

With Books Falling From the Sky:

A Discourse on Literacy



By Roxanne Coady

In certain cities and towns across our country, the rate of functional illiteracy exceeds 70 percent. There is an undeniable correlation between functional illiteracy, poverty, and crime—in fact, eleven states predict their future need for prison cells based on the reading levels of their fourth graders.

As a bookseller, I know how profoundly books can change lives, yes, and so can the lack of them.

The shameful fact is that 49% of the adult population in the United States is functioning below Level 3 literacy, as measured on a five-point scale. The National Governors Association and other experts agree that today's economy and society require literacy skills at Level 3 or higher. Level 3 literacy means reading at below a sixth-grade level, having difficulty reading job applications, ATM screens, street signs, the newspaper, outpatient care instructions and dosage or precautions on medicine bottles. So, **here in one of the richest countries in the world, almost HALF our population, cannot read well enough to get through their day.**

Consider these effects of low literacy:

- 43% of adults with Level 1 reading skills are living in poverty, compared to 4% of those at Level 5 literacy levels
- The likelihood of being on welfare goes up as literacy levels go down. 3 out of 4 food stamp recipients read at the two lowest levels.
- Adults at Level 1 earned a median income of \$240 per week compared to \$681 per week for those at Level 5.
- Adults at Level 1 worked 19 weeks per year compared to 44 weeks for those at Level 5.
- Seven out of 10 prisoners performed at the lowest two literacy levels.

So hidden in our midst are these sad, if not shameful, facts. Even more frustrating is the fact that there are known ways to solve these problems. We cannot allow these conditions to continue to exist—it is our responsibility to remedy them.

I care passionately about literacy and the ways in which books can change a life. In fact, reading and valuing words is now what anchors my life. Both my mother and father brought me to this place, in very different ways, as you'll see.

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When my mother first read to me, neither she nor I, her two-year-old listener, understood the words. She was a recent immigrant from Hungary and hadn't learned English yet, but she "read" to me almost every day. She just sounded out the words phonetically, and mostly that worked, except we thought "know" was ka-now and "high" was hig-ha. Actually, it isn't surprising that I grew up to value words—my mother snuggling up with me, reading in her beautiful voice, both of us enjoying the illustrations, trying to figure out the story, making up the story. It really was all about words, and my earliest pleasure was about those books, even just holding them—or catching them.

My brother, Gary, was born in 1955 at Jewish Memorial Hospital on 197th Street in New York City. In those days, children were not allowed on the maternity floor, so my dad brought me and my sister, Barbara, around to the side of the hospital to "visit" our mother. And there she was, four floors up, smiling down at us. As was her nature, she had gifts for us. From the window that day, she dropped



two Golden Books, one for me and one for Barbara. I think it was at that moment, with books falling from the sky, that the notion solidified in my six-year-old mind that books were from heaven.

As I grew older, I read incessantly. Through high school and college and beyond, I found myself always excited to talk with friends about the books I was reading, always eager to hear about what they were reading, and inevitably loaning my books out all the time. Reading was my passion. Although I ended up majoring in finance and accounting and tax law, I was a bookseller at heart, and after a twenty-year detour as a tax accountant, I came back to books. I left New York and my job as national tax director for BDO Seidman, moved to Connecticut, and opened R.J. Julia Booksellers.

Reading is a way to learn how to knit or build a house or solve an equation, but also a way to be moved to laughter, and wonder, and to learn how to live.

My dream was that the store would be a place where words mattered, where people would gather, where writer could meet reader, and where our staff would work hard to put the right book in the right hand.

Dreams can come true. R.J. Julia has now been welcoming readers and writers for sixteen years. Every day in the store we see how books change lives, in big ways and small, from the simple desire to spend a few quiet hours in a comfy chair, swept away by a story, to the profound realization that the reader is not alone in the world, that there is someone else like him or her, someone who has faced the same fears, the same confusions, the same grief, the same joys. Reading is a way to live

more lives, to experience more worlds, to meet people we care about and want to know more about, to understand others and develop a compassion for what they confront and endure. Reading is a way to learn how to knit or build a house or solve an equation, but also a way to be moved to laughter, and wonder, and to learn how to live.

Over the years, many people have asked me why the store is named R.J. Julia. The short answer is that it is named after my father's mother. But this year, I feel compelled to share the long story, because this is the year my beloved, exuberant, wise, hard-working, curious, complicated, loving father died.

My father was born and lived in Hungary. As World War II approached, my grandmother—recently widowed—resolved that her son would finish high school. This was not easy at that place and time for a Jewish family without resources. But my grandmother was determined. She made the humbling decision to ask for help—to accept charity for my dad to finish school. Her commitment to my dad's education, and her respect and awe for books and learning were her motivations.

