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Literacy Lessons From the Childhoods of Authors

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The retrospectives of authors' childhoods can provide courageous portraits for children. Their examples demonstrate how reading and writing helped these professionals not only survive illness, loneliness, and rejection, but also forge meaningful lives. Children need to hear their stories, and so do adults. This piece reviews the role that literacy played in the childhoods of Eudora Welty, Madeleine L'Engle, and Jack London, and contrasts aspects of their childhoods with aspects of contemporary childhoods. The contrast sounds a clarion call to today's adults to assume greater responsibility for how children spend their time.

Retrospectives of authors' childhoods provide unique insights into the connections between childhood literacy experiences and adult literacy experiences. The courageous examples of Eudora Welty, Madeleine L'Engle, and Jack London demonstrate how reading and writing helped these professionals not only survive illness, loneliness, and rejection, but also forge meaningful lives. Children need to hear their stories, and so do adults.

Eudora Welty

As a child, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Eudora Welty (1909- ) keenly listened to the life around her while in Jackson, Mississippi. Given the rich oral traditions of Southern culture, she had many childhood opportunities to listen for the stories told in daily life. Whenever her parents drove their first automobile on Sunday afternoon rides, they usually invited a neighbor to go along. In their small town it was an affront to go on a ride with an empty seat in the car. As soon as they were on the road, Eudora would command the adults, "Now, talk" (Welty, 1991, p. 14).
Moreover, in those days clothes were sewn at home, and the sewing woman who went from house to house gossiped as she worked. 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).

In addition to listening for the stories told in family and neighborhood, Eudora listened for the stories from books shared with her parents. Both her parents were avid readers. Eudora's father, an insurance salesman, believed in science and the future and loved non-fiction, but her mother, a former schoolteacher, sank into fiction. She "... read Dickens in the spirit in which she would have eloped with him." (Welty, 1991, p. 7).

When her mother was a girl, her mother's parents believed, as many did at the time, that long hair sapped a child's strength. They offered Eudora's mother gold earrings to let them cut her hair. 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 valued these books even as a married adult. When her own house was on fire, she climbed on crutches with a broken leg 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. As well as books, her mother shared her love of reading by reading to Eudora. 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 own 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 who never regretted it (Prenshaw, 1984, p. 131).

_Madeleine L'Engle_

Observations of daily life and listening for people's stories also started Madeleine L'Engle (1918- ) on her journey to become a writer. She was born in New York City to parents who had been married for twenty years before she was born. She and her parents did not have many
common interests, and her parents disagreed on how she should be brought up. Her father wanted a strict English upbringing with dancing, piano lessons, a nanny, and meals on a try 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. As a toddler, she had also suffered an illness that left one of her legs shorter than the other so she limped when she was tired. Any sports team she was on in school would lose.

Her unpopularity with her peers was paralleled by unpopularity with her teachers. Her homeroom teacher believed that she was clumsy and dumb. Because she used Madeleine's schoolwork as bad examples for the class, Madeleine stopped doing schoolwork. Her comfort came outside 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. When 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 and was able to resume her writing.

Madeleine continued to write into her adulthood. She read books on how life could be made better for people all over the world, and she read theology to think about questions of good and evil. She did research on physics and space. Such varied interests confused publishers about how to categorize her manuscripts. Her best-known book, *A Wrinkle in Time*, was rejected by more than thirty publishers before publication and before winning the Newbery Medal for children's literature. In addition to library research, Madeleine 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).

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

**Jack London**

Loneliness coupled with the need to escape extreme poverty led Jack London (1876-1916) to literacy. His mother, a spiritualist, conducted seances at home. She yelled when possessed, and, in one session, 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 teach Jack 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* 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 (Sinclair, 1977).

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 in poor condition and the school librarian 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 in 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 when he was a child. She was the first person to praise him for his choices in reading (O'Connor, 1964).

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. After 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.

**So What Have We Learned?**

The lives of Jack London, Madeleine L'Engle, and Eudora Welty are three literary 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. They entered the literary world fueled by need: Jack to survive emotional rejection and poverty; Madeleine to combat shyness and loneliness; and Eudora for entertainment during an extended illness. 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).

Writing time was when they were happiest. They were not afraid to shut the door and confront themselves for, "Writing is ingoing ... Writers must be comfortable with aloneness ... The theme is solitude" (Murray, 1991, p. 16). Jack London, Madeleine L'Engle, and Eudora Welty 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. And as children, these authors had time.

Some of today's children have time. However, the nature of their time alone has changed. More than a decade ago, a quarter of the children in kindergarten through sixth grade were left unsupervised after school (Long and Long, 1982). In 1990, the National Child Care Survey conducted by the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the United States Department of Education found that 44 percent of school-age children with working parents had no supervision after school. This represents nearly a doubling in eight years of the number of children alone after school (Chira, 1994). Unsupervised children often use their time alone to watch endless hours of television or to play video games. Reading is not often the activity of choice.

Some of today's children do not have time. After school and on weekends, harried adults may shuttle children from one activity and one location to another. These children do not have great periods of time to themselves to observe, listen, and think. If they choose to read, they may be interrupted.

Experiences with literature do not happen without long attention spans. How else will children know what it is like to begin a book, look up
at the clock, and find they have been lost in that book for hours? How else will they experience the sadness that comes with knowing the ending of a wonderful book is just a few pages away and the worry that another book by the same author might not be so wonderful? How else will they remember the enthusiasm that comes with recommending a great book to a friend or the bond that comes from finding someone who has enjoyed the very same book?

As children read, they decide whether reading will play an active part in their lives. They make connections between what they understand of life at that moment and what the text offers that is new. From characters with good conduct and characters with poor conduct, they learn how to behave with other people. Through stories of strong and weak humans, they learn courage, and they learn whether they would exhibit such courage under similar circumstances. They encounter foolishness, wisdom, miserliness, jealousy, patriotism, passion, love, hate, death, and the myriad aspects of feelings and thought that make them human. All the time they are reading about others, they are making decisions about themselves. These decisions relate not only to the kinds of people they want to become, but also to their conduct in a wider world.

Reading can offer children entertainment and learning, and it can offer them sanctuary. Many of today's children have terrible problems in their lives. Their emotional needs are as great, if not greater, than those of Jack London, Madeleine L'Engle, and Eudora Welty. Through reading, they too can escape unhappy lives and find examples of people and strategies to help them handle their lives. Adults determine children's schedules. As the adults in their lives, we must step back from our frazzled daily lives and evaluate how we are spending the time we have and how our children may be passing their childhoods. Restructured time and encouragement to spend that time reading can provide literary experiences to help more children find clearer paths to adulthood.
References


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