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ABSTRACT

Three famous writers--Eudora Welty, Madeleine L'Engle, and Jack London--used their silent reading experiences to survive not only their childhoods, but also to become adult chroniclers of human lives. Pulitzer-prize winning author Eudora Welty credits an extended period of silent reading when she was 7 years old (and home from school for nearly a year) with the discovery of her author's voice. Madeleine L'Engle credits her observations of life and people for starting her on her journey to become a writer. Unlike Eudora, Madeleine had more than one period of solitude in her childhood, and Madeleine's solitude was coupled with the intense loneliness of an only child with physical problems and distant, frail parents. Solitude and loneliness intensified by the need to escape extreme poverty led Jack London to literacy. Jack loved books as much as he loved reading them. These three authors entered the world of literacy fueled by need: Eudora for entertainment during an extended illness; Madeleine to combat shyness and loneliness; and Jack to survive emotional rejection and poverty. Adults must give children uninterrupted time to discover silent reading and to discover themselves through books. It is up to adults to give children both the time and the safety to find the way to adulthood. (RS)

# EXPLORING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN CHILDHOOD AND ADULT LITERACY EXPERIENCES

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# EXPLORING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN CHILDHOOD AND ADULT LITERACY EXPERIENCES

Silent reading is an intensely private act. In such times of privacy, children become their own audiences. At the same time, they unconsciously decide whether reading will play any active part in their lives, and, if so, how reading can help them discover their sense of self.

As readers, we live within the world of the mind, making connections between what we understand of life at that moment and what the text offers that is new. Characters with good conduct and characters with poor conduct show us how to behave with other people. From stories of strong and weak humans, we learn courage, and we learn whether we would exhibit such courage under similar circumstances. We encounter foolishness, miserliness, jealously, patriotism, passion, love, death, and the myriad aspects of life that make us human. And all the time we are reading about the lives of others, we are making decisions about our own lives. These decisions relate not only to our own survival in a wider world, but also to the kinds of people we want to become. This presentation will discuss the experiences of three famous writers who use their silent reading experiences to survive not only their childhoods, but alsc to become adult chroniclers of human lives.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning author, Eudora Welty, was a child who keenly observed the life around her while growing up in Jackson, Mississippi. When her family drove its first automobile, they always invited a neighbor to go on their Sunday afternoon rides. In a small town, it was an affront to have an empty seat in the car. As soon as the ride started, Eudora would command the adults, "Now, talk" (Welty, 1991, p. 14).

These were also the days when clothes were sewn at home. The sewing woman who went from house to house gossiped as she worked, and Eudora loved listening to the latest neighborhood stories. She writes:

> Long before I wrote stories, I listened for stories. Listening FOR them is something more acute than listening TO them. I suppose it's an early form of participation in what goes on. Listening children know stories are there. When their elders sit and begin, children are just waiting and hoping for one to come out, like a mouse from its hole (Welty, 1991, p. 14).

Given the rich oral traditions of Southern culture, she had many opportunities to hear stories told in her daily life.

Eudora was the oldest child of a schoolteacher from West Virginia and an insurance salesman from Ohio. When her parents were to be married, they decided to live somewhere unfamiliar to either of them. Her father offered her mother the choice of Thousand Islands or Mississippi. Her mother chose Mississippi. Both her parents were avid readers. While Eudora's father believed in science and the future and loved non-fiction, her mother sank into fiction, "...read[ing] Dickens in the spirit in which she would have eloped with him" (Welty, 1991, p. 7). When her mother was a girl, her family believed, as many did, that long hair sapped a child's strength. They offered her gold earrings to have her hair cut. She refused until they offered her a complete set of Charles Dickens shipped up the river in a barrel to their home. Eudora's mother so valued these books that as an adult when their house was on fire, on crutches she climbed to the second floor, threw the volumes out the window to her husband, and only then jumped to safety herself. Eudora knew when she saw the set of Dickens that

the books were waiting just for her. And her mother shared her love of reading with a young Eudora by reading to her. Eudora remembers:

> I learned from the age of two or three that any room in our house, at any time of day, was there to read in, or to be read to. My mother read to me. She'd read to me in the big bedroom in the mornings, when we were in her rocker together, which ticked in rhythm as we rocked, as though we had a cricket accompanying the story. She'd read to me in the diningroom on winter afternoons in front of the coal fire, with our cuckoo clock ending the story with 'Cuckoo', and at night when I'd got in my own bed. I must have given her no peace (Welty, 1991, p. 5).

Given such immersion in listening to stories from books, naturally she would want to learn to read herself.

Eudora begged her parents to teach her the alphabet, and her mother pressured the principal to take her into the local grammar school when she was five years old. But when Eudora was seven years old, she stayed out of school for nearly a year for what the doctor called, "a fast-beating heart". During the day she occupied her parents' double bed and covered it with storybooks. She credits this extended period of silent reading with the discovery of her author's voice.

> Ever since I was first read to, then started reading to myself, there has never been a line read that I didn't HEAR. As my eyes followed the sentence, a voice was saying it silently to me. It isn't my mother's voice, or the voice of any person I can identify, certainly not my own.

> It is human, but inward, and it is inwardly that I listen to it. It is to me the voice of the story or the poem itself...My own words , when I am at work on a story, I hear too as they go, in the same voice that I hear when I read in books. When I write and the sound of it comes back to my ears, then I act to make my changes. I have always trusted this voice (Welty, 1991, pp.12-13).

This reader's voice aided Eudora's leap to the development of her writer's voice and the profession she chose when she grew up. She wrote almost exclusively from life situations, and said "...it's living that makes me want to write...although it's reading that makes me love writing" (Prenshaw, 1984, p. 175). She remained as she called herself, "a writer who came of a sheltered life" (Welty,1991, p. 114) who chose to live at home to do her writing in a familiar world and never regretted it (Prenshaw, 1984, p. 131).

Madeleine L'Engle also credits her observations of life and people for starting her on her journey to become a writer. She writes:

> ...I don't suppose it's possible for a writer to create a wholly imaginary character. Whether we are aware of it or not, we are always drawing from every human being we have ever known, have passed casually in the street, sat next to on the subway, stood behind in the check-out line at the supermarket. Perhaps one might say that we draw constantly from our subconscious minds, and undoubtedly this is true,

but more important than that is the super-conscious level which comes to our aid in writing... (L'Engle, 1972, pp. 93-94).

Madeleine L'Engle also began her literate life as an observer and a listener but in New York City. Her parents had been married for twenty years before she was born. She and her parents did not have many common interests. Moreover, her parents disagreed on how she should be brought up. Her father wanted a strict English upbringing with dancing and piano lessons, a nanny and meals on a tray in a nursery. Her mother preferred that she be raised by a circus performer who could teach her to be confident and graceful. Her father won. Fortunately, her nanny and her mother read books to Madeleine. By the time she was five years old, she knew every story in each of the books in her bookcase. Reading, inventing, and listening to stories were very important to this only child who spent many hours by herself.

In the fourth grade, Madeleine had an attack of iritis, a painful swelling of the eye. Several months later, she had a second attack and the doctor warned that a third attack would make her blind. This affliction made her very aware of all the sights and events around her. In addition, she had suffered an illness as a toddler that left one of her legs shorter than the other so that when she was tired she limped. Any team she was on lost. Her unpopularity with her peers was paralleled by unpopularity with her teachers. Her homeroom teacher believed that she was clumsy and dumb. She used Madeleine's schoolwork as bad examples for the class so Madeleine stopped doing her schoolwork. Her comfort came outside of school from reading books and writing stories and poems. She always kept a journal. When she was in sixth grade, she

entered a poem in a school poetry contest and won. Her teacher accused her of copying the poem. Madeleine's mother carried a huge stack of Madeleine's writings to school to prove that she loved to write. Madeleine wrote about the incident in her journal, and her parents transferred her to another school.

Madeleine's father was in constant poor health because of his exposure to mustard gas during World War I. The family moved to Europe, hoping that the mountain air of the Alps would help his deteriorating lungs. Her mother, never robust herself, was often an invalid. They put Madeleine in boarding school where she was miserable and could never find time to write. She was fourteen years old before she returned to the United States.

Madeleine continued to write into her adulthood. Her best-known book A Wrinkle in Time, was rejected by more than thirty publishers before being published and winning the Newbery Medal for literature. She continued to read books about how life could be made better for people all over the world. Much of her favorite research was about physics and space. She read theology to think about questions of good and evil. She also did fieldwork. To experience the settings for The Love Letters and Arm of the Starfish, she traveled to Portugal. Like Eudora Welty, Madeleine explains that she writes like a listener.

> Everything I do, everywhere I go, everybody I meet--I see story. Story springs from experience, and then the storyteller goes on. When I actually start to write, I listen to the characters; I listen to the story (Gonzales, 1991, p. 102).

Unlike Eudora, Madeleine had more than one period of solitude in her childhood. And Madeleine's solitude was coupled with the intense loneliness of an only child with physical problems and distant, frail parents.

Solitude and loneliness intensified by the need to escape extreme poverty led Jack London to literacy. His mother, a spiritualist, conducted seances at home. She yelled at Jack when possessed. In one session, she put six-year-old Jack on a table that levitated. He was never accepted by his mother nor his natural father (Sinclair, 1977). His mother, however, did Jack the service of teaching him to read when he insisted upon it. Reading matter was scarce and he was grateful for whatever fell into his hands.

The first book he owned was Ouida's novel Signa with the last 40 pages missing, which he had found by the side of the road. Jack identified with this tale of an illegitimate child his own age who dreams of escaping the drudgery of peasant life through his ability to play the violin. He read it again and again.

Jack loved books as much as he loved reading them. Once he borrowed Washington Irving's The Alhambra from the school library. He was so impressed by Irving's book that he built an Alhambra (the palace of the moorish Kings at Granada, Spain) of his own from an old chimney. When the towers and terraces were complete, he wrote inscriptions to mark the different sections (Kingman, 1979; O'Connor, 1964). When he returned the book and the library would not loan him another, he cried all the way home (Sinclair, 1977).

At the Oakland Public Library, Jack met Ina Coolbrith, head librarian, who guided

his reading. She was poet laureate of California and a hostess of her own literary salon. Jack knew her when she was in her early forties. Twenty years later he wrote her that she had been a goddess to him as a child. She was the first person to praise him for his choices in reading.

Jack left school at age 13 to work in a cannery. As a young man, he bought a boat with borrowed money. After some time on the waterfront as a pirate and a lawman, he joined a road gang of homeless boys who rode freight trains. Delinquency and alcohol had nearly killed him when, at 17, he signed up as a seaman on a ship bound for Japan. He took his books with him and cleared a small space for his reading. When a despised seaman died, he ignored the superstition of the sailors that he would not live to the end of the voyage if he slept in the dead man's bed. Jack occupied the man's bunk so that he could be near the light in order to read (Sinclair, 1977).

His description of an episode from this voyage became a short story that won a newspaper contest and launched him as a serious writer.

The lives of Eudora Welty, Madeleine L'Engle, and Jack London are three reading-writing success stories. They were not only interested young observers, listeners, and readers, but they were readers of stories who made the leap to become writers of stories. Their reading voices cultivated their writing voices, and the literacy experiences of their childhoods made them choose writing as a profession.

They entered the world of literacy fueled by need: Eudora for entertainment during an extended illness; Madeleine to combat shyness and loneliness; and Jack to survive

emotional rejection and poverty. With reading, they could leave their daily lives and visit any one or any place. Reading became, "a ritual space in which other possibilities might be entertained" (Hedrick, 1982, p. 21), and writing became the time when they were happiest. They were not afraid to shut the door and confront themselves.

Don Murray (1991) emphasizes, "Writing is ingoing...The theme is solitude. Writers must be comfortable with aloneness..." Eudora Welty, Madeleine L"Engle, and Jack London were comfortable with their aloneness. In fact, they craved the solitude of their reading and writing experiences because the time away from reality helped them cope with reality. But these authors had time as children.

Contemporary American culture constantly fragments time and cuts it into small pieces. Our idioms when we speak support middle class attitudes toward time. We must "save time", "spend time", " watch the time", "find the time" . This last expression "find the time" is particularly interesting. How do we find the time? Is time lost? If we ever knew the true time of the creation of this planet, we would be centuries off in our determination of this time that we value so preciously.

These days some children do not have great periods of time to themselves. They are shuttled after school from one activity and one location to another. If they have time to themselves, they may be alone at home free to watch hours of television or to play video games. As adults, we must step back from our frazzled daily lives and evaluate how we and our families are spending the time we have. We must give children uninterrupted time to discover silent reading and to discover themselves through books.

When you are in the private world of silent reading, you are vulnerable. In our large city schools, we have to worry about children's safety. How can children learn if they must fear for their lives? While silent reading may be intense, it should be safe. Readers should only have to worry about the relationships with themselves and their relationships with their books. They cannot be in danger when they withdraw with their books from whatever is going on around them.

Children these days have terrible problems in their lives. Their emotional needs today are as great, if not greater, than those of the authors considered here. Reading can be a refuge. They can experience peace in reading. They can escape, and they can learn to handle their lives. And they can have these experiences and enjoy them. It is up to us, as the adults in their lives, to give them both the time and the safety to find the way to adulthood.

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