History of Reading News

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LEARNING TO READ AT 81 – PART 1

MOGENS JENSEN

When I turned 81, I still had not learned to read.
But I'm slowly getting there.
In other words: *Learning to read is a lifelong process.*

"When do we learn to read? This article offers an answer to that question based on one person's experience (my own!); others will, of course, have different answers. In my perspective, one never actually *"learns to read"*.

One *gradually* learns to read in various ways, depending on what is needed in relation to a given text. Reading depends on the individual's general background, specific competencies and countless emotional factors. And reading depends on expectations and demands from the reader's environment.

Reading also depends on the texts at hand. Texts vary in terms of content, readability and visual appearance. They appear in different media – posters, books, magazines, newspapers and all sorts of electronic media that also present texts in various formats.

These factors are crucial for our understanding that "learning to read" should be seen as *a skill, a competency that is constantly under development* – depending on the individual reader's general and specific background and influenced by a constantly changing world.

WHEN I LEARNED TO READ

Maybe I learned to read by spelling, I'm not sure. Edel was five years older than I, and she played school with a couple of us. We were four and five years old.

It probably was not just playful "pretend reading", but the teacher's dedication made learning to read fun. We did not learn to read by writing, for even though I did one day bring paper along to Edel's class – it was lined, and I had brought plenty for the three of us to share – we were not allowed to borrow Edel's pencil. So we read without a pencil: no pretend writing.

Edel most certainly did not know anything about phonemes or the visual shapes of letters. And we probably did not learn to read in books with an age-appropriate vocabulary. There would have been pictures in our texts, but the main thing was that we played school. It was playtime for us when Edel came home from school, and the two or three of us ran over to see her without an Individual Education Plan in our pockets. We were fortunate too that her schedule ended around two in the afternoon, and that our own days were not scheduled by adults. Had it been, we would have either *had to* or *not been allowed to* "learn to read".

We were the generation that did not have to work from we were seven or eight years old (like my parents – yes, they did! Dad was six, and mom was nine years old when they began to work during the day – before or after class. Dad worked as a runner in a glassworks, Mom as a farm girl.).

We also were not placed in daycare when we were one or three years old, as my grandchildren did.

In that regard we are a privileged generation.

My encounter with the library and the man with the wart
At the age of six or seven years, I encountered the library system (in the form of the man with the wart on his forehead), when my mother took me to the library. Children were not allowed near the shelves, and with a stern index finger the man with the wart silently directed me to one of the three chairs placed along a wall, far enough from the shelves that the books would not come to any harm.

When the man with the wart was not around, I would sneak over to the shelves with books about the great explorers. I would point them out by title, and my mother would check them out along with the two that she checked out for herself. In fact, the limit was two books per person, and children did not count, so she was only allowed two books. But with non-fiction, the limit was three to four books – that is, unless the man with the wart was on duty to stamp the books on check-out. Having successfully secured the books, we would catch a trolley home, and I read my non-fiction books. I did not know that it was called non-fiction. I only knew that it was exciting.

These books did not come with comprehension questions, so I was free to focus on reading whichever way I felt like – based on my personal background – and grasping whatever I could. I would probably have gotten all mixed up, if I had been required to test my comprehension. Most likely, I would have just checked random boxes, "yes" and "no", and continued on my merry way.

READING IN THE LOWER GRADES

My class teacher in grades 1 through 5, Erik Brandt (*Mr.* Brandt, that is – a level of formality that would be inconceivable in today's egalitarian Danish education system) taught Danish language arts, including reading. He was an artist and also taught math – but sadly, not in our class. He

was cheerful, and he had a natural air of authority and very high standards. After a week or two he realized that I would be wasting my time doing the ABC with the rest of class. As far as I recall, this became clear to him when he found me bent over a book that had been left behind by a 3rd-grader (from 3B, the class that used our classroom in the afternoon). So he gave me another reader. It had lots of pictures, good ones too, and a fair amount of text.

Later I was given a 2nd grade reader and required to just pay enough attention when the class was learning a new letter that I would be able to answer when Mr. Brandt drilled the class. Afterward I had permission to read in one of the books that Mr. Brandt had laid out. I was given a choice of readers for – probably – grades 1 through 3 or 4 as well as a couple of other books in the classroom book cabinet. When I had finished one book, and that took me a while, I could pick another. Once, Mr. Brandt asked me a question about something I was reading, but otherwise I was left to my own devices, free to read. Gradually, three of us were allowed to read independently, and the selection of books expanded.
We learned (cursive!) writing; for two lessons a week we were taught to write letters "properly". First we had to do the straight lines in the letters, then the curvy ones. Next, the lines had to be connected, and then we had a letter. Sometimes we had to do a circle – then we had a new letter. Writing was boring, and even then my handwriting was ugly. My somewhat deficient fine and gross motor skills did not exactly earn me high marks in writing, actually quite a bit below average; the one thing that saved me from doing even worse was probably that I did not have to concentrate much to get the spelling right.

Spelling was never an issue for me, but the boy next to me, and my best buddy throughout my ten years of school, Hans, had spelling difficulties. He did better when we did written dictation, as he could peak over my shoulder and copy my work – provided that he could read my handwriting.

LEISURE READING

During these years, I also read my mother's weekly magazine, a close equivalent to the Ladies' Home Journal. My sister would buy me a children's magazine. Every three months it included a book. I still have a few of these books; they have survived every bookshelf renovation over the years so far.

I also read books that one could send for after collecting enough coupons from cereal boxes. We also collected pictures that came in packets of coffee substitute. One could buy an album and paste the pictures in, with captions where the pictures went.

Today, the captions would be judged as illegible by both children and adults: tiny, black print on brownish paper, with a vocabulary and sentence constructions more appropriate for adult-level reading. Today, we would say that it looked like the fine print in an insurance policy. If we were to encounter texts like that in schools today, we would say that they were visually unacceptable, had hopeless readability and incomprehensible content – briefly put, they were appalling.

Otherwise, I would read whatever came my way in print, and the books that I received as Christmas and birthday presents. At the time, the typical birthday present was a "birthday quarter" or a book.

Neither my sister nor the coffee substitute manufacturer nor the cereal manufacturer had any deliberate intention of promoting my independent reading, and anyway, the texts I encountered, seen with today's eyes, were not appropriate for kids and barely for adults.

