granny and I prepared beans for canning.

By the time I was old enough to go to school, my father, pressured by his two younger sisters to take some responsibility for me, hired as my foster family a couple that my mother and father had met during their residence in North Carolina. They lived in High Point, North Carolina, where I could walk to the red brick elementary school. I spent that first-grade year away from Granny, holding onto the promise that I could come back to her in the summer.

Sensed Memories
My foster mom, “Mi,” worked in a patent-leather purse factory; my foster dad, Carl, was a milkman. They had one child, Dick, a year older than I. They became my family intermittently—at any point when my aunts pestered my father too much about the absence of any “real schooling” with my grandmother. There I could walk just up the road to a three-room school that ran on the agricultural yearly schedule, starting late in September after tobacco, the local crop, had been harvested. So far as I ever knew, none of the local White families included anyone who had ever finished secondary school. For most of us, school was a palace of play, with its surrounding forest and meadows and long recesses.

For the first grade, I lived with Mi and Carl and walked to school each day. Bookcases with books lined the first-grade room and the school library. Mi had bookcases in the front room, and she sometimes read in the early evenings, but Carl went to work at 3 a.m. each morning, and our tiny house offered no well-lighted spaces for escape with a book at night. In that first year of school, I discovered the thrill of reading little bits of print for unexpected details. My foster mother gave me my first spanking when, during a bout of the measles, she found me, shut away in the darkest area of the house, shaking the pennies from my penny bank to read their dates with a flashlight.

At school, we ended the year with a “second reader, level two” hardback book entitled The Story Road (Hildreth et. al., 1940), but we did not get to keep our readers. By early May when I knew I would have to part with that little orange-covered book filled with stories of barnyard and circus animals, I read the stories over and over again so as to take them with me back to the farm. I wanted to tell Granny stories from my book. As I prepared to leave Mi at the beginning of that summer, she gave me a package wrapped in brown paper and told me to open it when I got to Granny’s house. The car ride with my father took forever. As soon as we reached the farm, the three of us carefully removed the wrapping. There was The Story Road (Hildreth et al., 1940). My father read the inscription:
“To a little girl who likes to read. From some one that loves her very much, Mi and Dick.”

That summer I tried to interest Granny in the books that had been secreted away behind the door. The pictures of Bambi, Smoky the horse (James, 1926), and the wild creatures of Thornton Burgess’ Old Mother West Wind Series entertained us on nights when we were not too tired to stay awake. On my birthday late that summer, Granny gave me a package wrapped in a paper bag. Inside was Elsie Dinsmore (Finley, n.d.). The book, with its faded green cover, carried an inscription in a handwriting I knew well: “Presented to Rosa May [sic] by Mamma Dec. 25, 1920. Besure [sic] to read it and tell me what you think of Elsie D.” Granny had given this book to my mother (Rosa Mae) the Christmas of her 10th year. I had never seen the book. My own stories from my first-grade reader and our sporadic summer evening reading had resurrected Granny’s memory of a long-forgotten gift she had given my mother more than two decades earlier.

For that summer’s birthday, as though to meet some deep notion of what parents do when they cannot do what others might expect of them, my father gave me a bookend in the shape of a black Scotch Terrier. I did not go back to Mi’s for school that year or the next or the next.

I spent most of my elementary school years with Granny. I walked to the three-room seven-grade school of forty-some pupils with its “library” of three shelves of books kept behind the desk of the head teacher. She taught seventh grade, and prize pupils in her classroom won book-borrowing privileges. Otherwise, “books” meant workbooks.

**Black on White**

Down the road from my grandmother’s house lived two teachers at the local Black school, a large brick building boasting resources, bus transport, and a staff trained at Hampton Institute, the historically Black college in a nearby county. Aunt Berta was their mother and the matriarch who lived in the big wooden house with the detached kitchen in the backyard. From her porch, Aunt Berta could see the smaller brick homes of all her children set nearby under the large oak trees that surrounded her property. Aunt Berta always welcomed me with a bear hug and took me back to the kitchen for fresh corn bread and buttermilk. When my chores were done at home, Granny knew I might be down the road with Aunt Berta or back of the big house playing with her grandchildren. Music, talk, laughter, and an abundance of food and children marked frequent family celebrations—a sharp contrast to the quiet life Granny and I lived. Back at home, I had to tell Granny who had come home to see Aunt Berta, who was getting married, and who was building a new house. Then we could unwrap the packet of food Aunt Berta always sent home with me. Aunt Berta did not venture far from home, but her family members stopped by to see Granny and visit whenever they went up the road to the store. A decade later, I realized they never came to the front door.

My grandmother and I were one of the few White families in an area where Black farmers owned most of the land and raised tobacco, corn, and large gardens. We looked forward to late August when tobacco season began. In fields around the area, farmers pulled tobacco and brought it in large mule-drawn slides to curing barns. There, children handed bundles of tobacco to women who tied the tobacco onto sticks the men placed high in barn lofts where curing took place. We measured the weeks of tobacco season by the staged smells of green leaves fresh from the field to the pungent smoky odor of the yellowed dried leaves on the sticks taken down from barn lofts and hauled to tobacco auctions at the end of September. On water breaks, we splashed one another and played with tobacco worms fat from feeding on the green tobacco leaves.

By early October, the few White children watched their Black playmates board school buses for transport to the Black school 15 miles away. That school was a new sprawling brick building. But the small three-room elementary school for White students was plenty big for the few of us. Unlike the Black churches that held bi-weekly services, the two local White churches had circuit preachers who came only once a month except during the two weeks of summer Bible School. On Sunday mornings, White families collected either in the back of Black churches or in their own church to plan the annual Homecoming, clean the cemetery, or hold an informal Sunday School and sing-a-long.

White schoolteachers were “hired in” for the three-room school, given a small house, and watched with a cautious eye. Few stayed more than a year or so. A test of their adaptation to local ways came in the speed with which they honored our flexible attendance rules. They also had to learn quickly that we required long recesses to run home for chores or to complete our elaborate games based on comic book characters, such as Batman and Wonder Woman. How we got those comic books, I don’t remember, for the nearest city was over 50 miles away. But the comic books we shared among ourselves incited vivid reenactments with weapons crafted from tree limbs cut from the forest that surrounded the school.

Beyond the seventh grade, I walked to the paved road intersection where a bus took me and the few White students to the county seat, location of the small regional secondary school. The school had no library, but it did have a jousting field adjoining the fair grounds. The year’s highlight, the county fair, featured a jousting tournament, 4-H booths, and competitions for the best chocolate cake, biggest pig, and finest rooster.

Late in my secondary school years, my mother returned and decided to take Granny and me to south Florida. There my mother worked as a seamstress in winter months. In our small town—said to be the tomato capital of the world—Blacks lived on the other side of the tracks, at-
tended their own high school, and almost never crossed the tracks except to work in the tomato fields. The house where we stayed was very near the tracks on the “White” side. I sometimes rode my bike to the tracks where I could hear muffled voices and laughter and catch refrains of songs I had learned in the Black church at home in Virginia. Now that my mother was around much of the time, my grandmother told no stories and our household lived in silence.

At high school, I met my first Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Filipinos, Jews, and self-proclaimed atheists. Outsiders all, individuals from these groups became my friends, and I learned the stories of the Alvarado, Spitzer, and Mendoza families and the travels that had brought them to south Florida. My fitful peripatetic schooling left me woefully behind all my classmates in every subject. I studied every spare moment. My Spanish class, taught by a Puerto Rican woman who spoke little English, topped my list of terrifying experiences, for I had had no contact with any foreign language other than a bit of Latin from the secondary school in Virginia. I sought out more opportunities to be with Puerto Rican and Cuban friends, confessing my fear of the teacher and the language, and, most of all, of being called on to speak in class. As though to prove to myself that I was not an utter failure at this language, I turned more and more to reading Spanish literature, which I did with ease. My best-spoken phrases were those I used in private with the teacher to ask to borrow books in Spanish, so I could “practice” the language. She started me with children’s books and allowed me to graduate to novels and classics from Latin America and Spain. My practice with the language remained largely restricted to silent listening and solitary reading.

At 16, I went to work as a grocery store clerk, and I occasionally baked pecan pies to sell to neighbors. I never remember going to the school library, though I found my way to the town library, which was near the grocery store where I worked. There I found the resources I needed to write research papers to meet class requirements. I became editor of the school newspaper, and in the days when typesetting and “going to press” were literal activities, I spent most nights of my senior year after work at the small press that published local small-town newspapers. There the typesetter talked to me of books, asked about my reading, and gave me ideas on how to edit, inspire younger writers on the newspaper staff, and read beyond the headlines and obvious stories of newspapers.

Never wanting to displease or disappoint, I thought I should turn all the typesetter’s questions into action. One of my self-identified atheist friends was a reader, and one day I found my way to her house to ask her about what she read. She drew from the pile of paperbacks: “Start with these.” I found solitary reading for pleasure outside of class assignments or religious contexts strange and recalled the times when as a young child, my grandmother and I leafed through the gift books sent to me by my mother’s acquaintances. If Granny found me reading alone, she would ask: “Don’t you have something you should be doing?” Her “should be doing” never included reading without instrumental purpose. Her disapproval and cautionary tone stayed with me through my senior year of high school. I read alone, but with guilt, for now I was reading books I could not share with her.

By the middle of my senior year, the guidance counselor asked what I was doing about college. I looked at her in puzzlement. She called in my mother, having recognized the need to convince her that college was a possibility for me. A friend was applying to the University of Chicago; I decided to do so as well. My father, who weighed in at that point from afar, nixed that idea by declaring any college north of the Mason Dixon line off limits for me.

The college I would attend came down to a choice between a small women’s college in Georgia and Wake Forest in North Carolina. My mother heard that the Georgia college would feed me well (I weighed 99 pounds and stood 5’8” tall), and Wake Forest was a Southern Baptist school. But in the choice between food and God, the latter won. I headed to Winston Salem in the first year that Wake Forest admitted females. The campus banned dancing, required that dating be only double-dating, and insisted female students wear hats to compulsory Sunday chapel.

The summer before I was to enter Wake Forest, a single event shaped the course of my life’s work and my future of trying to understand families and children in relation to language, literacy, culture, and belief systems. Thomas Mendoza, my Filipino friend from high school, was driving through Virginia on his way to college in the Northeast. I wrote to ask him to come by my grandmother’s farm in Virginia. When my parents learned of the invitation, they issued a definitive “no,” explaining that his dark skin proscribed such a visit. On this denial pivoted all the accumulated observations of exclusion, racism, and discrimination I had seen but not fully reckoned with in Virginia or Florida. I had been too busy just playing and working to sort out any analysis of the strangeness of the givens and the choices that made up my unique world.

Perhaps my blindness came because in Virginia I had neither witnessed nor felt exclusion. Blacks and Whites went to different schools, but the Black schools were better. Blacks and Whites worked together, but the Blacks owned most of the land and hired us White children to work as “hands” in tobacco season. Granny and I went in and out of our neighbors’ houses and shared garden bounty. We gathered with friends in the back of Black churches to hear sermons and sing hymns. The Mendoza denial brought all that I had not seen into glaring detail in my memory. Uneasy in spirit and full of shame, I left for college that fall.

After a year of immersion in European history and Spanish literature, and a host of courses in mathematics, I left Wake Forest. The precipitating event came in the spring of my freshman year when I declared mathematics
as my major. My professor called me to his office a week later. He counseled against my decision: “You cannot enter what is a man’s world.” Denial and discrimination had twice cut short my choices. Now I made my own choice. I ran away to Mississippi to work in the Civil Rights movement.

