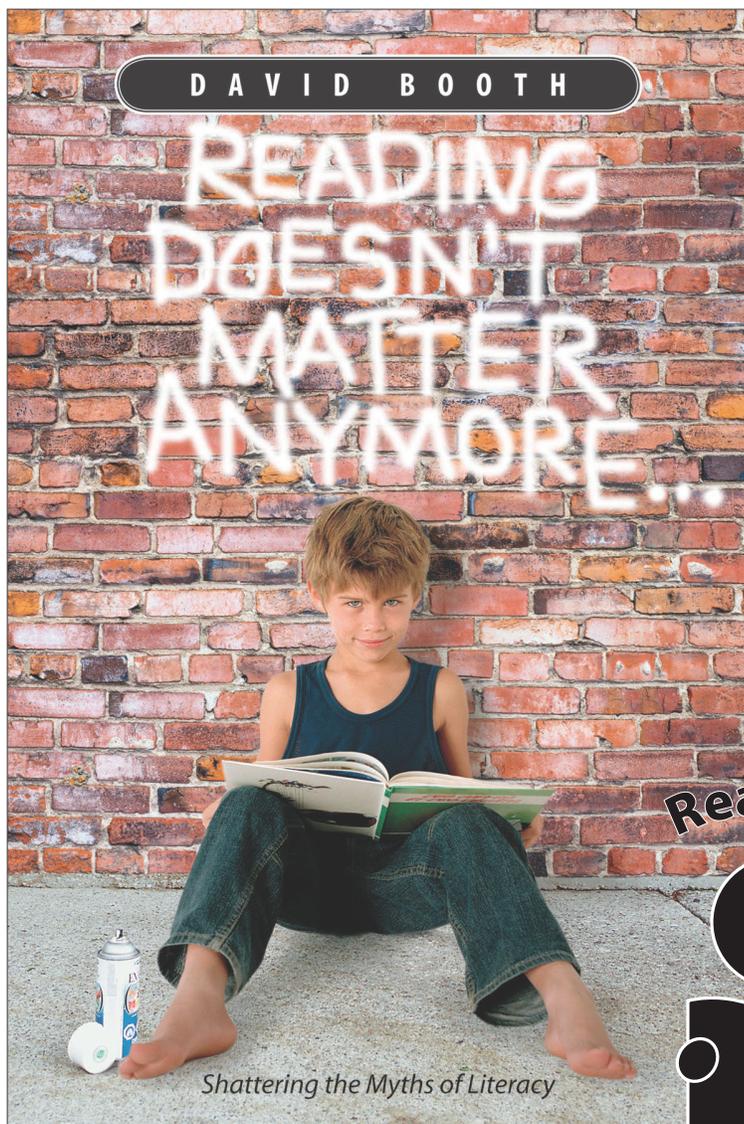
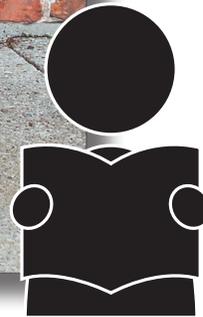


Read Me a Story

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Reading



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Read Me a Story; My Mind Is Tired

Can we capture the spirit of bedtime reading in a modern classroom, with students from so many different home settings, attitudes shaped by years of feeling worthless when confronted with print forms that seemed unreadable? Will they let me read out loud to them? Is it a worthwhile teaching strategy? The answers are simple: we can, they will, and it is. Still, it will take courage on your part, and stamina as you build the ritual. But you don't have to do all the work yourself: consider books on tape, radio programs that share items read aloud, speeches that matter, newscasters reading the news each night on television, and, most interesting, teenagers downloading the lyrics of their music so they can read them as they sing along. It is normal in our world to hear texts read aloud. Each year, student teachers tell me their stories of teachers who had read to them in different grades—picture books, novels, biographies, poems. Sometimes a novel took too long and they lost interest; sometimes they begged the teacher to continue long into the afternoon. In my role as a guest in schools, I have read aloud to hundreds of thousands of students in different settings around the world, and each time is like the first one: even though I always worry that they may not enjoy what I choose to read, that they may not listen to me, or will have nothing to say in response, the story is always there to support me, and to grab the children by the throat. I am often asked why I sometimes choose tough tales, with so much conflict and violence, even in the humour. It's because I want the children to turn around and face me, and join in the ceremony of the tale, the teller, the telling, and the told. Once we are inside the story circle, I can risk other types of text, more subtle, more nuanced; that is why I never bring just one book to a group; I prefer a set of selections, texts that fit together as they appear, one after the other, until the children want to add their own words to the mix, contribute their own responses. Excerpts from novels, three poems in a row, a picture book with dark and intriguing illustrations. These are all in my book bag.

