



By narrowly defining what is considered “allowable reading,” educators and parents basically have stymied the essential stage in literary appreciation— Unconscious Enjoyment—in a child’s journey toward becoming a lifelong, avid reader.

Readicide—Killing the Love of Reading in Our Schools

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“Given the chance, kids will read the same way adults do: for themselves. Don’t think of books for young people as tools; try instead to treat them as invitations into the reading life” (Sutton and Parravano 2010, xiv).

The above quote is from Roger Sutton’s introduction to *A Family of Readers: The Book Lover’s Guide to Children’s and Young Adult Literature*. I knew it would be savored, and perhaps quoted, over and over again when I saw the book flap: “*A Family of Readers* is a book for readers, people who need books as much as food or air.” I not only understood the statement, I have felt it. I have held my breath in anticipation, ignored my stomach’s growling hours after I had settled in with a book, not getting up until I turned the last page. I admit it—I am addicted to feeding my reader’s soul. Doing so is as essential to my well-being as appeasing my physical hunger.

I have been an avid reader since the moment I got my hands—and teeth (or so my older brothers tell me)—on books. Books have been an integral part of my life, and the characters in them my friends, for as long as I can remember. When most little girls wanted to

be ballerinas, I wanted to be a school librarian. So, when I was asked if I would be the guest editor for a *Knowledge Quest* issue that focuses on reading and how instructional practices in the P–12 school environment are killing the love of reading, I jumped at the chance. I hear the horror stories from my MLS students every semester as they attempt to entice children and teens to self-select books and read for pleasure when the very same students are burned out with reading due to school-mandated reading programs with stringent requirements placed on what and how they read. Due to these highly structured approaches, many of these same students are quite capable of reading at, or even above, their grade level. However, when not required to read for grades or points, they choose not to read, as they do not find any pleasure in reading. They rarely become recreational lifelong readers.

Unconscious Delight

Those of us who call ourselves lifelong readers have all spent time in the stage of literary appreciation that Margaret Early refers to as Unconscious Enjoyment. We would not consider ourselves avid readers if we had not done so. “The stage of enjoyment is the beginning of literary appreciation; it cannot be bypassed. Before readers are willing to work for a higher level of delight, they must be convinced that literature affords pleasure” (Early 1960, 164). I call this stage Unconscious Delight, for that is exactly what it is—delightful, delicious escapism reading we all love to return to no matter how “high-brow” our adult reading

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tastes may become. We joyously abandon the need to critique or analyze. Perhaps we still love to wallow in the delight of joining a favorite character on yet another escapade that we know will end happily—at least the last fifteen did! We still settle into the comfort zone created by a favorite author, character, or genre.

As children we were given time
and left alone to succumb
to the unconscious delight
of losing ourselves in a story.
Our bodies may have been
sprawled across old armchairs
at our grandmothers' houses
or on sunporch swings
at summer cottages, but
vicariously we were swinging
on vines through Sherwood
Forest or joining Jessica
and Liz as they rule the halls of Sweet Valley High.
Taboo making the experience even more delightful,
we were the ones vicariously brandishing swords
beside our favorite characters or swooning over the
newest heartthrob, more real to us than the student
in the next seat over nodding off in boredom, as
we happily journeyed beyond the classroom via
a book or magazine hidden behind a textbook
laboriously being read aloud by a classmate.

Factually Delightful

Remember the classmate, often a boy but sometimes a girl, whom you saw sitting on the floor lost in a nonfiction title or sometimes even in the reference section with a volume of the *World Book Encyclopedia* on his or her lap? You may even have been that student. Unconscious delight also happens with readers of nonfiction. It happens with the children who read everything in the library on a subject, like dinosaurs, and happily reaffirm their knowledge in book after book. They are experiencing the same kind of comfort zone many of us find in reading novels by a favorite author or in a favorite genre.

Teachers and school librarians of yesterday knew it was acceptable and quite normal for children and teens to delight in nonfiction books. And, yes, even read the pages out of order! Children love it when I tell them I read magazines from the back to front, and that I first read the pictures in informational books, then the captions, and (gasp!) sometimes that is all. Young readers do not seem to know it is acceptable to not read a book in its entirety, or to use the index to find the information desired and then close the

book. However, they are very aware that if they don't read every bit of text, they may not pass the multiple-choice test. That is, if the book has a quiz available. There are more reading program tests for fiction titles than nonfiction, and many of the highly illustrated nonfiction titles just waiting to help create

unconscious delight in young readers sit gathering dust or are never purchased at all as selection is done based on test availability.

*In the zeal to create competent
readers, we are, instead,
creating alliterates—people
who can read, but don't.*

Practice vs. Pleasure

Students can quickly become bogged down and bored to the point of near unconsciousness with reading programs' "endorsed" books that are at their reading level but of no personal interest

to them, rather than happily self-selecting another book in a favorite series or by a favorite author. I know the argument—we are supposed to be encouraging youth to expand their reading horizons. We need to push them on to more "appropriate" reading. We fear they may stay stuck in the "unconscious-delight mud." However, if budding lifelong readers are left alone to discover that reading is a pleasure, not a chore, they move on to other authors and other genres without our intervention. Early says it much better than I can: "The teacher, too, stands between the work of art [book] and the audience—and tries not to block the view! Indeed, his whole aim is to get out of the way as soon as possible....let them meet literature directly, prepared to be delighted" (Early 1960, 167).