I was reminded of this when the deputy director of the school where I had my first employment as a teacher, said that he did not mind buying specially adapted books for my remedial reading class. But he was convinced that I might as well teach them to read using a volume of "Popeye" – "those magazines even have pictures in them." And then he bought the adapted books. The students did not develop very good reading skills, but then again, cereal coupon books or coffee substitute albums would not have been any improvement.

VORACIOUS READER WITH A SORE THROAT

Since my health proved defenseless against pretty much any bug that was going around, I had many sick days. I often caught cold or developed a sore throat – and if! During World War 2, coke for the stove was hard to come by, and in the hearth in the kitchen, the peat blocks produced almost as much moisture as heat, my dad said. He fished drift wood out of the water in the harbor, and we obtained a permission card to gather pine cones and dead branches in a small wooded area a few kilometers outside Copenhagen. That produced a good fire and allowed us to maintain a reasonable temperature in the kitchen and in the formal living room. But I still caught cold constantly. A strep throat would last 10-14 days; this was before the days of penicillin. It was also before the days of two-income families, so a speedy recovery was not so crucial, as my Mom could look after me without missing work. I also caught diphtheria, scarlet fever, food poisoning, was hospitalized to be kept under observation for meningitis and caught all the standard things such as chickenpox, the measles, rubella, the mumps etc.

– Does all this personal information have anything to do with reading? *Yes. Absolutely!* Hans lived a little farther away from school than I did, and I would wait for him every morning so that we would walk to school together. He complained to his mother, "– he's just lying in bed at home, reading, while the rest of us have to be in school." I devoured books when I was sick. All sorts of books. In the 4th grade I only managed six or seven weeks of school and was away sick the rest of the school year, so there was plenty of time for reading.

I learned to read (very) fast, to skim to and to handle the sorts of books that I later discovered were called non-fiction. A Swedish reading researcher once wrote that good readers read the way pigs eat: *anything!* That was true then, and it is true

now. But I never read texts on astronomy and star dust. I also did not read about the content and structure of rocks – perhaps because Denmark's geology only features rocks on one tiny island, and even there in a limited amount. The real explanation is probably that texts about living creatures (biological, historical etc.) held more appeal for me than texts about inanimate objects.

Dewey's concept of "learning by doing" dates back more than a hundred years. That does not make it any less valid. I learned to read by reading. A notion that is not accepted by everyone today.

As a teacher, when I worked with a student who had reading difficulties, and we had struggled our way through eight lines of text – and compared that to the volumes that the voracious readers in their class (even today, there are many of those – most of them girls!) consumed, that is *part* of the explanation for good versus poor reading skills in many students. Apart from reading difficulties related to cognitive, language or perceptual deficits. Emotional factors also play a role.

READING IN MATH

My somewhat inadequate numeracy came under particular pressure in the 4th grade. Here "we" learned to do short and long division and the multiplication table from 10 to 20. Except, I did not.

Mom helped me with my homework, we had to use real ink, and the results were blotchy in more than one sense.

Math became easier in the higher grades when it became more text-based; at least it was not all numbers.

Numbers continued to be cumbersome until many years later when I acquired a paper tape calculator; that was a big help. But I still find numbers unwieldy. Later, the pocket calculator has repeatedly saved the day for me when discussing the annual budgets at work or when checking an estimate.

Generally, in my work as a researcher and an executive I have been lucky enough to have "numerate" staff members who accepted that their share of our joint effort included keeping track of the numbers I sent their way. In my personal life, my limited numeracy has been a burden, and in many job contexts, numbers have been a headache: Checking the page numbers in an index when proofreading a manuscript took much longer than proofreading several complex chapters. To this day, I have difficulty reading phone numbers, typing in number codes, remembering my license plate etc.

CRITICAL READING AND "CRITICAL READING"

The term "critical reading" is not always used with regard for the essential meaning of "critical". In fact, it often involves reflecting on the text, comparing different texts, assessing the content of illustrations in relation to the text etc.

These are all important activities, which should be taught and learned. Of course. The following comments should not be taken as a negative opinion of teaching "critical reading" as a genre in school. On the contrary, it is an essential skill to develop.

But during the last few years of World War 2, when I was 13-15 years old, I – *we* – learned to practice "critical reading" on a different level. We had to. An example:

One day, two stories dominated newspaper headlines. The stories were presented in a similar layout, had the same font size, etc. That was required by the censorship imposed during the German occupation.

One story was that an unknown fishmonger in a small coastal town had been murdered, gunned down. The story did not mention that he was a notorious Nazi informer.

The other story, almost identical in layout and wording, was that a small-town vicar had been murdered, gunned down. The story did not mention that he was known as a fierce, high-profile opponent of Nazism.
Critical reading of the daily newspaper relied on several other, obvious sources: Every evening, my Dad and I would bike over to my uncle's, as he had a radio that would pick up the BBC's news in Danish, with *"Her er London..."* (London calling) as the standard opening phrase – accompanied by the noise and crackle from German efforts to jam the transmission.

We listened to the news of the day and the next day we spontaneously compared them with the content of the censured newspapers. That led to meaningful, critical reading!

WHEN LITERACY BECOMES A PROBLEM

Minding my own business: Soon after I had turned six, I was hospitalized in a pediatric ward with a severe case of "food poisoning". At the time there were no relevant drugs, but patient care was excellent, the nurses were kind, and even though I was quite miserable for quite a long time, my stay in hospital was endurable.

Up until the morning when I managed to get out of bed on my own and snuck over to the nurses' station, where the three newspapers of the day were laid out. I read the headlines and was sent back to bed once I was caught. Back in my bed, I overheard the nurses discussing the events of the war over coffee, wondering news there was from the war in Abyssinia. I called out, "Mussolini has bombed Addis Ababa" – reply: "Be quiet!" And – how did I know?

"It says so on the front page of the Daily Gazette". Now they told me to mind my own business, stay in bed and stop meddling in affairs I did not understand and besides, to stay asleep until they came to wake me up.

This incident is just example in many that precociousness is not always welcomed – at least not if it involves being able to read before starting school.

Reading aloud: In grades 1 through 4 we would take turns reading aloud from our readers in almost every language arts lesson. But most of the time was spent on other classroom activities.

Among other things, we spent a great deal of time discussing the meaning of various words, and we learned to use familiar "bons mots" and "idioms", without actually being introduced to these terms.

We learned to tell stories and wrote our own "storytelling stories", complete with illustrations, although we were not allowed to spend very long on the drawings!

As I recall, our language arts classes used a very varied approach. At least as varied as most of the language arts classes I observed as part of a research project in the 1970s.

But sometimes I was asked to read aloud to the class from various children's books when Mr. Brandt was away for "meetings with other teachers". Sometimes I was also dispatched to some of the earlier grades to read aloud to them when their teachers had to go away for "meetings".

It was only after VE Day, 5th of May 1945, when the British troops liberated Denmark from Nazi occupation that we realized what these meetings had (also) been about: The school had been a centre for underground publishing. We thought that the teachers were simply having coffee in the teachers' lounge, which was sometimes the case, of course.

It was no fun at all sitting at the teacher's desk, reading to the rest of the class – not even to the second-graders. I did not enjoy that at all.

The problem of reading ahead: In many educational contexts, I felt (and still feel) that I was wasting my time (and I was certainly not the only one). This began in the early grades, when I found textbooks for my geography, biology and history classes dreadfully boring, because I had already read ahead, far past the books we were using in class.

It was fun or exciting when the teacher went beyond the textbook and the curriculum – especially when he or she was adept at teaching, mastering the craft of education. When this was perfected, teaching became both an art and a craft. The teachers who mastered this are still vivid in my recollection.

By the way, hardly anyone misbehaved during these lessons.

WHEN READING BECAME UTILITARIAN

Looking back at reading during my school years, I see that it was first driven by pleasure and enjoyment and later by a thirst for knowledge about the topics that I was interested in. To put it in "lyrical" terms, reading gave me many starry moments, usually in fiction, and many "epiphanies", usually in non-fiction. But both genres were capable of offering both. Non-fiction is often underrated in this regard. Perhaps because the teachers who teach reading have a personal fascination with fiction?

From the age of 15-16 years, my reading was usually fueled by the requirements of school, education and work. In most regards, reading had become a tool that I used. It just had to work, like any other tool.

Subject-specific knowledge is the domain of the school – in principle and certainly primarily.

General knowledge – in Denmark – is often an overlooked factor in reading education. We rely on our general knowledge every single day *outside* school – and in every single subject *in* school. Of course, general knowledge is also acquired in school, but much of it in fact stems from experiences outside the school context. This is clearly a task for the parents as well as the other adults in the child's environment. In hindsight, the adults that I was around as a kid probably had considerable influence on my literacy process. But in addition to the influence of my parents and other adults, the many books in the library were a major contribution to building background knowledge.

Generally, perhaps, the more subject-specific the education is, the fewer spontaneous efforts are made to acquaint the student with "everyday knowledge"; this is only my opinion, however. Everyday knowledge – general knowledge – is not a curriculum subject. Today, children have less one-on-one time with adults; this probably does not help to further their *general* knowledge.

A YEAR WHEN I LEARNED NOTHING?

At the age of 18 years, I was enrolled at Blaagaard Teacher's College. I skipped high school, so I had to complete a one-year preliminary course.

I "kept up with the class", whatever that means. I certainly did not study. I had various jobs that year; was allowed to hand out the mail (although I was actually too young), helped out at a local store one afternoon a week, worked as a delivery boy for a printing office and had other odd jobs. But most importantly, also in financial terms: I began to offer "home tutoring", as my ad in the local paper said.

My first student, a 15-year-old girl, needed help with math (!). I prepared – thoroughly – for every session. She passed her exam.

Almost all the other students I tutored over the next three years needed help with reading and spelling: I would sit with the student and learned to "listen for" the areas where the he or she had problems as well as the areas where he or she did well. We did too much cramming. How else was the student going to learn? – I had not yet learned to teach.

By accident, one day at the library I came across nature poetry from the first decade of the 1900s. I still enjoy this genre today. It was an entirely new type of text, an unfamiliar genre for me. Yet another facet had been added to my reading. In time, poetry taught me to read using an "inner voice" – and to read the same texts over and over. And then once more.

Slow reading suddenly made good sense.

But what did I formally learn that year? Nothing, I guess. The only thing I recall today is that we read about a French king called "Charles the Bold". Why we had to learn this, and how he acquired that name, I never knew. I never tried to find out. But the next year I was old enough to embark on formal teacher training.

And that was the end of that year.

Reading education? – Not as part of my teacher training!
The three years of teacher training were not about advanced studying but closer to highly expanded high school studies, although some classes did go well beyond that with comprehensive curricula that provided a sound basis for our subsequent vocation.
Other classes had a more arbitrary structure. It was not always easy to make out the big idea in these courses.

"Reading" was not a formal subject in teacher training. But we did learn a great deal about *teaching* reading/language arts when we did our "teaching practice" under the tutelage of the elementary school director. He demanded thorough preparation. And *we* were the ones who had to prepare! The feedback was very useful, maybe a little humiliating, sometimes very much so, especially if our preparation had been modest or, worse, if we failed to pay proper attention to the students' replies to our questions.

That was insulting to us and quite educational.

Some of the teachers, whose classes we observed in elementary school, were very skilled educators. They managed to teach most of their students to read. I developed a deep respect for the *craft* involved in teaching. This respect has only deepened since. Considerably. Their teaching was not burdened by theoretical considerations before, during and after. Not a bad word about one theory or another (at least not all of them). Even then, prevailing theories varied almost as rapidly as the width and length of skirts and neckties.

For six weeks I worked as a temp teacher in a village school. That was a learning experience. One statement by the head teacher still sticks in my mind: "Young man, we are also going to need people to pull potatoes out of the ground!" – I had expressed concern that some of the students in – if memory serves – 3rd or 4th grade were completely unable to read. In a field outside school, which was located on the outskirts of Copenhagen, we saw them digging up potatoes. Later, the potato fields became an industrial area.

By the way, the potatoes were being taken up, sorted and packaged by mechanized farm equipment.

SO MUCH FOR READING EDUCATION.

And we grew a few years older and learned quite a bit in some subjects.

A military interlude, reading and functional illiteracy
Denmark has general conscription, which means military service is mandatory for (virtually) all young men. During the cold war *everyone* was drafted.

Here too, reading and writing proved to be useful skills: The NCOs who dealt with the privates were at the bottom of the military hierarchy. They were barely accepted by their superiors. Most of them only had seven years of schooling, and not everyone had adequate reading and writing skills. They struggled whenever they had to produce a brief written report.

After a few weeks, I was "temporarily" (permanently, as it turned out) reassigned to "desk duty", where I would type up the orders of the day, make sure that the daily paper work was in order, type up (and gradually write) rosters etc. In terms of language skills and, not least, cooperation skills, this was a challenging situation for me, not least when an NCO had to produce a written report. Emotionally, it was difficult for them and for me.

"Desk duty" allowed me some room for studying "on the sly": My regiment was not stationed in Copenhagen, where the college was, so I made do with informal preparation.

Functional illiteracy: Many – in my mind a stunningly high number – of the conscripts had poor reading skills. Some of them were what was later labeled functionally illiterate. They were offered additional literacy (and math) education as part of the military's "civilian training program", which was not under military leadership. During my last six months in the service I became involved in this difficult educational undertaking: The soldiers who took voluntary literacy and math training definitely did not have positive experiences in school. Most of them were aware that they needed to improve their qualifications for life after the service, but the courses took place in their limited spare time, so they expected *me* to teach while all *they* had to do was sit back and listen. They were physically worn out. However, both parties did learn from this experience.

What I learned here came to good use later when (to make a little extra on the side) I began teaching "voluntary evening classes" for young people and adults who were struggling readers. Some of the young people, however, were actually required to take these "voluntary" courses in order to complete their training. Most of the students were adults, though. It was not unusual to have an average age in the class of more than 50 years. The vast majority of the adults were women.

A TWO-YEAR PROGRAM IN LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE, NOT READING

After finding employment as a temp teacher, I signed up for a two-year program in language arts that I had begun to prepare for during my military service.

That proved challenging, not least because there were only about a dozen students in the program. Furthermore, we followed the pattern of the song about the "Ten Little Nigger Boys" (later changed to the more acceptable "Ten little soldier boys"). In the end, only two of us stayed on to receive competent and unusually intensive training in Danish language arts, especially during the final six months. The emphasis was on *language,* not reading, but the academic level was (for me at least!) very demanding. I had to develop *a different type of reading* than the type I had been practicing in the past. Reading was not taught, since that was – obviously – a skill we already possessed. Precise reading was required. No detail was omitted, but at the same time we had to keep sight of the overall theme and gradually elaborate on it.

The program focused on Danish language arts and Nordic literature studies. In the classes on Nordic literature, I took the opportunity to reread texts that I was already familiar with as well as new texts, and I discovered that there were more ways to read than I ever imagined, even though I had in fact employed quite a few of them in practice. This was an inspiring literature course; it required us to read many, many books. Later, I was to work closely together with the teacher for this class, co-editing a number of textbooks.

Both these classes included extensive written assignments: Among other things, I learned to write very precisely, or at least I tried to. That was to come in handy in later years.

I came to fully appreciate that reading, writing and oral presentation were closely related, and that "study techniques" (which are anything but "technical") are essential. My work approach was definitely systematic during these two years. I also handled my daily teaching job: I taught a group of students with severe reading difficulties as well as a few weekly lessons in mainstream classes.

My exam in Nordic literature went smoothly, but in Danish language arts I merely scraped by – and only because luck stood me by. The many linguistic details were not my cup of tea. At the time.

READING AND WRITING IN UNIVERSITY

Two of us completed the two-year program in "reading" (or rather Danish language arts and Nordic literature) in 18 months; after graduation I was accepted into the master of psychology program at the University of Copenhagen. Here my reading experience proved really useful: the ability to read large amounts of text very quickly, take a critical approach to details and develop an overview of the topics at hand.

We encountered research requirements that we did not quite see the use of: There were very specific criteria for the use of research literature; not least, we learned to look for abuse and misleading interpretations of data. We were required to read tables, figures and graphs in a "critical and corrective" manner, comparing them with the main text and illustration captions. We learned to read in a systematic and critical manner and to apply several different reading approaches. Not least, we learned to distinguish between the researcher's *"opinion"* and his or her *documentable, fact-based knowledge.*

Study planning: Three of us formed a study group; we were all teachers with a daily teaching job. Our reading became very goal-oriented. Never before had our reading been this intense and this purpose-specific. Fortunately, we were able to divide the task between us – the team approach worked! It was our own invention too:

One member of our group, Gunnar Kjær-Rasmussen, who later became the business manager in the Danish Reading Association (51 years and counting), studied the German literature in the field and conveyed the content of German books and articles.

The second member of the study group, Jens Bjerg, studied some of the literature available in English and Danish; later he became the editor of the Danish Reading Association's journal "Læsepædagogen" (an equivalent of "The Reading Teacher"; the main difference was that at the time "Læsepædagogen" also lobbied hard to put reading on the political agenda – something that was sorely needed! This objective was eventually achieved – and then some!)

I studied some of the literature in English and some of the reference books and manuals. The rest we all read.

We were able to develop a nuanced understanding of reading and learned a great deal about studying *in practice* – what is sometimes referred to as "study techniques". In our case it was part of our "survival skills" as students. Among other things, we discovered that a reasonable approach to the literature that was slated for "cursory" reading was to place it in a stack, face up, put a hand on the stack, copy the bibliographic data on a list and return the books to the library. In-depth reading, on the other hand, was intense. Manuals, encyclopedia and other reference books played an important role. They were specific and hence efficient. We made notes – but only of the most salient points – and used them.

Had we been under less "stress", as the term is now, we would have benefited more from our reading. The "stress" was our own fault. Often, we were able to put the interesting (and, as we thought at the time, and I still do, occasionally rather lofty) lectures and abstract theoretical articles into perspective on the basis of our daily work teaching remedial as well as mainstream reading.

New old theories? There is one statement by our lecturer on psychological testing, Thomas Sigsgaard, that I have later returned to repeatedly: "If research says one thing, and the real

world says something else, one must have the courage to entertain the absurd notion that maybe the real world is more insightful than the research."

Twice now, I have lived through (*very* simplistically put) the battle between different general theories on reading: from phonetics to holistic reading and back again, from holistic reading to phonetics. Each cycle has lasted about two decades. Now, it is coming around again. By the time this is read, it probably *has* come around again. For researchers who do not ascribe to currently prevailing views, the new dawn will seem a long time coming.

People from both camps base their arguments on *documented* data (and differences in opinion). And if one is not a true wholehearted supporter of one view or the other, one is likely to wind up in a "two-front" war!

Clearly, it is *not* just the "same old" ideas making their reappearance after a few decades. The choice of teaching methods and materials is also based on educational *opinion* – and, underlying this, the individual teacher's basic world view. There is definitely new knowledge, renewed dedication, a new environment and new people behind the trends that are a natural and positive aspect of ongoing developments in research.
In my opinion, there is no "final answer" to the issues in reading education, that is, the problems the students face – apart from ongoing improvements in education practices. The problem is that for the students, the goalposts are always being moved, as expectations and requirements keep being raised.

Text credibility – and proofreading: As students, we read a lot. We were expected to. Of course. We read critically. That goes without saying. We did not expect such a trivial factor as proofreading to play any role in "critical reading":

While we were studying for our final exam, we got stuck on what had to be a crucial point in the most important book of the program: the professor's own thesis. We just did not get it! And we knew that the book (which was without any interest to us whatsoever and besides was extremely inaccessible) would be essential. One afternoon, I managed to track down the professor who was in charge of the final exam and asked on behalf of the group how certain sections in his thesis were to be understood. He took a brief look at the pages and then said, "Oh, that? – I was sure I had fixed that! There's something missing, and we neglected to correct it." He flipped through the book and pointed at another passage in the text: "This, of course, is also wrong!"

Our confidence in the highly respected researcher's texts suffered another blow. In particular, the necessity of proofreading was made painfully evident to us.

"Reading" includes proofreading. Any writer has to be able to proofread and also has to actually do it: Any text must be checked for ambiguous phrasing, omissions, errors and incomprehensible passages if it is to be credible and targeted to the intended readership. And *proofreading* cannot yet be replaced by even the most sophisticated electronic spell checker.

A curiosity: When I was 12, I bought my first non-fiction book, a small reference book on Danish birds. When I came home and looked up a particular bird, I was directed to the wrong page! The table of contents referred to page 47, but the bird was in fact featured on page 48. I still have the book, not because of the error, but because it is the first non-fiction book I was able to put on my shelf. Typos in a book are probably unavoidable. There are errors in my own books and articles too, probably many.

To Be Continued in the Spring 2012 *History of Reading News*.

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LEARNING TO READ AT 81 – PART 2

MOGENS JANSEN

[Editor's Note: This is Part 2 of an autobiographical essay by Mogens Jansen. Part 1 appeared in the Fall 2011 edition of the History of Reading News. *Also, the editor apologizes sincerely for the misspelling of Dr. Jansen's surname in the Fall 2011* HRN.*]*

READING AND WRITING IN A RESEARCH INSTITUTION

Just after graduation I was employed at what was then the only Danish educational research institution that did not engage in teaching. It was a "pure" educational-psychological research institution: That meant no teaching! A dream come true!

Critical reading: Over the following years, I was met with demands for very broad as well as very critical reading and writing: For example, I had to distinguish between primary and secondary literature. The former was deemed (more) reliable, and one might then check to see whether the latter had conveyed the information in a simple and reliable manner, or whether it had introduced misleading interpretations of the research findings.

The risk inherent in relying on secondary literature as a basis for research was stated repeatedly: "What is this based on?", "Where is the documentation?", "Is this application credible?" Such an approach ought to be common on all levels of higher education.

Later, more than once, researchers whose books and articles I have edited or reviewed, have been (more than a little) surprised – and perhaps even slightly offended: They *had* already read and summarized loyally – they just had not given the data and the data interpretations a sufficiently in-depth treatment. In most cases, these issues have been resolved to the reasonable satisfaction of both parties; but not without a mutual effort.

Critical writing: Our own texts had to be stringent. A close relationship between what we had read, and what we wrote was an obvious requirement. Our texts had to be targeted: "To whom is this addressed?" ... "You must write in such a manner as to make your text comprehensible to your intended audience!"

The director of the research institution read our texts with a very critical (we thought, overly critical) eye and set the bar high for the publications that he was formally responsible for – including form requirements. He was equally demanding of his own work. I had to seriously reassess my idea about how to write articles that were to be read and understood outside a small circle of our closest colleagues. The four or five rewrites that were standard got us used to the idea that a manuscript is "never" finished. Furthermore, most publications (except the statistical reports, which we might not even fully understand ourselves) had to be "readable and comprehensible" – as we were told both verbally and in writing when a draft version of a section in a research report or an article was returned. It had been carefully reviewed – very carefully. The typewritten text remained just barely visible underneath his corrections in pencil.

To boot, Jesper Florander, head of the department where I worked (Research and Development), also reviewed our articles, adding comments, additions and changes in red ink, which only served to complete the image of a constructive and corrective reading process that I have also practiced myself. Perhaps sometimes with the effect of making the writers I worked with just as frustrated as I was then.

Different types of proofreading: Later, when I received reports, articles or book manuscripts for review, I have had to practice different types of reading:

Basic proofreading (for typos etc.) as well as proofreading to catch errors in spelling and punctuation – and drawing attention to sentences that were incomplete or (more commonly) that stretched over 15-20 lines. Since one cannot *simultaneously* focus fully on research content, for example to address the validity of arguments, additional readings were required. At times, this effort was considerable. And what was due to "sloppiness," what constituted "lack of clarity," what reflected "lack of background knowledge," and what was due to "limited language skills?" Perhaps the authors had not learned to use a typewriter (later a computer) – or at least not properly.

Lack of precision and major gaps in general background knowledge continue to cause problems, exactly as is the case for 3rd or 4th grade students who may have "learned to read" but who lack specific subject knowledge – *and very often general knowledge* – to understand what they read.

Very narrow subject areas also cause problems, but these are easier to identify and rectify.

At times, my own limited knowledge about a topic has also caused problems – for better and worse:

As a policy, whenever I failed to understand an article that I was editing, I took it that a few other potential readers would also fail to grasp it. This criterion was not always popular with the writers – especially when it turned out that I simply did not have enough knowledge about the topic. Sometimes, the article really *was* okay, and I simply did not know enough about the topics of the books and articles I was editing.

TEACHER, WRITER AND EDITOR

As a teacher, I have worked with all age groups except for children under 6 years of age and 16-19-year-olds. Over the years, I have worked with remedial reading groups, mainstream classes, adults with reading difficulties and highly proficient readers.

I have taught in education programs for teachers and other medium-length and university programs – usually on the topic of reading but sometimes also on evaluation or research and development.

In many cases this has helped to improve my teaching – many things become clearer to me when I teach than when I read about good teaching practices. I have also benefited from working with people who were less – or more – competent readers than I was, with readers who based their choice of texts on very narrow and specifically subject-related approaches, and with teachers who were interested in reading "all sorts of things."

My authorship began at the age of eleven, when I joined a group of three older boys who wanted to produce a school newspaper. At the time, this was *definitely* not common. I was allowed to join because my father, who was a craftsman (a cooper), had promised to make the wooden frame for the hectograph. We all chipped in to buy the glue and whatever else we needed for the gelatin pad as well as paper for printing.

But this was 1941 (during World War II), and the raw materials were hard to come by. We did manage to write and publish two four-page issues. Buying enough paper for a third issue was proving very expensive. We dared not raise the price (2 cents was a considerable amount for a child at the age of 10-12 years). One member of our group suggested that we adopt a "timeshare scheme:" The paper would still cost 2 cents, but buyers were only allowed to keep it for two days. Then they would have to return it to us, and we could sell it again.

The timeshare concept never caught on. We closed down the newspaper. We were the only ones who missed it.

When I was 16-17 years old, I was a contributor to the Danish Ramblers' Association's magazine about nature conservation. There was a movement at the time to cut down big roadside trees to prevent accidents. I argued that the drivers themselves were to blame if they hit a tree, since the trees never actually darted into the road to collide with the cars. Later I became a driver myself.

To supplement my teacher's salary, for a few years I did a regular section for children in a bi-weekly magazine published by the Danish Farmer's Union. The content was clearly defined: "Aunt Karen" (yours truly) had a letters column where she (I) in fact asked most of the questions and also provided the answers. I serialized a novella from a Swedish children's magazine; I had no concern for copyright issues – at the time. I also did a crossword puzzle and described to make "my own natural history book". But doubling as "Aunt Karen" was too time-consuming and did not pay enough, so after a few years the baton was passed to someone else.

In professional terms, this writing job was very rewarding for me, as the assignment had a very specific target group: 7-11-year-olds living in the countryside.

My "authorship" really developed when I began to write and edit a series of educational materials for reading and writing. One incident in particular was educational for me.

I had written a *very* short and *very* accessible text; it had to be, because it was intended for some of the first pages in an ABC reader. The publisher's consultant (the aforementioned Professor Thomas Sigsgaard from my university studies) not only approved it but even had a few words of praise for it.

It had taken a long time to write the story – and quite a bit longer than I had anticipated. So, encouraged by the praise, that same evening I wrote another story and went over to the consultant's house to drop it off (he lived quite close to me).

The following morning, there was a note in my mailbox: "Dear Mogens, I have read your second story. One of us will never miss seeing it again."

That was useful feedback. And the consultant was right. Since then, I have taken much longer to write things – regardless of the topic. I also discovered that it is difficult to write easy texts and easy to write difficult ones. And that everything – *everything – must* be reviewed and revised. Since then I have. My latest contribution to a book, a fairly extensive manual on educational evaluation underwent at least seven or eight rewrites.

Writing and editing: My work as a writer gradually expanded to include editing teaching materials. This led to a long list of books over the years; later I became involved in other types of editing. Together with varying co-editors, I was the editor of the Danish Reading Association's magazine, *Læsepædagogen* for forty years. The magazine is still published with six annual 48-page issues – in addition to occasional reprints and special issues. For forty years, I have also edited two publication series together with varying co-editors. One features important articles aimed at supplementary education for teachers, translated into Danish. In this series, the Danish Reading Association has published important, often essential, articles

by researchers who write in English, including Jeanne Chall, Margaret Clark, David Elkind, Emilia Ferreiro, Ken Goodman, Albert Harris, Walter MacGinitie, David Pearson, John Pikulski, Catherine Snow, Keith Stanovich, Dorothy Strickland, Ana Teberosky, Robert Tierney and Keith Topping. In addition to these authors, the series, which has a total of 45 titles, also features authors from other language areas besides English: many Swedish and Norwegian contributions as well as articles translated from French and Spanish and, of course, Danish contributions.

The other series, which is intended for use in basic teacher training, mostly address reading or remedial education. Almost all the contributors to this series are Danish. Issue 71, by the Norwegian reading researcher Øistein Anmarkrud, is fresh off the presses.

The list of editing assignments also includes several books by other publishers about reading and reading education for adults, in part aimed at "training" young people and adults who have reading difficulties, in part at highly proficient readers who were looking to optimize their studying efficiency. The latter target group has mostly included future teachers, teachers taking supplementary education and occasionally researchers.

What I have always found most exciting – and most challenging – was editing and writing books on a variety of topics including reading and writing as well as subjects like biology, history and geography in close cooperation with writers, editors, illustrators and graphic designers – sometimes also with the groups of teachers who were going to test the textbooks. We read the texts in different ways, based on our interests and our jobs. This collaboration not only improved the usefulness of the texts but definitely also their aesthetic and literary value.

The common feature for all these series and individual books was that the main focus throughout had to be on the intended readers. The books were either about or aimed at students aged 6 to around 16 years.

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READING IN MY OWN LANGUAGE AND IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Learning to read other languages beside my mother tongue opened new worlds to me – and new and interesting problems: Word by word, the text might say the same or almost the same in my first language as it did in the foreign language. But the new language never really became my own.

I did learn to *read what was on the lines* (explicit content). I was "able to read a foreign language."

If I was familiar with the academic or literary background of what I was reading, I was also usually able *with some confidence* to approach the content of the text: I was able to *read what was behind the lines* (background knowledge).

But in a manner of speaking, essential content, all the things that are hidden between the lines, is not really there at all. I am only with difficulty and *with some confidence* able to *read between the lines* (implicit content), because the foreign languages are not my own and never will be. There is far more written between the lines than we are normally aware. This is where we find all the content that is not explicitly stated, and I definitely do not always catch all of that when I read a different language than the one I acquired as a toddler. My reading is hampered because I know that the content that is not explicitly stated is often the mainstay of the text – the heart of it.

Here, only an eminent translation will do – and yet, something will always be lost in translation. And although the electronic translations keep improving, they still fail to grasp whatever is (not) said between the lines.

One aspect in particular is problematic: Once we are past the basic level of decoding, it is usually our vocabulary and *importantly, our general knowledge* that set the limit. Vocabulary and general knowledge play a similar role in our mother tongue, but in a foreign language, the problem is much more pronounced – and it is significant.

"Cultural context" – broadly put – also makes it much easier for me to read Swedish and Norwegian (which are close linguistic cousins to Danish anyway) than, for example, French, which I have never mastered well enough.