She accomplished her dream. My dad finished high school in 1942, despite the odds. His life-long love of books and his insatiable desire to read were launched. But within a year he was imprisoned in a labor camp and was a minesweeper for the Germans. My grandmother was deported to Bergen-Belsen and killed. My dad's life was shaped by her love, and by her loss.

Thanks to her fierce love and resilience, he survived and made his way to America, had six kids, opened a string of bakeries and realized his version of the American dream. I've always wished that I'd had the chance to meet my grandmother, and to tell her that her son—my dad—had achieved so much. I think I was always looking for a way to honor her accomplishments, her strength and her indomitable spirit.

So when the time came to find a name for a building filled with books, I had no doubt where to look. The small gift I could give to my dad was to name the store after my grandmother Juliska (Julia in English) to honor her dedication to learning and love, and to symbolize the enormous power of books and how they can change lives.

As my father's story illustrates, access to books is crucial and we must read to children from birth.

But not every child is so fortunate. In 1996 a local health clinic asked us to help replenish the “gently-used” books they gave out to children who came to the clinic. With the support of our readers, our staff, and our community, we filled two school buses with twelve thousand books. In expressing the clinic's appreciation, pediatrician Laurel Shader told us what it was like to see an eight-year-old boy's expression upon receiving the first book he ever owned. For a minute I thought I hadn't understood her. Connecticut has the highest per capita income in the country, and I was staggered by the realization that there were children—turns out there are thousands of children—who have never owned a book. This had to change. In 1997 a small group of us got together and formed a nonprofit organization called Read to Grow, which started with the simple idea that every baby born in our local hospital, Yale-New Haven, would receive a new book.

Everywhere, every day, someone is changed,
perhaps even saved, by words and stories.

Read to Grow has since evolved into a vibrant organization that promotes literacy and the joy of reading through direct contact with families. Read to Grow now has two major components: Books for Babies, which has distributed seventeen thousand new books to newborns in seven urban hospitals in the last year, along with a packet for parents on why and how to read to their infants; and Books for Kids, which provides ongoing support for family literacy by collecting and distributing gently-used books (currently some seventy thousand a year) to day care centers, schools, clinics, and homes.

Back at R.J. Julia, we were looking for a way to celebrate readers and writers, so we invited authors who had read their works at the store to contribute to *The Book That Changed My Life*, a collection of 71 essays. All of the royalties from the book go to Read to Grow.

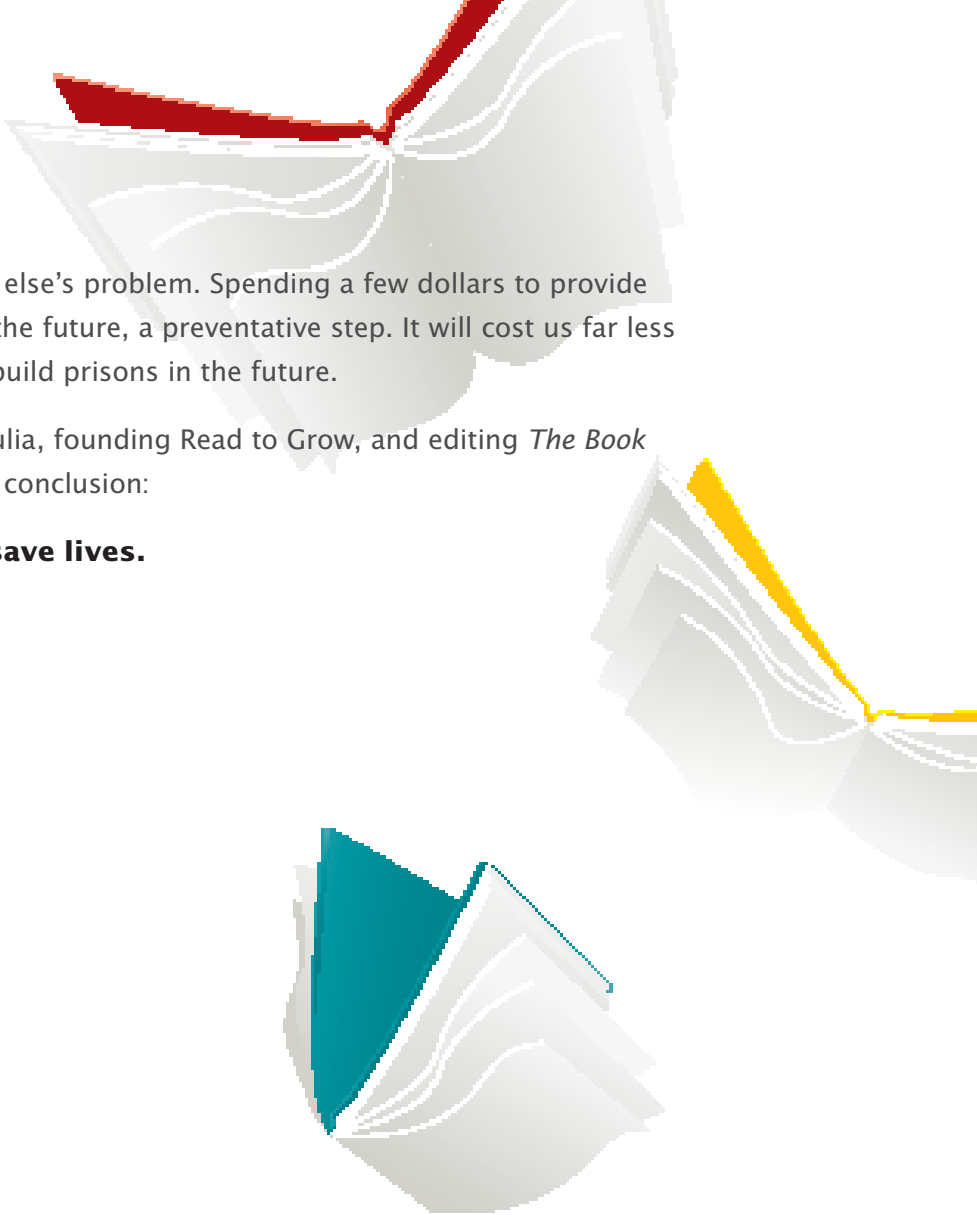
As my mother knew so well, putting the right book in the right hand can mean the world. I know this from my own experience, and I know it because I've seen the faces of children who have discovered the magic of reading, I've seen the faces of teenagers who have found comfort in a character or a story; I've seen the faces of adults who have learned to understand others in a different and enlightened way. Yet when I sat down recently with the final manuscript of *The Book That Changed My Life* and read it in one sitting, even I, who so firmly believe in the notion that books can change lives, was surprised and moved by the profound impact of books on the contributors.