There I lived on the generosity of Black families. I tutored children in Black schools and took part in meetings and protests. Now I began to seek out children’s books that related to the lives of the children, families, and churches that took me in. The few books I could find carried little of the richness of oral stories or the relevance to contemporary times I sought. Wonderful as Ezra Jack Keats’ *The Snowy Day* (1962) was, neither the children in Mississippi nor I found much there in common with our experience of either climate or environment. Night after night, Sunday after Sunday, I listened to grandmothers, aunts and uncles, and parents tell stories, stage performances of their neighbors’ lives, and plead with and sing for a god they believed knew them as characters and shaped the plotline of their days ahead.

From Mississippi, I went to southern California to work as a part-time substitute teacher in “special education” with migrant farm workers’ children with whom my spoken Spanish now flourished. By now, I knew the work of my life would be to understand the shaping of cultural differences and the place of language(s) within everyday ways and values. Finances meant that I moved often, each time enrolling in a different college along with correspondence schools. As a result, I finished college with concentrations in Anthropology, Sociology, Education, Spanish literature, and English. Readings required across these fields provided some answers to a few of my many questions. But none acknowledged the role of stories, oral and written, for children and adults hard at work shaping and reshaping their lives and trying to make words and ideas do things for them and the social world around them.

**Searching Stories**

Forces that mold what goes into our memories and values remain largely hidden from us. Only from time to time do we believe we know what defined who we now are. For most of us, any such revelatory insights bear little definable relationship with who we were yesterday or will be several years hence.

Ken Macrorie and others whose livelihoods are made in industries that surround children’s reading (from publishers to librarians and educators) urge consistency in the course of each individual’s history with language and literacy. They trust in the causal and directional powers of socialization into literary culture. Yet reliable patterns based on single chains of influence are more often wished for than achieved. A generalized trajectory cannot account for the variation of routes that may lead at any point to respect, reverence, and fascination for books.

After college, doctoral work in anthropological linguistics and Latin American Studies at Columbia University took me to Mexico to study the history of language and literacy from the arrival of Cortés until the mid-20th century. From 17th-century archives through contemporary practices in indigenous villages, the power of oral stories for children came through again and again. Friars sent from Castile to Mexico learned the indigenous languages by collecting children within the walls of the monasteries and then listening through the thin walls of the children’s dormitory to the stories and legends the older children told the younger ones to calm their fright. Language policies of the Castilian Empire in the New World resonated with expectations that children and their stories were the best teachers for the missionaries (Heath, 1972).

In the 1980s, my teaching at the Bread Loaf School of English fed my anthropological interest in how readers and writers of contemporary American fiction connected with one another throughout the 20th century. I began that work by hanging out in workshops that creative writers attended and by observing readers and writers in their separate environments. In the fiction sections of bookstores in 27 cities across the United States, I loitered, asking every fifth client who bought a work of fiction what led them to the purchase and if I might phone them at set intervals in the coming months to see how their reading had gone. Writers from creative writing workshops I attended allowed me to observe them over a full week at random times during a single year. I followed this pattern for eight years, socializing in literary events across the country with major contemporary writers reading and talking with their devoted readers.

One of the young novelists I met during the course of my study was Jonathan Franzen. Initially, he had resisted my project and “the whole idea behind it.” Several years later, he entered the national scene with his award-winning novel *The Corrections* (2002). Critics saw him as a young writer to be reckoned with in the future.

In April of 1996, Jonathan published an article in *Harper’s Magazine* entitled “Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, A Reason to Write Novels.” A major New York newspaper had asked him to write a piece on the topic of “the great American novel.” When he undertook the task, he remembered my research. With my blessing, he wove my findings into his reflections on his own life as reader and writer. He noted that novelists dislike social scientists and the idea that anyone could poke into matters of readership. He described me as a “beacon in the murk” that inadvertently jarred him from his depression about the state of the literary world and of his place as writer in that world. Most meaningful to Franzen from my poking about in the ways of readers and writers of American fiction was the fact that I could give names and reasons to his own childhood discovery of literature. I had found two key factors in the lives of readers who habitually read “serious” fiction as adults. The first was experience as a
child with reading models—intimates who valued reading and encouraged others to take up this good habit. Franzen solemnly reported that he could not remember seeing either of his parents read a book, except when they read to him as a child. He could not declare them good models of reading or even promoters of the habit. He smirked, thinking he had demolished my social science “findings.”

I continued: “But there’s a second kind of reader. There’s the social isolate—the individual who from an early age feels different from everyone else and who may or may not read as a child, but will, if fortunate, later discover literature and find others sorting out their unique destiny in life.” His silence permitted me to go on. I said to him: “Readers of the social isolate variety are much more likely to become writers than those of the modeled-habit variety. You, Jonathan, are one of those socially isolated individuals desperately wanting to connect with your own past, a substantive imaginary world, and your intense lonely existence. You want these to be of some consequence in the future.”

Franzen’s piece for Harper’s Magazine argued that writers, almost by definition, feel estranged from the world around them and most comfortable constructing and inhabiting an imagined world (1996, reprinted 2003; see also Franzen, 2007). The writer Don DeLillo had told me, as he later wrote to Franzen, that “the writer leads, he doesn’t follow.” This is because the dynamic behind the creative act will always live in the writer’s mind and not in questions the writer ponders about acceptance or readership. In response to his article for Harper’s Magazine, Franzen received many supporting testimonies to confirm the ties between loneliness and imagination in the lives of writers.

Readers wrote to say that they too were lonely and found joy, solace, and togetherness in reading the complexity of the lives of others. Echoing through these letters were voices railing against the death of either the novel or book reading. Readers and writers both do what they do to fill a need—generally unexpressed though keenly felt and certainly denied to the individual’s harm (Fox, 1992). Society simply had to keep books and reading alive. Though romance, mystery, and even compulsion surround ideas of literature, whether for children or adults, reality lies in the cultural apprenticeship they afford and the company they provide for lonely writers who will be society’s keenest critics.

