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Everyone Can Enjoy Reading—If Given the Right Book

By Emma Gisclair
UCF Forum columnist
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When I was 4 years old, I demanded my mom teach me to read so I could read my own books instead of being read to.

At 9, my best friend introduced me to Harry Potter. I devoured the four released books, then wrote a letter to author J.K. Rowling informing her that I had decided to be a writer because of her. It was the beginning of a dream that has guided my life ever since.

Two years later, I discovered *The Two Princesses of Bamarre* by Gail Carson Levine at my school book sale. I had never related to a character more than shy, unadventurous Addie. Someone like me could be a hero!

Then the summer before eighth grade, my family moved yet again, to my sixth city and seventh school. Books were my companions when I knew no one, a conversation starter with new classmates, and a connection to the friends I left behind.

I know that I was (and still am) an outlier when it comes to reading. And that's fine—I'm a library assistant and a writer, so reading is my job in every way. I don't expect everyone to share my goal to read 100 books in 2017, but the fact does remain that readership has decreased over the past decade across all demographics.

Multiple polls and studies have shown that the time a child spends reading declines steadily throughout childhood and adolescence, including a National Education Association poll that found 70 percent of middle school students reading 10 books per year, compared to 49 percent of high school students.

Of course there are many factors that contribute to this statistic: increased homework loads, technology usage, the social life that comes with a driver's license, the reading atmosphere in the classroom and at home. I am neither an educator nor a parent, and banning all technology and returning to a pre-Industrial Revolution society sounds like a dystopian novel concept, so no, I don't have a magical solution to increase reading among children and teens.

But I do have one suggestion, based on the experiences of myself and others, which we, as adults, can be better at: Give children and teens the power of choice in their reading.

Consider this story, which happens far too often: A 7-year-old boy enters a bookstore and picks out a book with a princess on the cover; his mother takes it from him. “Oh no, this is a girl book,” she says. “You won’t like it. Let’s go find a book about monsters instead.” The boy doesn’t like the book about monsters or the one about sports or the pirate adventure story. He becomes less interested in reading as time goes by.

Or this: Students in a high school English class are required to read one book outside of their assigned reading. One girl, for whom reading is difficult, chooses a graphic novel at the recommendation of a friend. The teacher tells her it doesn’t qualify, and instead suggests the coming-of-age drama *The Outsiders*. The girl struggles with the book, confirming her belief that she just isn’t a reader.

A personal experience: I was in second grade at a school that used the Accelerated Reader program. On a trip to the library, I picked out an age-appropriate book featuring dragons—my current obsession—but when I tried to check it out, the librarian told me it’s too far below my reading level. The next year, when it was time to take the AR test, I intentionally chose wrong answers so I would score lower for my reading level.

I’m currently rereading Madeleine L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time* in preparation to watch the new movie. The great evil faced by the Murray children in the book is a being called IT, who steals the individuality and agency of its victims and turns them into mindless drones. In *Harry Potter and The Order of the Phoenix*, we meet a villain who is arguably worse than Lord Voldemort—Dolores Umbridge. Like L’Engle’s IT, Umbridge seeks conformity at Hogwarts, forcing the students to read the books she approves and punishing those who speak out. These are just two of many children’s books that revolve around the importance of choice and individualism.

Perhaps adults—especially those of us who are gatekeepers of children’s literacy—can learn a lesson from these books. I’ve long believed that everyone can enjoy reading, if given the right book. The problem comes when we deny a child the opportunity to find that book because we deem it unworthy. The right book for me may not be the right book for you or for the child down the street.

And that’s OK.

Because if there’s one thing children’s literature taught me, it’s that individuality is essential to humanity.

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