I no longer worry about a child who hasn't yet joined; if I persist, he will come round, if not this time, then next time. I ignore the teacher who climbs over the children in order to silence the boy who is tickling his neighbour. But I must confess I was quite put off when a group of teachers placed their chairs

amid the children in the gym, facing them with their backs to me, so that they could maintain order. If the story and the storyteller can't pull them in, time to retreat to the classroom.

When limited readers listen to text read aloud, sometimes the fear of the print starts to melt, to dissipate with the realization that they are understanding what they are hearing. There is a general rule in literacy: if a child can understand the text as he hears it read aloud, then he does not have a comprehension problem; he has difficulty with printed text. I found a boy in one elementary school in fifth grade whose reading disability was so acute that he couldn't read or write his name. His teachers were working with him, and he was positive about school and his attempts at becoming a reader. The amazing part of this story is that he was able to discuss at length the three novels his teacher had read to the class throughout the year, and his comments about the books were deeply structured and heartfelt. He had "read" the books.

I think back to a day at a school in Toronto when I worked with a group of 250 or 300 adolescents. They were so boisterous before I began that I wondered how I would get their attention and, once gotten, how I would keep it. In about 30 seconds, the story had them calm and listening intently. But the secret is there isn't any secret and that is partly the trick. Students have to see you immediately as who you are, what your job is, and to recognize what you have to offer. You strip yourself to the essence of teacher: "I am here to be with you, so that together we can do more than you can do by yourself. That is all I am here for. What I have for you are stories that matter to me and we'll share them and see if they matter to you. I have no idea if they will or not." The wonderful thing about working with large groups is they need to have that single focus, and the focus has to be one that connects them. They're not staring at you; they are in a space with you. I think that is what all of my teaching should be. "We have a visitor today, class, and he has some interesting things to share with you, and he cares a lot about you and we're going to have a relationship with him for an hour and a half." That is what I struggle to do with them. There is no big barrier between the students and me. I haven't got anything to put between me and them. I just have me.

How to Read Aloud

- Read aloud as a salesperson: choose several new books from the library and share excerpts from each, so that the youngsters will want to read them on their own.
- Read aloud as a traveller: share stories and information from other cultures, other places, other times. Let readers meet words and expressions from England, Australia, Sri Lanka, and translations from other languages.
- Read aloud as an expert: choose texts that are unfamiliar to the readers, more difficult than they might be able to manage on their own, so that their ear-print continues to be challenged.
- Read aloud as a researcher: use the content of different subjects as resources for sharing excerpts, anecdotes, observations, and reflections from newspapers, articles, and additional resources that you and the students find.
- Read aloud as a bard: chant and sing the poems and ballads of the past and present, and ask the youngsters to join in the refrains.
- Read aloud as a storyteller: retell a story that you know well or want to learn. Freed from the printed text, you can move and gesture, and alter your voice to bring the text alive.
- Read aloud as an actor: choose a role in a script or a readers' theatre selection, and model passionate and energetic voices.
- Read aloud as an editor: select revised and completed writings from the youngsters, practise them, and share them in a public reading, adding significance to their words with your careful reading.
- Read aloud as a lover of print texts: choose things from your own life to read to the kids—a column from the newspaper, bits from a course you're taking, a letter from a friend who lives far away, an excerpt from a book you loved as a child, the picture book you once read to your son or daughter.

Forty years ago I began teaching literature and drama in a school with twenty classes on a rotary system, where one group after another would appear in my classroom every forty minutes—eight classes a day. I found hope and strength in story, stumbling, as it were, into “storying for a living.” To involve students (and to save my life) I began to explore all the ways and means of having the children work with stories. The students were retelling them, reading them aloud, writing from them, dramatizing them, arguing about them, finding other stories like them, other versions, other authors, and telling each other their own personal stories.

The stories came in all shapes and sizes (life stories, novels, tales, home stories, gossip, retellings, legends, picture books, poems, scripts, advertisements). I had not yet acquired much understanding of why storying was so important for children, but it worked in my classroom and so I continued.

Over the years, the understanding of storying has increased dramatically, and now we are able to be selective and adventurous in handling narrative with young people. Since I moved into working with teachers in both in-service and pre-service courses, story has retained its place at the centre of my work. Now we have dozens of books by informed authorities on why story matters, why we should help children engage in “storying.” As well, we can now find stories of all kinds inside and outside the curriculum.

Educator Wayne Booth says that who we are is best shown by the stories we can tell, and who we can become is best determined by the stories we can learn to tell. The classroom is a village of stories and storymakers. The teacher, as well as the students, belongs to it; we, too, have stories to tell.