In *The Art of Possibility*, Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander write that art "is about rearranging us, creating surprising juxtapositions, emotional openings, startling presences, flight paths to the eternal," and that's exactly what the contributors describe in their essays, each in a different and unique way. Apart from the sheer beauty of the essays, they are a dramatic reminder that everywhere, every day, someone is changed, perhaps even saved, by words and stories.

That's why programs like Read to Grow are so critical, that is why we cannot allow almost half of our population to not have access to these opportunities.

As a business owner, I worry about the pool of qualified applicants for jobs. Will we have enough literate workers in the future? It's a real possibility that we won't. Literacy is everyone's responsibility. What can we in the business community do to ensure that children have the academic skills to succeed in life?

- If your company has a day care center, ask whether teachers have the qualifications to create the building blocks to reading. In the recent book, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young Children*, the authors learned that by the age of 3, children of professional parents had about 300 more vocabulary words than children being raised by parents on welfare. The best way to grow language is by reading aloud or storytelling.
- Underwrite public service announcements that promote reading aloud. In Connecticut, furniture store, Raymour and Flannigan, has done just that.
- Support literacy initiatives in your state, or Birth-to-3 Early Intervention development programs.
- Make a donation to an literacy organization such as Read to Grow or look into the idea of replicating a Read to Grow program in your state.
- Volunteer to read aloud in clinics, schools, homeless shelters and day care centers.

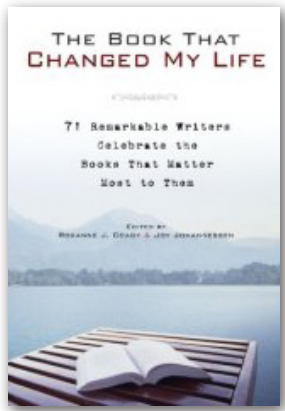


It's easy to think that literacy is someone else's problem. Spending a few dollars to provide books for babies is a wise investment in the future, a preventative step. It will cost us far less to spend money on literacy now than to build prisons in the future.

All of the things in my life—owning R.J. Julia, founding Read to Grow, and editing *The Book That Changed My Life*—point to the same conclusion:

**Books not only change lives—they save lives.
Together, we can make this happen.**

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BUY THE BOOK

For more details or to buy a copy of Roxanne Coady's *The Book That Changed My Life* [click here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roxanne Coady founded [R.J. Julia Booksellers](#) in Madison, Connecticut, 16 years ago, creating a business that is recognized as a national leader among independent booksellers. *Publisher's Weekly* selected R.J. Julia Booksellers as "Bookseller of the Year" in 1995, and the store continues to strive to be an exceptional model of best practices for independent booksellers. The store works to enhance the community and promote the notion that a book can change a life. In 2006, Ms. Coady co-edited the book, *The Book That Changed My Life* and appears regularly on National Public Radio.

In 1996, Ms. Coady founded, and continues to chair, the Read to Grow Foundation, which in partnership with urban hospitals throughout Connecticut, provides books and literacy information to tens of thousands of children and families each year.

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