

# Reading

What distinguishes truly educated people, what identifies them and sets them apart, is that they are readers. This is true even for a school dropout who has spent 70 percent of his life in prison. When Wilbert Rideau was eighteen years old, he robbed a bank, killed a teller, and was sent to the Louisiana State Prison for life. After a few angry years doing nothing beyond sitting and rebelling, Rideau picked up a book and spent a number of weeks reading it. Then he picked up another. Although he left school in eighth grade and English was his least favorite subject, soon he was reading two books a day on a variety of subjects. But he liked history best.

“ I read about Napoleon, Muhammed, Lincoln, Washington, Bolivar, Sukarno,” says Rideau. “I came to realize that a lot of people had terrible beginnings, but they lifted themselves up and gave something back to the world. I read *Profiles in Courage*. I’ll never forget what it said—that a man does what he must, regardless of the cost.” One day a guard passed him a copy of Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*. Its message of self-reliance became Rideau’s credo. “I started seeing that no matter how bad things looked, it was all on me whether I made something of myself or I died in some nameless grave.”(quoted in Colt 1993, p. 71)

What Rideau did was initiate and become editor of *The Angolite*, the convict magazine that is required reading in training classes for new correctional officers and also the first prison publication ever nominated for a National Magazine Award (an honor it has since earned six times). In addition, it is the first to win the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award, a George Polk Award, and the American Bar Association Silver Gavel Award (Colt 1993, p. 72).

When children are interested in what they read, and read broadly—whether fiction, nonfiction, or both—they can learn much of value from trade books. People are able to grow and develop intellectually without the carefully structured approach to learning typical of textbooks, as these four examples show:

1. *Robert Howard Allen has never seen his father.* Divorced before he was born, Robert's mother left him at age six to be raised by his grandfather, three great-aunts, and a great-uncle, all of whom lived in the same house in rural Tennessee. After his grandfather taught him to read, Robert regularly read the Bible to a blind great-aunt. "From age seven he read thousands of books—from Donald Duck comics to Homer, James Joyce and Shakespeare.... He began picking up books at yard sales, and by his early 20s he had some 2000 volumes" (Whittemore 1991, p. 4).

Robert Howard Allen stayed home and helped and read. He never went to school, not even for a day. At age 30 he easily passed a high school equivalency test, and at age 32 he showed up at Bethel College in McKenzie, Tennessee. Three years later he graduated summa cum laude (3.92 GPA), and continued his education by enrolling in graduate school at Vanderbilt University. Having earned his Ph.D. in English, he is currently a visiting lecturer at Murray State College in Kentucky (Whittemore 1991).

2. *During her childhood, Lauralee Summer and her mother moved frequently from one homeless shelter to another.* She remembers sitting on her mother's lap and listening to stories. "'She was about 20 months old when I began reading to her every single night,' says [Lauralee's mother], who recalls a well-thumbed book of nursery rhymes. 'I read the same book every night. That was the only book we had'" (Gloster 1994, p. 1).

With money for her fourth birthday, Lauralee bought a See & Say book and taught herself to read. She soon was visiting libraries as mother and daughter moved among shelters and welfare hotels in three states. At age 10, Lauralee tried fourth-grade classes in two Santa Barbara schools, then quit in favor of reading to herself at the shelter. Eventually, she did attend school, an alternative program for nontraditional students during her senior year, where she took the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and scored 1460, putting her in the 99.7 percentile of America's high school seniors. Lauralee applied to Harvard University and was admitted to the 1994 freshman class with a full scholarship

(Gloster 1994).

3. *Dale Wasserman makes his living writing for stage and screen.* The winner of almost 50 writing awards is perhaps best known for *Man of La Mancha* which had a five-year run on Broadway, has remained in continual production since, and currently is being performed in over thirty languages. When Dale was 14--"undisciplined, secretive, and almost entirely unschooled"-- both his parents died and the Wasserman children were parceled out to relatives and orphanages. He lasted a month before running away, hitching a ride to Pierre, South Dakota, and in the middle of the night hopping on his first freight train. For the next five years he rode the rails, never having a home, going to a school, or working a steady job. So how does an untutored boy learn enough during his wandering youth to become a noted writer? While crossing the country on freight trains, Dale did not neglect his learning. "In the library of a small town, I would select two books, slip them under my belt at the small of my back, read as I rode, and slip them back into the stacks of another library in another town far down the line, where I would 'borrow' two more. I thus acquired a substantial, if incoherent, fund of knowledge that, together with my experience, became my total education" (Wasserman 2001, p. 64).