

LOOKING BACK

by
Ted Clymer

History of Reading:

Most professionals who are involved in literacy instruction were interested in books and writing at an early age. Is this true of you?

Clymer:

Yes. As far back as I can remember, books have been important, reliable friends. They were one of my earliest sources of entertainment and information; they remain so today.

History of Reading:

To what do you attribute your interest in reading?

Clymer:

Many things contributed, of course -- with my childhood home being very important. However, that home was not a "bookish" place. Growing up in a mid-western village that was encircled by lakes and trout streams, forests and wild meadows, was a powerful stimulus to out-of-doors activities. Books had some severe competition. Swimming, camping, hiking, fishing, hunting, trapping, boating, skiing, biking, and skating all claimed a share of our free time.

Radio, the television of that earlier time, was another competitor. It was a major source of entertainment with the adventure serials a daily ritual. We listened to Little Orphan Annie every day, but on Fridays we listened with great care -- pencils and our Secret Decoder Pins at hand -- so that we could record and then decode the numbered clues to the next week's exciting events. It was great drama.

But always there were books. Unencumbered by adults, we made almost daily excursions to the local Carnegie library where a wise librarian guided us to titles that took us beyond the small world we knew first hand. At home someone always seemed available to read to us, whether we wanted to hear the Sunday funnies or a bedtime story.

The second parlor was our home "library." The volumes, assembled in part by purchases at farm auctions, filled the glass-doored bookcases that stood against three walls. These titles provided a diverse and rich reading diet, some of it a bit unusual for children. Titles ranged from Du Chaillu's *The Viking Age* to *The Encyclopedia of Health and Home* to Stevenson's *Collected Works*. Standing before the cases trying to select my next book always brought a rush of excitement. I don't recall ever finding a book that I didn't enjoy -- although I did find some that were hard to read.

I soon learned that there was at least one book about anything I wanted to learn about and that books were an effective way of gathering information or of "traveling" to other places and other times.

History of Reading:

You haven't said anything about writing. What early experiences shaped your attitudes toward writing?

Clymer:

Well, I did mention the Little Orphan Annie Decoder Pin. That was writing of some importance!

Writing and reading are two sides of the same coin. Each is an extension or an outgrowth of the other. I have never -- even as a child -- viewed them as "separate." So what I've said earlier about reading would relate to writing also.

Of my early experiences in the reading/writing process, one was especially important. An attempt to publish a neighborhood newspaper taught me some of the complexities and realities of publication. I learned that the final product sometimes bears only a slight resemblance to the writer/editor's initial vision. In varying degrees, this insight has held through the years.

Another important experience was attending "readings" held at the home of a young woman who was frequently our baby sitter. At these animated readings and discussions of works underway -- presented by her numerous adult brothers and sisters, all aspiring writers of romance fiction and "soap opera" radio scripts -- I learned something about the nature of the creative process and literary criticism. I learned, also, that for some adults writing was an exciting process that lasted far beyond school days.

History of Reading:

Were there other adults who influenced your reading and writing?

Clymer:

My father was an important influence. He read widely in the English classics and would recite bits of Shakespeare and the Lake Poets to illustrate a point or amuse us. He enjoyed quizzing us about parallels between the Bible verses we were learning in Sunday School and the events of our village. I believe that he wanted us to test what we were learning or reading against our observations of the world around us.

History of Reading:

You haven't mentioned any of your teachers or your school experiences.

Clymer:

Maybe I've been saving the best for the last.

In that far back time, the school was a more central and stable part of a child's life. One brother two years older, another five years younger, and I all had the same teachers as we passed through grades 1 to 8! And with 20 to 25 pupils in each grade, those teachers knew all about me and my brothers and they knew about all the other pupils too. No need to consult the cumulative folder.

We knew somehow that we had important responsibilities as students. And those teachers felt keenly that success in school meant success in reading and writing and spelling. So the pupils knew that they had a job to do and the teachers knew what the job was. In looking back, it seems that we had a simpler and easier world than the one we have now.

I don't recall very clearly the procedures the teachers followed in teaching reading. But I do recall that in every classroom there were good books to read and that good books were read to us. And in every classroom we knew that the teachers cared about us and our success in learning to read.

History of Reading:

Thank you, Ted, for sharing your reminiscences with us.