**Uncommon Readers**

In 2007, the British playwright Alan Bennett fictionally portrayed his monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, as a reader who came quite late in life to reading fiction and poetry. As she did so, four changes came over her that she attributes to her new self-identity as reader. First, she wants to talk about her reading with others. Then, she wants to meet with the authors themselves to probe their motivation and inspiration for writing. Along the way, she organizes principles of her reading that derive from to-do and do-not-do lists, for she wants to read all the works of authors she comes to admire. For a long time in her reading, she tells herself to avoid the writings of authors whose characters live their lives in social classes with which she has little familiarity but considerable responsibility, but she overcomes this limitation. Ultimately, she determines that she will co-mingle in the world of writers by becoming a writer herself. She moves from recording her reading in her diary to wishing to shape her responses and her own creative worlds into written texts.

Despite the overdrawn humor and satirical framing of his book, Bennett hit a nerve for those among us who see something of our own later immersion in the world of books in the Queen’s march of revelations. Like her, we have experienced the disdain of those who equate reading with shirking other responsibilities. Like her, during our daily routine duties, our thoughts remain on pages in the middle of a chapter cut short by the call of responsibilities others thrust upon us. And like the Queen, we have lost consciousness of outward appearance and relished curling up before the fire in our favorite baggy clothes and warmest socks. We have expanded the comfort zone that the escape of reading offers so that we may distance ourselves from the intruding world. Ultimately, we have come to decide we too can write, and we have turned out our own books or found ways to promote books to others (cf. Gilbar, 1989).

Like Bennett’s Queen, I too took up writing books. But I did so early in my career with an eagerness to explore and express what I learned about language and its uses in oral and written forms. Unlike the Queen, however, I was fascinated by more than words: I was drawn also to the powers of visual illustration. During fieldwork in Mexico, I spent time with not only archival remnants of Mexico’s past but also in sites of excavation of monuments, settlements, and religious centers in Oaxaca, Puebla, the Federal District, and the Yucatan Peninsula. There texts came along with sculptured profiles of individuals and events carved into the stonework of panels that surrounded temples and public buildings.

Having completed my book on Mexico (Heath, 1972), I settled in the Piedmont Carolinas to teach in the midst of the initial turmoil of desegregation, busing, and lamentations by White teachers that they could not understand the language of their Black students. At first I spent my out-of-school time between Black and White working-class communities, working in gardens, gossiping on front porches, helping can food, and attending church and Bible School. I gradually wore a natural pathway into Black and White middle-class communities, where parents followed the romantic idea that early experiences with books would ensure their children’s school success and establish lifelong reading habits.

In White working-class communities, I watched parents
read religious stories for children, point to illustrations and letters in alphabet books, and talk through books that recounted simple “true” stories written for children about pets, farm animals, and birds and small animals of the fields and forests. For these families, reading in and about the Bible held highest place in time and honor. Their questions asked for straight and familiar answers—no opinions or chases into imaginary places.

In Black working-class communities, I relived my years in the family compounds just down the road from my home with Granny. I heard gossip laced with jokes, family stories, and tales full of fun and moral lessons. Entire families used newspapers, letters, and circulars as prompt and props for stories.

For White working-class families, the exaggerated stories of their Black counterparts seemed to be nothing but lies. For Black working-class families, the stories their White counterparts told were just plain boring. My book, Ways with Words (1983), about the ways of reading and telling stories in these two communities laid bare just how uncommon some readers are.

In the decade in which my book was published, academics in fields from anthropology to religion began to study what being literate could mean across cultures and situations. Again and again, these works showed the intertwining of literate habits with different norms of time, space, relationships, as well as religious, academic, and commercial incentives (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Boyarin, 1992; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984, 1993; Taylor, 1983). Books, their accompanying artifacts and values, and their relation to children’s socialization and adult habits of child-reading could not be considered apart from socioeconomic class, geographic location, religious beliefs, or cultural milieu. The only “common readers” were, in fact, those created out of the cultural habits and ideals elevated in Western societies where reading held a place right up there with morality and advancement in class status. The majority of the world was filled, instead, with “uncommon readers,” albeit of a very different sort than the Queen Elizabeth of Alan Bennett’s fiction.

By the early 1990s, the unquestionable importance of sociocultural context to the structures and uses of language was firmly established by social scientists and historians. Professional educators acknowledged the idea, but generally could not fit the wide-ranging differences into their fixed curricula and assessment tools for teaching reading. Educational policy, tests, and texts in the United States generally ignored the unique language and cultural patterns of African American communities in the South as well as the North.

Meanwhile, in both the United States and other economically advanced nations, migrations, relocations of refugees, and absorption of asylum seekers further challenged fixed normative ideas of routes to literacy and academic achievement. Motivations behind migration varied greatly for newcomers, as did the extent and type of their prior experience with either written language or formal schooling. Some read in non-alphabetic scripts, some only in a non-Indo-European language. Others had little experience with schooling or literate expectations.

Yet the norms and modes of teaching reading narrowed. The appeal of phonics accelerated while arguments for children’s literature that had previously held for homogenous populations fell away as inappropriate and ineffective. Decoding became the goal. Comprehension according to formulaic dictates of “main idea” and “supporting evidence” became the primary purpose of such pedagogical practices. Education policymakers viewed interpretation and imaginative language, along with creative learning, as impossible with children vastly different in oral language fluency and background experiences. Learning to read mattered more than reading to learn. Surveys of book buying and reading for pleasure showed that both were on the decline. The “death of literature” was sure to come with the reduction of print and growth of images, technological shortcuts in communication, and shifts in habits of work and leisure (Kernan, 1990).