Children left alone to select their pleasure reading, outside of the books/materials used in the instructional setting for honing reading strategies, learn the pleasure of reading. They realize the difference between what occurs in the classroom—learning to decipher text and gain meaning as well as fluency—is very different from their personal experience with self-selected books. No one is watching/listening as they skip a word and determine what it means by context, or even just plain skip it the first few times they see it until its meaning eventually becomes evident. No one knows that they are reading aloud in their heads during the difficult passages. They may not even realize when they have become so proficient that they aren't slowed down by having to pronounce each word in their heads. This all happens as they happily explore books by favorite authors, topics of interest, or read all 20+ titles in a favorite series.



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Family Impact of Readicide

The shift in reading instructional strategies to closely monitor reading selections, even those chosen outside of the school environment, has many parents involved, as well. Some jump on the “bandwagon,” and are vocal coaches and “book pushers,” wanting their children to be the highest point-earners in the class. Competition becomes the focus. Instead of overhearing parents, while I browse the shelves in libraries and bookstores, happily recommending books to each other that their children have read, or the parents have read aloud to them, I now hear interactions quite different in nature. Parents are looking at their watches and impatiently asking each other, the librarian, or sales clerk how they can find the books that have tests in their child’s school reading program. They may also be frustrated that the “allowed” books are not easy to find on the shelves. Why aren’t they clearly marked like they are in the school library? Where are the dots that save time? Time together in the library or bookstore with their children is no longer about parents enjoying the process of assisting and encouraging their children to self-select books. It certainly is not about allowing children time to browse and locate books that actually interest them. The focus is on quickly locating a book, no matter what the subject, with the right number of points and at the allowed reading level, so the child can get the required number of points to get an A that quarter/semester, or have his or her name on the top of the point-level chart.

By narrowly defining what is considered “allowable reading,” educators and parents basically have stymied the essential stage in literary appreciation—Unconscious Enjoyment—in a child’s journey toward becoming a lifelong, avid reader. Children are not being given the time to discover the unconscious delight found in reading every book in a series. They are not being given the freedom to discover what a participatory sport reading can be when vicariously developing a relationship with book characters. They are not being allowed to savor the joy of prolonged browsing in a library or bookstore to serendipitously find just the right books they didn’t know existed. In the zeal to create competent readers, we are, instead, creating alliterates—people who can read, but don’t.

There is Always Hope

Unconscious delight may not occur for all of us at an early age, but when the right book and the right time come together, the floodgates open. With the wealth of well-written and widely marketed youth titles, reading children’s or young adult titles no longer has any age boundaries. Due to the wide exposure of children’s



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and young adult literature in the media, readers who did not experience unconscious delight as a child or a teen are still beginning their reading journey.

There is always hope—even for those who adamantly declared they would never read another book after they left a school with a mandated reading program or a teacher’s classroom where every book read had to be preapproved. The library, the bookstore, and even the discount store shelves are brimming with children’s and young adult books for readers of all ages to wallow in unconscious-delight reading.

As reading advocates we are responsible to help open the doors to unconscious-delight reading. We need to remember what caused us to become avid readers and share these experiences with anyone else who will listen—and even with those who may just be in the area. We are often unaware of who is listening while we stand in line chatting or walking down the street talking on a cell phone. Or, who may serendipitously come across our Facebook pages or blogs. Forget about being a parent, a teacher, or a school librarian for just a moment—be a reader and do what should come naturally—what some of us just *have* to do—tell someone else about what you read!

In This Issue

Many publishing professionals, authors, librarians, and educators are as adamant about reading as I am, and they all have perspectives and experiences that need to be heard. The March/April 2011 issue of *Knowledge Quest* is devoted to methods used to encourage P–12 students to become proficient as well as lifelong readers. The term “readicide” is used with permission from Kelly Gallagher, the author of *Readicide: How Schools are Killing Reading and What You Can Do About It* (Stenhouse 2009), who took time out of his busy schedule to be interviewed for this issue.

Also interviewed for this issue was Malbert Smith III, who discusses (with AASL President-Elect Carl A. Harvey II) use of the Lexile framework for reading.

Dr. Ruth Small, director of the Syracuse University LIS Program–School Media Specialization in the School of Information Studies, joins with her colleague Dr. Marilyn P. Arnone, codirector of the Center for Digital Literacy, to share their expertise. They both engage in research in the area of motivation theories, so they are well versed in creative methods to encourage reading. Dr. Ruth (as she is affectionately known by her students) is also a frequent contributor

to the AASLForum electronic discussion list. The AASL forum is open to all AASL members. You can join online by visiting <www.ala.org/aasl/aaslforum>.

Kelly Milner Halls, author of high-interest nonfiction titles including recently published *Saving the Baghdad Zoo: A True Story of Hope and Heroes* (HarperCollins 2010) and the Junior Literary Guild selection *Mysteries of the Mummy Kids* (Lerner 2007), knows what kids like, based on her successful school visits, and in this issue she shares her thoughts on enticing kids to read.

This issue would not be complete without voices from the field. Several school librarians share their techniques for counteracting readicide. One is Jill Whitson, a proactive high school librarian, who shares her techniques for making the library the place teens want be. Whitson makes it clear how to get teens into the library—give them what they want!

We also hear success stories about using school-mandated reading programs to support the curriculum, encourage reading success, and help create lifelong readers. For example, professor, program director and reading advocate Marie Kelsey shares her passion for compelling students to read by introducing them to nonfiction books.

I hope you all enjoy this issue of *Knowledge Quest*, and that I—or one of the other avid reading advocates who share their knowledge and experiences—encourage you to take some time to wallow in unconscious-delight reading and then share the experience with someone else.

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Works Cited:

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- Sutton, Roger, and Martha V. Parravano, eds. 2010. *A Family of Readers: The Book Lover’s Guide to Children’s and Young Adult Literature*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick.