

**The Reading Matrix**  
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**READING FIRST: AN ALTERNATE DISCUSSION<sup>1</sup>**

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**A Commentary**

*On a recent afternoon visit to a local public library, I happened to pass by the very inviting wing where children's and young adult books were housed. Prominently displayed near the entrance to this part of the library was a large, multi-colored poster that announced the literary challenge 'Read To Win!' Directly beneath these twelve-inch-high words were the details outlining what constituted children's reading success. Youngsters who read ten books during the summer months were honored with a certificate of accomplishment from a local pizza chain and a coupon for one free Pizza Supreme. Those who read twenty books were awarded a similar certificate and three free Supreme pizzas). Finally, those youngsters who read more than thirty books were awarded the certificate, still more Supremes, and a cap emblazoned with the words 'Champion Reader.' This kind of poster, I suspect, might be readily found in any library anywhere these days, and so its familiarity should not have been at all surprising.*

*As it was, however, this announcement took on a life of its own in my mind, and I found myself feeling slightly disconcerted by what I'd just encountered. I could not help but wonder about this representation of reading's purpose and power, and about some of the ways this purpose and power is communicated to children and adults alike. How, I more specifically wondered, has it come to pass that the injunction uttered by Gustav Flaubert's eminently perceptive heroine, Madame Emma Bovary, 'Read to live' is now 'Read to win'? How did what was once an existential articulation of reading's relation to an individual's life become a socially competitive one? A kind of youthful 'Literary Idol'? How had an internal motivation become so commercially external?*

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It may seem somewhat unusual to mention this anecdote about reading as a prologue to identifying several strategies for promoting fluency in writing at the graduate level, but an exploration of this issue, I believe, might be fruitfully approached from precisely this tactic. In what follows, I want to talk about how central to any consideration of effective writing are the words of Madame Bovary, 'Read to live.' Thus, by extension in this essay, the advice becomes 'Read in order to write.'

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<sup>1</sup> This commentary is developed from an invited presentation originally delivered in Professor Karen Bromley's doctoral seminar, EDUC 677, Seminar and Practicum in Writing, at Binghamton University, September 27, 2005. The invitation was extended to share a personal methodology that might help to promote doctoral student writing fluency. This commentary will appear in slightly different form still as a chapter in the forthcoming book, *Writing For Educators*.

There are many lessons from research and practice which provide ample documentation to support the strategy of ‘Read in order to write.’ The register of these lessons is wide-ranging and convincing as educators across a variety of different cultural contexts have explored questions of what do good writers do and how can these practices be implemented in the classroom and in daily life? Representing nearly a half century of empirical and qualitative inquiry, this research includes the following: the early findings of the San Francisco Bay Area Writing Project in the 1960s, the work of scholars like Donald Graves, James Moffett, and Lucy Calkins, and more recently, the culturally inflected work of critics like bell hooks, Patrick Shannon, and Cornel West. Fundamental to this cumulative research is the consistent finding that good writers are, in the first place, good readers.

In the following section, the work of three other individuals whose work is not ordinarily cited in the research above, but whose views provide a unique perspective to the reading-writing connection and which again underscore the enduring relevance of Madame Bovary’s advice, should therefore be discussed.

### **Leila Berg**

Leila Berg’s (1977) small classic, *Reading and Loving*, explores the notion of ‘read in order to live’ from a cross-cultural and very personal context. In a series of narratives about her own children and her grandchildren’s initial and subsequent engagements with books and the reading experience, Berg argues that children’s reading can be a deeply satisfying experience on many levels—aesthetic, emotional, intellectual, physical—since books have many causes and serve many functions. According to Berg (1977), young children, when provided the opportunities to do so on a consistent basis and in a loving environment, have the potential to derive immeasurable pleasures from the reading experience from the material and aesthetic qualities of the book itself to the equally material and aesthetic constructions of narrative and story. In this context, books are more than just containers for pictures or story; rather, they provide readers with opportunities for more-dimensional critical engagement, response, and insight. She goes on to assert that it is these varied, diversified qualities and satisfactions that have implications for the development of writing itself. Although youngsters would hardly state this in such terms, having encountered words and texts as elements which produce delight and satisfaction in the construction of their daily lives, children may then more readily appreciate the practice of writing itself as they work to create and re-create their own personal understandings of the world through text and discourse. Berg’s unique ethnography makes it clear that words matter. Even a single word can represent an extended conversation that a young child is making with him or herself, with the world, or with anyone who is listening thoughtfully.