Nevertheless, children’s literature and its power to inspire learning and to initiate a lifelong love of books and reading lived on in the intuitional wisdom of confident teachers and many middle-class parents whose family life was increasingly feeling pressure from the information economy and its partner technologies. Literary and art critics continued to hold onto the Western-model-tells-all-we-need-to-know framework. Books on reading and its values across the ages of individuals and of Western history proliferated (cf. Manguel, 1996). Romance is a difficult thing to dislodge.

Making Images, Expanding Modes, Shrinking Words

Particularly challenging to established thinking about children’s reading and their literature have been picture books and illustrated books, comics and graphic novels (Eisner, 1996; Fox, 2008; McCloud, 1993). In such works, image often dominates word. As images expand in their conveyance of meaning, words shrink in their own power or work in sync to retain it. Authorities beyond the child reader lose control over interpretation. Through images, young readers can take charge.

Once the child has learned to speak, picture books engage child and adult relatively equitably. Infant laughter, gesture, and imitation are soon followed by the child’s growing takeover of the story beyond the written words. Characters and their moves and motivations belong to the child who now reads images to take them beyond the written words. Adults read for meaning while children look for meaning. With the discovery of comics, children carry their expertise in reading images further into imitation of entire scenes with their friends and sometimes into their own attempts to draw graphic narratives. The
visual can quickly outpace the verbal. For decades, young readers have charged into the “plague” of comic books and all that it represents by its open inclusion of readers of the lower classes, derision of social norms, promotion of consumerism, and representation of the horrors of “man’s inhumanity to man” (Gordon, 1998; Hajdu, 2008; Spiegelman, 1986, 1991, 1994). With graphic novels, the imagined world within the page and beyond belongs almost entirely to the young (Adams, 2008). The intimacy of the adult-child reader dyad fades away.

Concern over the graphics of narrative derives from the long-standing linkage of children’s literature with control over the moral, behavioral, and linguistic futures of children. Children’s literature developed and has continued in relatively few regions of the world—the majority of those steeped in Anglo traditions, Judeo-Christian values, and often the tying of nationalism to moral certainty.

Early in their history, Scandinavian nations enlisted religious leaders to reinforce the habit of parents reading with their children, withholding services of the Church to resisting parishioners. Along with their empire, the British spread a high estimation of reading with children and entrusted books to build foundations for commitment to hard work, individualism, academic promise, and commercial success. American colonies, more than any others, renewed Protestant faith in reading the Word for life guidance and placed responsibility on parents to bring up their children as believers and practitioners of Biblical truths (see Stevenson, this volume). Sunday School books, pamphlets, daily devotional readings, and later video films, DVDs, and illustrated music books expanded meanings of ancient dicta in contemporary life.

The history of visual art in the Western world leaves little doubt about the spiritual convictions behind the idealized image of mother and child reading together in intimate pose with a book. European and American painters have given us the classic metaphor of the reading mother through Mary, the mother of Jesus, who becomes spiritual authority reading with her child as novitiate. The earliest now-familiar rendering of this narrative comes from Simone Martini’s 14th-century depiction of the Annunciation. Medieval and Renaissance artists repeatedly portrayed the Virgin Mary startled from her reading by Gabriel’s announcement of the forthcoming birth of Jesus, the Christ child. Uses of light, the cast of the eyes of the reader, and the positioning for the perspective of the viewer outside the paintings combine to reflect absorption, tranquility, and solitude in the presence of book as altar (Adler & Bollmann, 2005). The handling and elevated placement of the Bible as the Word during Protestant church services echo these sentiments of Judeo-Christian art. Such visual narratives portray the duality of being both outside the mundane world and inside the sacred realm of certainty, loving care, and promise. The family Bible in quiet times of intimacy leads to reenactment. Granny had never seen a work of Western visual art, but she knew how to take her Bible and sit me on her lap where our reading encircled us.

Women Who Read Are Dangerous

However, an oppositional genre of painting has told another story. From the Middle Ages forward, artists have suggested that reading may lead the weak and innocent away from the sanctity of home and into danger, foul play, and wrongly-placed passion. The romance of reading has, until recently, largely ignored any such idea. But by the late 20th century, art critics began to deconstruct details of classical works of art. This scholarship, along with the growing body of research on women readers by feminist writers, revealed images of women reading letters and other materials that could lead women into danger or even, more menacing, make them dangerous influences. The book as home, retreat, and reliable source of knowledge could be inciting resistance or rebellion.

These paintings suggest the potential of book reading, especially for women weak in resolve, to disrupt their devotion to family, their home, and their chastity. Images in these paintings show that reading stops time and action and allows viewers to read into images the secret desires of women. Jacob Ochtervelt’s La Requête amoureuse (1670) and Johannes Vermeer’s The Love Letter (ca. 1669–1670) tell more than is seen. When these artists portray facial expressions of women reading book or letter, viewers across the centuries have imagined lovers, plans of escape, and inclinations to temptation beyond the bonds of propriety. Les femmes qui lisent sont dangereuses [Women who read are dangerous] is a volume of paintings of women lost in reading through the ages (Adler & Bollmann, 2005). The images remind viewers that books and their secrets may stir in women the disobedient nature and weakness of will of their progenitor Eve. They may step out of place and wish to be “the woman on top” (Davis, 1965). Yet the message is that they must not succumb to either the temptations of others or their own ambitions (Liedtke, 2001). They must not lose themselves in nature, a favorite suggestion artists have repeatedly made in their paintings of women reading in open fields, on park benches, and before a window looking out onto a garden of rambunctious flowers (cf. Updike, 2005 on “looking”).

