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## We Suggest

Eleanor Buelke

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# WE SUGGEST

*Eleanor Buelke*

Jennings, Frank G.,  
*This Is Reading.*

N. Y.: Bureau of Publications,  
Teachers College, Columbia University,  
1965, Pp. xv + 196.

Many present-day books about reading and reading instruction deal with these subjects largely as processes apart from their human aspects. They treat reading as a physical function; or, as a form of sequential, mechanical, stimulus-response learning; or, perhaps, as an imperative outcome of our national historical, economic, and social development. In *This Is Reading* Frank Jennings expresses his convictions and opinions in ways that keep the individual and his unique, personal, human qualities in clear, central focus.

The sincerity of this new book demands sincere readers. From teachers it asks concern for value of children, aspirations to professional stature, and art in human relations. It expects talent to transmit one's own thirst for delight and appetite for wonder to children, love of one's subject, and operational understanding of basic educational principles. From parents and lay readers it calls for a recognition of the great importance of reading to any kind of learning, an understanding of the vital significance of language development in any, and all, stages of growth, and encouragement of youth as it struggles to master and to improve management of ideas in its world.

In a sense, this is what Mr. Jennings believes reading is—the management of signs of things in the world about us, and of the signs of things represented. He generalizes that the history of reading habits is the history of society and its pressures upon people in it. He suggests that the history of reading instruction is the history of man's interpretations of signs, and representations of signs, in the world about him. It is also growth in complication, extension, and sophistication of methods of managing these signs.

As signs involving feelings are translated into action, reading gains precision. As signs involving faces, features, and figures are organized into personalities, reading gains in scope. As signs involving observations of nature are interpreted accurately, reading begins to encompass the universe. For man to become a healthy human being in a present-day free society he needs skills to manage the signs of his world. He must be able to see these signs, to reflect upon them, to hold ideas still long enough to compare them, and to choose wisely from them for his own use.

To Jennings, certain attributes of man have been considered contributing factors to his unique, human character. One of these is his language. His world of words is one place man can look for signs. Words enable man to portage meanings of events from one place to another for examination. Words enhance human companionship. Words hurt, too. Words cause destructive action. Words confuse. Young school children who have had happy language experiences bring respect for words, and joy in their management, to the classroom.

Because words can be so important to learners, teachers need to recognize the differences between words: the sham and the real; the ambiguous and the precise; the stultifying and the stimulating; the shoddy and the excellent. Such recognition helps to hold the bright magic of words untarnished, to keep the black magic of words inoperative, and to prevent "associated diseases of words and word users."

Protection from what Mr. Jennings calls the "slippery word" can be taught, or learned, only through expert instruction in meaningful thinking. This protection should begin at birth, ought to be initiated by parents, and needs to be continued through childhood and adulthood by the community, school, church, and society itself. To introduce and promote ideation, to maintain the romance and adventure of concept formation, become the responsibilities of all the adult and the mature to the young and the immature. No matter how effective the teaching in our schools, or how excellent the published printed products on our markets, these will have small influence on the public as a whole unless reading is nurtured in the home, and books are considered important there.

A child learns to read by reading his world, by talking and listening. He continues to learn by recognizing and responding to meanings of words as written symbols. He proceeds to generalize relationships between sound and letter symbols. Then he moves from word reading to thought-unit reading. He goes forward to critical reading where speed is flexible and varied, depending upon the type of reading material. Continued enlargement of meaning background aids his growth in word perception skills. He enjoys expressing his reaction to a writer's ideas. Finally, he becomes a mature reader, able to integrate the writer's ideas with his own, building his total reading experiences into his own way of thinking.

The writer's broad definition of reading, that of making all experience a part of oneself and of using the wonderful tools of language to make experience available and manageable, leads into some interesting, often avoided and disregarded, reasons for reading. He recognizes

many of these and has the courage to face them. Through much of the latter part of his book this author expresses the conviction that reading, for whatever reason, holds the answer to learning.

Reasons for reading are numerous and varied. Some people read to find strength to face life's problems by discovering how others have faced similar problems. Some read to restore their faith in the orderly workings of their own minds. Others read to find ready-made answers to perplexing questions about philosophy and science. Still others read to secure vicarious experience in exotic, dangerous, or forbidden practices or behaviors. Some use reading for catharsis. Vicarious experiences, encountered on the printed page, are more easily controlled, managed, and survived without personality damage, or identity loss, than when they are met in actuality.

No matter what reasons lie behind the reading act, some printed materials warrant readers of high maturity rate only. As Mr. Jennings states, the reader's "prior investments in psychological and intellectual securities must have been considerable and sound." According to this author, when one reads as an adult certain conditions are present: awareness that the author is speaking; bringing one's own total experience to bear upon meanings of words and ideas expressed; consciousness of one's feelings as he reads; and a "living-through" of the emotions or situations in which the characters are involved. Even more than these, maturity in reading demands doing something to oneself and one's environment with what he learns from reading. It enables one to extend his intellectual appetites; to expand his world with adventuresome ideas; to stretch his emotional range; and to accelerate his interest in, and understanding of, the nature of man and his works, not the least of which is his own, living self.

Aside from the ideas presented in this book, its vitality stems also from the writer's style. Many of the sentences are short, of simple construction. Meaning flows smoothly, unmistakably. Creative imagery abounds in prolificacy of fresh, appropriate figures of speech.

Physical appearance of the book may deceive the would-be reader who thinks to peruse it in a few moment's leisure, or to scan it quickly. To savour the excitement and exhilaration of its basic communication will cost the price asked of a mature reader: time, considered judgment, and, hopefully, confrontation with original thinking. Likewise, value received is in the coin of the mature reader's realm: "adventure among ideas, feelings and facts;" a psychological "shield, a tool and a powerpack" for his own exclusive, personal use.