THE POT OF GOLD AT THE END OF THE RAINBOW; ABOUT READING METHODS

When I was in university, there were five common solutions to the problems of reading education. Now, some fifty years later, the same problems are still around but with new labels. None of them can be solved with a quick fix: Linus' Great Pumpkin, who shall one day appear in all his glory in the pumpkin patch, is bound to remain a no-show. No Great Pumpkin will ever come along to magically rescue literacy.

But many "solutions" are proffered to the problems of reading education (and readers!). Other "solutions" have been put on the table in the past, and new ones will emerge. The following five have been persistent. Many of the new "solutions" that have been proposed are little more than new shoes for the old suit.

1: "Send more money!" Money is always needed. Often, large amounts of money are needed in certain areas. Funding decisions can delay necessary changes. When available, "more money" should always be carefully allocated – without spending all the energy (and the money) on documentation requirements and red tape.

2: "The educational system lacks leadership!" Sometimes it does. But we cannot manage or administrate our way out by means of new legislation, regulations, requirements, objectives and planning. Some of it may make a difference here and now; for example we could try to make plans that go beyond the beginning of the next school year. But the world outside the school is ever changing, and legislation, regulations etc. will have to change along with it. The education system cannot be expected to stand still – this is a fundamental condition.

3: "We need more knowledge!" We have to know "what works" – then we will also know what does not work. But it is naive to think that any "solutions" last forever. If the acquired knowledge is evidence-based, it may be helpful – for a while: Once the outside world changes, and it will, other approaches may be called for.

4: "We need more research!" Yes – if the research is closely related to everyday practice. But we cannot always or even mostly expect to see a close link between theory and practice. Even if that is the way it ought to be.

5: "We just need to find the right method!" – the one that will work in Colorado and Copenhagen, uptown and downtown, in School A and School B and with teacher X and teacher Y. The world has never seen such a miracle drug. The world outside the schools is not homogenous throughout. Mark Twain wrote about "snake oil peddlers;" they also hawk their wares in the Danish education system, not least in the field of reading, peddling concepts and materials.

The five phantom solutions point to the basic problem, which is that teachers, reading researchers and administrators often work in a "historical vacuum" with little or no knowledge of things that were common practice in the past. These topics, initiatives etc. are introduced as if they were news. Eventually, they pale; some of them, sadly, are flops – as always.

FUTURE VISIONS

There have been and fortunately still are many future visions from domains outside the world of reading. These too have often proved wrong.

An amusing example was the prediction that London would be buried in horse manure due to the many horse-drawn carriages that would be needed as the city expanded and became more densely populated. London was not buried in horse manure. The prediction was based on a linear extrapolation. A very different type of horse power that came to dominate the transport sector was not and could not have been predicted then.

A classic example is the prediction that a population explosion would lead to global overpopulation and starvation. This future vision has proved slightly more durable, but it could not, for example, have included the effects of widely available birth control.

A few old examples: The Oracle at Delphi and crystal balls have been used – astrology and the scrutiny of ancient texts are still in use to this day. I never knew why.

Futurology is a serious discipline that seeks to look into features that were seen last year and are still in evidence this year. Many of them will surely be around for another decade; we just cannot tell which ones will be sustained. We may aim for distant goals, the stars for example, and a serious futurologist may be happy if we hit the tops of tall trees. That is also true when it comes to reading.

Ten years ago, we did not know that we would encounter Generation 4C (= C for Connected, Communicating, Computerized, Clicking). The generation of people that were born in the 1990s, and who are now headed for the universities and colleges, read in a different way than their parents and I do. They will be familiar with the reading and writings of people in other societies. They hear them speak, and they see them. Via the social media, they – and gradually also *we* and *I* – spontaneously contact individuals we have never met.

"New technologies" always have consequences, and that includes consequences for *how* we read: "A world of information" is only a few clicks away in Google or Wikipedia. My generation and my children's generation have had to learn that. Generation 4C grew up with iPods, iPhones etc. At the time of writing, a generation familiar with new and different media is coming of age.

The media of any historical period – the paper-based reading media that my children and I grew up with and the electronic reading media that my grandchildren grew up with – provide a world of reading that binds us together. It gives us greater opportunities than previous generations had access to.

Over the past few decades, children have grown up in a digital world. Since childhood they have been "natives in the online world." They will be as adults too. My generation and that of my children will always be immigrants to the digital world and thus also to this new world of reading. We have acquired the norms of this new world of reading, but they will never become second nature to us – at least, they haven't to me.

We live in an information-saturated universe. That affects our reading, our knowledge and our emotions – every aspect of our lives. If we fail to master the language that is spoken in this universe, we will have to accept that we will never be able to enter our grandchildren's world. We can observe them, maybe even follow them. We know their information and interpret it in relation to *our* knowledge. But the next

generation will interpret the same information in relation to *their* knowledge and reality. "You may house their bodies but not their souls, for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams," – as the Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran wrote in 1931.

A future turned present: In order to use our reading skills moderately well, we need to build on what we already know; and usually we know quite a bit about the texts we read. Otherwise, we are in serious trouble with our reading! That has always been the case.

But now we, as readers, are increasingly taking on the role as co-authors in relation to our reading. An author has always only been able to convey *some* of the information that is embedded in his or her text. As readers, we have always put something of ourselves into the text. Two individuals will never have read "the same text". This fact has become more apparent and widespread than ever before. We make our selections among the many texts online and transfer the information in these texts to our own universe. It took me a few years to become familiar with this way of reading.

Perhaps the concept of reading is changing fundamentally?

"For me the process of change is fascinating, and I am enjoying the world I see," wrote Alan Purves in 1998.

In the era of online communities, 1998 is a few generations ago.

Books and other paper-borne materials will probably not disappear or be replaced by electronic media – I think. Both formats will exist: It is almost a rule that things rarely replace things but simply act as supplements. And my perception of the world a few decades ago is not the same as my grandchildren's perception of the world today. Online texts have taught us to read in a way that differs from paper-based reading. *An example:*

Already now, we are able to *select* the information we want online. If we are convinced that the earth is regularly visited by extraterrestrials, we can join the appropriate ideological online "community," where everybody shares our view on this particular phenomenon. This is a global community. It offers plenty of texts, videos, films and audio recordings and allows us to avoid media content that disputes our own perspective. That has significant consequences for our knowledge (and for our emotions, although the latter point is often overlooked). And the consequences are growing. For example, based on a referral system, Google may present *different* information to *different* people even if they use the same search terms: Thus, if a computer geek enters "mouse" as a search term, his or her many previous searches for "mouse" or other computer-related concepts will cause *different* search results to be presented first than those that top the list if the same search is carried out by a person who is interested in biology. The "search engine" apparently selects among the search results and manipulates their order or ranking. Our particular "community" is strengthened, but it also becomes narrower.