Reading invites self-knowledge as well as exploration of distant places and unsanctioned behaviors. Reading takes one away from home to places where authority, ownership, and responsibility differ. Maps and legal documents, along with instruments for measuring and recording, figure in the background of many paintings of individuals reading and hint of multiple forms of “accounting.” We must take measure of ourselves, but there are many ways to do so. Reading books can dis lodge the weak and uninitiated—women and children—from received values that seem not to account for love or desire for freedom. Books introduce subversive ideas and lead women and the young to imagine
behaviors and relations unaccountable in society’s ways of measuring us. Reading may give women pleasure when their lives offer little else. *La Liseuse*, a Renoir (1877) portrait entitled “The Reader,” became synonymous with a woman reader “lost in a book” and likely therefore to shirk her responsibilities as wife and mother.

Some painters portrayed women with books as resistant to the world of external power. Impressionists often juxtaposed the woman’s inner world of peace in a book with the external world of upheaval (see, for example, Claude Monet’s *La Gare Saint-Lazare*, 1877). Female artists, such as Gwen John (1911), perhaps best known for her *Girl Reading at the Window*, made women reading a favorite theme in their work. The 1970s awakening to the subject of female artists consistently points to their serene portrayals of “the reading woman” (with her child or children) (cf. Barlow, 1999; Fine, 1978/1995; Schur, 1991).

But the quiet world of women reading changed after World War I when women were vitally needed in the workplace. Once called upon to work outside the home, women no longer had to read books to enter the world of dangers and temptations. They were now in the middle of them in a world of war and work. Throughout the 20th century, the realities of women in the workforce eroded the ideal of mothers having time and place to read at home with their children. By the end of the century, infants and toddlers went off to caregivers outside the home for much of each day; their evenings and mornings with parents held little time for reading. The image of mother at leisure to read with her child disappeared from Western art and norms of family life.

**Dislodged and Dislocated**

The idea that written texts undermine authority through alternative readings began well before the printing press. Storyboard narratives within medieval illustrated manuscripts and stained glass windows of cathedrals took readers and worshipers beyond Biblical text. In illustrated manuscripts of the Middle Ages lie the origins of comic books, graphic novels, books with illustrations, and children’s picture books. This era established the ability of images to expand modes and shrink the power of words and bear examination when we turn to the question of what contemporary children read and the relative extent of image, print, and talk in their everyday worlds (Kress, 2003). Here the issue is not so much that written texts may lead the weak away from duty, morality, and ethical behavior, but that images, even more than words, explode with unpredictable meaning.

Borders of illuminated manuscripts, as well as sidebars to the Biblical narratives depicted in stained glass windows of medieval churches, tell of artistic license. *Vignettes*, the term used for borders of medieval illustrated manuscripts, contained images that suggested stories that only sometimes related to Biblical texts (Watson, 2003). Vignettes that appeared alongside the text and within initials that opened textual materials included scenes of everyday life along with fantasy and foolhardiness. Monkeys covered their ears, grotesque animals frolicked, children teased dogs, and wives berated their husbands (cf. Stallybrass & White, 1986). Monks and scribes who illustrated manuscripts slipped into their images license to let the mind wander, question, and turn cynical (Heath & Wollach, 2007).

Illustrated manuscripts and stained glass windows of cathedrals may be the first crossover texts of Western history. For example, the windows gave parishioners in cold medieval cathedrals incentive to look up to find well-known Biblical characters moving through their narratives in grouped story-board-like panels. For children, the appeal must have been in the floating images—the butterfly, industrious squirrel, and bird on its way to build a nest. These designs were child-like and child-ready as were embellishments buried in garment folds and background scenes of distant castles. Cathedral windows were the kind of text and image artists believed children and adults might like to read. Text and illustration worked together and yet apart from one another.

Chapbooks of the 18th century continued the pesky trend of working text and illustration into intimate partnerships that sometimes quarreled with one another and at other times joined peacefully. Chapbooks used the license of image to let young readers see the lives of the poor, the renegade, and the miscreant. Picture books and illustrative didactic materials created by educated mothers in the home to support their children’s reading sustained the inclusiveness of chapbooks (see Arizpe & Styles, this volume; Heath, 2009). Children could look through the visual lens of the stories of their less fortunate counterparts.

Comic books of the 20th century do the same, telling stories of war, racial and ethnic divisions, violent crimes, and supernatural powers that contrast dramatically with the relatively tame stories of discovery and adventure rendered only in print (Hajdu, 2008; Heath & Bhagat, 1997). American, British, and European illustrators differ in use and extent of detail, suggesting national variation in assessment of when and how young readers can work out ambiguities and draw judgments on their own from images and text. In the 21st century, comic books joined graphic novels in their appeal to the shrinking attention spans of young people. Films and video games animated images and added sound effects, further reducing words—even in the spoken mode. Hand wringing over the dominance of image over text was inevitable. Official reports, such as *Reading at Risk* (National Endowment for the Arts, 2004) and *To Read or Not to Read* (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007), declared the decline in both amount of time youngsters spent reading and their comprehension skills with extended texts. Public media and educational reports lamented that young people not only read less now than in the past; they understood less of what they read.

Debates continue, with extremists certain that not only
is literature “dead,” but the entire publishing industry is in peril. Still, moderates and advocates of images in every learning life view the widening range of modes and media young people use to read, write, and act in the world as a welcome though drastic change (Kress, 2003; Spitz, 1999). They argue the need to view the current rise of image, performance, and autonomy—as well as imagination—among young people as a desirable challenge and expansionist opportunity for educators (Buckingham, 2003; Doherty, 2002; Flood, Heath, & Lapp, 2008; Hobbs, 2007).

But this opportunity comes with a price. Adults trained in guided reading and interpretation of print have little understanding of how the young actually see and interpret images and print in relation to one another and layer meanings through multiple media. A sense of dislocation prevails for adults who hesitate to invest in learning how to navigate visual texts from comic books to on-line multi-party role-playing games. On the other hand, young people see themselves as disconnected from resources and identities that might guide them in ways to deepen skills and knowledge. The most astute young feel the dislocation coming for them in a world where their skills with entertainment and diversion via the internet will be no match for rapidly increasing computing power and electronic control over their lives (Heath & Wollach, 2007). Adults feel their past disconnects them from the present; young people see their present dislocated from the future. The romance of children’s literature seems distant indeed.