"Technology" helps us build the "community" we are striving for – and we can completely block out any information that does not match our criteria.

Future readers, not future reading: In recent decades, I have realized that I should be focusing on future *readers,* my grandchildren and their children, not on future *reading:* Essentially, reading is about people, not techniques.

When online, we operate in a world that encourages us to be curious and seek out information. We are exposed to so much information that we suffer from information overload. Our (working) memory is overburdened. In our search for additional information we may find nothing but fragments. It is then up to the user to build knowledge from these disparate bits of information.

The web offers opportunities that we do not want to give up, should not give up and certainly should not fight (why on earth would we?). There is no percentage in fighting a new technology. And indeed, it is not new to my children and grandchildren. It is not new to me either – *any longer!* And it is here to stay – just like the one that will emerge tomorrow and the day after.

When I work with digital media, I may have trouble concentrating. I am not yet fully accustomed to the necessary reading approaches. We (I) face texts that may deal with highly complex issues. But what is perhaps a bigger challenge is that we are so easily lured down other paths – tempting side roads, irrelevant detours or even dead ends. We have to be able to select and seize exactly what we need.

It has always required self-discipline to navigate among the copy text, images, image captions and highlighted reference boxes of a non-fiction book or a journal. But that type of reading has long been commonplace. It is a skill that is taught. Most of us master it, even if journals and text books may sometimes seem rather chaotic with regard to readability. In the electronic media, this aspect is even more pronounced.

We won't solve any problems by sulking and running away.

A FEW CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE COMING DECADE

The more I work with reading – as a reader, a teacher and a researcher, the more I have to reject the pessimistic vision of the future that is so common: "The sky is falling, if not today, then definitely tomorrow." This view leads some people to conclude that there is no reason to learn to read today, and tomorrow it will be a complete waste of time. The people (usually well educated and proficient readers) who say this did not prevent their own kids from learning to read. Far from it. So why should other people's kids not "have to learn to read?"

I see no basis for statements of this nature. I find them downright offensive.

What I do see is that we live in the same world as before, except that it now features opportunities and requirements that were unknown only a few decades ago. Both opportunities and requirements are primarily a challenge to me as a reader and, naturally, to teachers who teach reading and to reading researchers. The challenge to you and me, to teachers, students and parents will be so significant that we have hardly even begun to fathom it.

At this time, it may be appropriate to mention one of the most important statements about reading in the last couple of generations. It applies whether we read on paper or papyrus, on parchment or online:

As Constance McCullough wrote in 1976, *the core of reading is comprehension.* She went on to say that the children and young people who know that reading can be compared to detective work, that reading challenges their cognition, their emotions, their language, their experiences and their imagination will possess the desire and the attitude required to become competent readers (lacking access to the original article in Florida Reading Quarterly, I have based this paraphrase on the Danish version of McCullough's article).

The motto of the Danish reading teachers is, *"Reading is experiences and knowledge."*

The following essay puts *our* reading in perspective.

READING REACHES BEYOND TIME AND SPACE

Clay cakes with bird tracks

The caravan leader had stolen two sacks of wheat and buried them in the sand, while his companions were sleeping.

They travelled from one full moon to the next and reached their goal without incident. The Syrian merchant, an important man with a wavy raven beard, too vain to move his head but with eyes that went everywhere, accepted the merchandise, walked among the kneeling camels with a closed expression, inspecting the shipment.

'Two sacks of wheat are missing,' he finally said and held out his hands toward the caravan leader, requiring an explanation!

In addition to suffering a beating, the caravan leader had to walk back to retrieve the sacks, wandering for days, dig up the sacks, drag them through the desert, hand them over and be chased away. Several changes of the moon later, he reached Babylon safely and told an older caravan leader about his fatal experience.

'Did you bring him clay cakes?' asked the friend.

The caravan leader thought back. Yes, in one of the small bales of items to deliver, which he had searched, he had indeed notices a cake of fired clay, an odd thing, a sacrificial cake, a fake loaf of bread, he had thought, a worthless object; it had been handed over the Syrian along with the other wares.

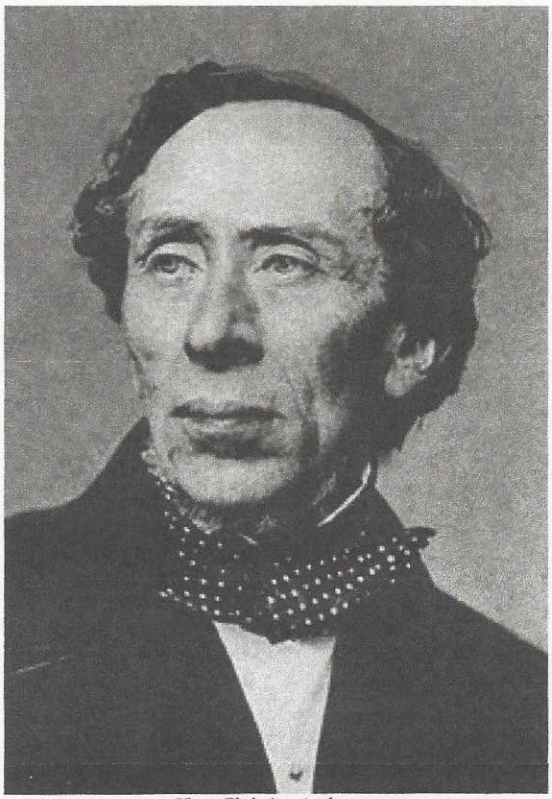
'Were there bird tracks on it?' asked the older, and experienced friend.

There were.

'The important men and the astronomers are able to sit in separate countries, hundreds of miles apart, and communicate simply by passing inconspicuous clay cakes, which they have let a dung beetle leave its marks on, from one to the other.'

The Danish Nobel laureate Johannes V. Jensen wrote the above essay in 1939 (reproduced here in abbreviated form) about Sumerian cuneiform script, a form of writing that dates back at least five thousand years – to a time when it was clear that reading … "is not a hereditary feature but a spiritual garment that any man must don to become fully human" ... "The recall of experience is transferred to a technology, human memory removed beyond the individual and the individual's life span."

"The oral tradition, which has little reach, was replaced by literature, which reaches throughout time."



Hans Christian Andersen

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