Why Do We Care?

In the history of literacy studies, few topics have generated as many words of confession and conviction as reading and writing. Aristotle and Plato held strong views, based on their own lives and protections of the State. Religions of the world have celebrated vision as our greatest sense, and their evocation of the eye as the soul of human essence reminds us that we are knowledge makers and interpreters. We speak of cognitive understanding as “seeing,” “gaining a perspective,” “having a viewpoint,” and “glimpsing meaning.” Scientists, artists, philosophers, and theologians have let us look over their shoulder as they read and left us their accounts of transformation brought about through their reading of words and interpreting of visual images that reveal narratives fundamental to life.

Judgments such as these lead individuals to be unduly self-conscious about their lives of reading and writing. How much? What kind? And for what?

When I ask these questions of myself, I admit that my life with reading started late. In the anger and violence of Civil Rights in Mississippi, I felt helpless. It was the same when I confronted in California educational institutions’ exclusion of migrants from their language and culture. All I could see to do was learn; perhaps books could prepare me to know how to change things. I had to catch up for lost time.

It took me more time to overcome the silence of my childhood and to learn that conversations about ideas had to come along with book reading.

I threw myself into literature and the social sciences, burying any memory of my exclusion in college from further study of mathematics. Research on people and their ways of living and thinking came naturally to me. I liked listening and looking in silence. Fieldwork in Mexico and archival discoveries opened to me past and present contrasts in values and uses of literacy across languages and cultures. A keen observer of human behavior, I was never satisfied with only what I could see in the present scene before me. I had been fooled by that complacency in my childhood. Now I questioned every form of exclusion and use of language—oral and written. I searched for origins, reasons, and consequences. What were the personal pains and joys, the current shaping forces and those of history? A career in linguistic anthropology and social history fell into place gradually and certainly without long-term goal-directed planning. My reading was eclectic and frantic, the need to know relentless. Yet my life of scholarship was still void of extended talk about books. I read alone.

Extended conversations with books came in my head as I wrote books. I typed Telling Tongues (1972), based on archival research and fieldwork in Mexico, on an unfurling roll of shelf paper fed into the typewriter so as not to have to stop to insert separate sheets of paper.

When bilingual education became a national possibility in the mid-1970s, I wanted to help. I spent time in Washington, D.C. with fellow sociolinguists and educators. Slowly my writing and reading became less dependent on my solo conversations with my reading and writing. Expanded opportunities for conversation came when desegregation of Carolina schools raised questions about relations, linguistic and behavioral, between Whites and Blacks. I spent time in local communities and classrooms talking with teachers and children about their learning. I traveled to state capitals of South and North Carolina to lose myself in letters and diaries of plantation owners and small-town people whose lives centered on farming and raising tobacco and evolved into millwork with the coming of textile mills in the 1920s.

I filled the lives of my young children with books but without knowing good from bad, rich from shallow. Grocery store racks and the school library provided their books. Marriage, divorce, remarriage, and a move to Stanford University just as my children ended primary school brought possibilities I had never imagined. My husband, Charles Ferguson, was a prominent linguist whose love of language, distant places, and cultural supports for literacy was as intense as my own. Also an only child, he had grown up in working-class Philadelphia. As a young boy, he had been free to explore the city’s many bookstores, hear other languages, and explore language in the many religions of the city. Our household was filled with children’s literature and talk of politics, travel, and
languages. Visitors from around the world came to our home in Palo Alto, and we traveled to parts of the world where numerous languages and cultures competed for political and social legitimation.

At Stanford University, I met Shelby Wolf, a young mother of two girls whose early childhoods with literature differed immensely from anything I had ever imagined. Together we talked for hours about how to interpret her field notes documenting her children’s talk about literature, dramatic reenactments, and entry into solitary reading. We discovered together the writings of other scholars who had also documented their children’s lives with books. We brought this work together in our analysis of children’s worlds of reading (Wolf & Heath, 1992).

Children’s literature presented itself as another field in which I could feel simultaneously the panic and joy of catching up. By happenstance, several years later, I learned of the existence of an early 18th-century manuscript collection of children’s literature in the Lilly Library at Indiana University. Over nearly a decade, I studied British history while analyzing the nearly 500 pieces in the “Nursery Library” (see Arizpe & Styles, this volume). I was “possessed” by the quest to learn about Jane Johnson, the maker of the collection (cf. Byatt, 1990). British scholars of children’s literature Morag Styles, Victor Watson, and Evelyn Arizpe joined me in the search to know more about Johnson’s life. Occasions for conversation, debate, and museum exhibitions, conferences, and books followed (Heath, 1997; Hilton, Styles & Watson, 1997; Styles & Arizpe, 2009).

Simultaneously, I was immersing myself and young ethnographers from Stanford in the lives of urban youth living in under-resourced neighborhoods across the United States. Theirs was a world different from my own and from any romantic notions about books in early childhood as essential to learning in later life. We studied young people who found their way to community organizations in their early teens to join theatre and music groups, artist cooperatives, and community service projects. They took up reading for pleasure, often motivated by the collaborative work of the group. But they also relished risk-taking, challenge, and long conversations. Talking about what they had read or were learning became socially acceptable among peers and adults who shared their interests. Talk motivated reading that they could take into action, contemplation, and further accumulation and testing of information (Heath & Roach, 1999; Heath & Smyth, 1999; Heath & Soep, 1998).

Meanwhile, I continued to follow the Black and White families of communities I had begun to study in the 1970s. The twists and turns of their lives took them far away from the South we knew in those days. Within two decades, their definitions of family, social life, religious values, opportunity, race, and work bore no resemblance to the lives I had captured in print in Ways with Words (1983/1996; Heath, 1990). I wrote and continue to write to document the dynamic of their mobile existence as individuals and families in “liquid times” (Bauman, 2000).

Knowing books, talking ideas, and seeing the world is sure to dislodge certainties—one’s own and those that others try to force on us. For me, sweeping generalizations about language, culture, youth, childhood, race, gender, family, and tenets of socialization were boulders to be pushed away in order to open landscapes of difference, possibilities, and human capacities. The issue of difference is not that it is there, but how much difference we allow it to make for us.

When we are in difference as distinct from indifferent, we see that persistence of either children’s literature or book reading as intimate parent-child dyads in quiet spaces of homes cannot take us where we now have to go. Families in economically advanced societies, those that have been the primary producers and consumers of books for children and young adults, have less and less time, space, and inclination to read with and for their children beyond the toddler years. Economic realities, two-working-parent homes, single-parent homes, and competing forms of home entertainment push interactions with print, image, music, and talk into layered mediated forms, places, and relationships. Recently, the number of hours libraries remain open across the United States has decreased, and many libraries have closed. Libraries and schools, as public institutions, are increasingly required to censor young learners’ access to the internet and to new media, such as graphic novels and novels written for young adults.

Yet young people who learn that reading books may feed their special interests will find ways to get what they want. On buses, in community centers, and with special friends, they create for themselves mobile home-like atmospheres. The future of the book’s home will be the “non-spaces” of supermodernity, away from private households into public spaces and in search of human company around and through technologies (Augé, 1995, p. 94).

Coda

What about Ken Macrorie’s proposed collection of autobiographies of language educators? It never appeared. Whether or not my dissonant pattern moved him to set aside the project, I do not know. In the intervening years, I have resisted attempts to universalize ideas about literacy, language development, readers and writers, and modern childhood and youth. As individuals, we matter not in the ways we fit into categories or meta-narratives. Instead, we matter in the ways we experience and remember the emotions, expectations, and connections of our early lives and attempt to understand how those of others affect who they have become. “Each childhood is a nightlight in the bedroom of memories” (Bachelard, 1960, p. 140).

All childhoods of promise do not begin with reading as an archetypal activity. In this chapter, I have tried to
shift us away from treasured reveries of childhoods with books. Through the lens of my life story, I have urged us to understand that people embody many different aspects of human potential—artistic, spiritual, economic, cultural, and intellectual; realized human potential does not depend on childhoods with favorite books. I hope to have disengaged us from constructions of single trajectories toward set destinations of literate lives. I have wished to heighten acknowledgment of difference not as deprivation but as incentive and inspiration to recognize that we are born to grapple—to observe and reflect on all that we experience.

From my life with books of all kinds, some written for children and the young, others about them, I have formulated two principles. The first recognizes that expectations embedded within metaphors of trajectory, pathway, and life course rely on a horizontal view to the past that precludes an open future. Such a perspective blinds us to differences of circumstance and will that lie beneath the shade of our skin and confines of our childhoods. The horizontal fails to account for the randomness of accident and serendipity.

A vertical perspective lets us see the intertwining of regional, racial, and gender origins with individual will and convictions of change. Verticality takes us deeper and higher and may even force us to return to places we think we have known before. We have to look up and down before we move ahead.

The second principle concedes that we cannot always move either ourselves or others—even those we love most—forward. The case in point is my daughter Shannon. In her childhood, we lived the romance of the book as home in our hours of reading, enacting, talking, collecting, and relishing books. When she was 18, on the cusp of adulthood, she suffered a severe head injury in a mountain-climbing fall. Memory, affect, engagement, and promise—all that had made children’s literature part of the fiber of her being—left her today. A woman in midlife, her afflictions limit her to collecting and categorizing children’s books and sometimes bringing their names into conversations she otherwise could not choose to enter. Her subterranean childhood passion survived brain insult to transform into the comfort and control that book names and taxonomies can give.

There is, to be sure, a correspondence here with the book as home. But resemblance is not sameness. Difference and an absence of predictability must summon in all of us a faith that goes beyond mere incidence to the certainty of awe in the motions of the mind.

Notes

1. Instances of this genre are numerous, and their forms range from substantive date books and journals designed for “the reading woman” (Schur, 1991) to the innumerable accounts by parents recalling their pleasures of reading as children or with their own children (Hearne & Trites, 2009; Tatar, 2009; Wolf & Heath, 1992).

2. Of those who collect essays or quotations about the powerful hold that books can have on life, women make up the vast majority. Of these, most have careers as scholars, writers, booksellers, small press directors, or collectors. See, for example, Bascove, 2001; Bettman, 1987; Hearne & Trites, 2009; Tatar, 2009. Alter (1989) analyzes the extent to which the ultimate complexity of reading for each individual will always ensure that no one else will ever replicate the process of another. This sense of “original creator” so inspires some readers that they cannot resist taking up the “many-voiced conversation” to write (p. 238).

3. Definitions of crossover texts abound and shift from year to year. As the genre of young adult fiction grew in popularity after the turn of the 21st century, debates raged over questions of appropriateness of topics and category assignment by award committees. When a thick volume, The Invention of Hugo Cabret (Selznick, 2007), won the Caldecott Medal for picture book, the matter of crossover took on new meaning, for here text and illustration announce themselves as partners in the progression of the story. The verbal and the visual never appear together on the same page; instead, the words and images take turns telling the tale. Within two years, other such books followed to complicate further the meaning of crossover. The Selected Works of T. S. Spivet (Larsen, 2009), described as “a boundary-leaping novel,” tells the story of a 12-year-old cartographer who renders his adventures in both words and maps. The debate here is dual. Is the readership adult or young adult? And the medium—picture or word? T. S. Spivet leads us back to some of the earliest crossover texts—the accounts of explorers who could not tell their tales without lists, maps, drawings of plants and creatures discovered, and illustrations of fantasies imagined. He reminds us that rigid categories will never confine books, authors, and readers regardless of age.

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