In *Reading and Loving*, Berg reminds us of how reading can be an intensely pleasurable activity for children and adults alike, presenting readers with uniquely challenging existential and aesthetic opportunities which serve to sharpen sight and deepen thought.

### **Robert Coles**

Robert Coles (1989) makes a different point about the importance of reading and the reading-writing connection in his book, *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral*

*Imagination.* In this book Coles documents his long-standing work with students at Harvard Medical School and provides numerous examples of how, in a course of his own invention called “Literature and Medicine,” he has his doctors-to-be read selected works of poetry and fiction in order to develop his students’ appreciation of what it means to be alive or ill to the world and to its often complex and tragic realities. Building on this approach with medical students, Coles has taught similar literature-based seminars: at Harvard Law School (“Dickens and the Law”), at its Divinity and Business Schools (stories of Flannery O’Connor and *The Great Gatsby*), and at the Kennedy School of Government (*All the King’s Men*). He has also developed and taught an undergraduate course “The Literature of Social Reflection,” whose texts include works by Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and James Agee. Fundamental to each of these seminars is Coles’ profound belief that reading (particularly about characters who are struggling to exist socially, personally, physically, or psychically) deepens the understanding of any vocation worth its name (doctor, attorney, or policy-maker), but especially that of the medical profession, whose coursework for its future doctors is often overly reflective of a more ‘scientific’ or ‘technical’ approach to professional training. While he does not state it in exactly these terms, Coles understands reading to be central to the way individuals might write, construct, or transform their daily experience. Stories and the practice of reading, he argues, provide individuals with a moral framework by which to conduct their lives. In its varied capacities, qualities, and forms, the practice of reading is a window opening to the ethical domain of what it means to be an educated individual, an engaged individual in an all too frequently turbulent world. Its practice helps develop an immediacy of social and personal engagement, an ethics of questioning one’s life and of re-inscribing these kinds of questionings in daily practice. As he points out in the concluding paragraphs to his book:

What [Anton Chekhov] wrote isn’t just another paragraph in a story; it’s what’s happening to you right here, right now... Dr. [William Carlos] Williams urges intense, searching self-scrutiny. Dr. [Anton] Chekhov urges a close look not only at ourselves but at others, at the terrible contrasts of this world... All in all, not a bad start for someone trying to find a good way to live [or write about] this life. (Coles, 1989, pp. 204-205)

## **Bob Dylan**

In his staggeringly precise, astonishingly detailed memoir of his early development as a (song)writer, Bob Dylan (2004) devotes much of an entire chapter to chronicling the crucial importance that his reading exerted on the formation of his writing. “Looking for the part of my education that I never had” (p. 36), Dylan (2004) reflects on a library of influences that he devoured during his days as a teenager and young adult while playing sets in coffeehouses at night in New York during the early 1960s. Among these readings, he notes, were:

[B]ooks on typography, epigraphy, philosophy, political ideologies... Books like Fox’s *Book of Martyrs*, *The Twelve Caesars*, Tacitus lectures and letters to Brutus, Pericles’ *Ideal State of Democracy*, Thucydides’ *The Athenian General*... novels by Gogol and Balzac, Maupassant, Hugo and Dickens... Rousseau’s *Social Contract*... Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the autobiography of Davy Crockett... Byron and Shelley and Longfellow and Poe. I memorized Poe’s poem “The

Bells” and strummed it to a melody on my guitar... These books were something. They were really something... I read a lot of the pages aloud and liked the sound of the words, the language. Milton’s protest poem, ‘Massacre in Piedmont’. A political poem about the murder of innocents by the Duke of Savoy in Italy... like folk song lyrics, even more elegant... There were art books, too... Motherwell and early Jasper Johns, German impressionist pamphlets, Grunwald, Adolf von Menzel stuff. ‘How to’ books, how to repair a man’s knee that’s been bent backwards... how to deliver a baby, how to perform an appendectomy in the bedroom. The stuff could give you real hot dreams... (Dylan, 2004, pp. 36-41)

During the course of his memoir, Dylan (2004) circles back again and again to further document his daily reading experiences and the power that they exerted on his writing life. Can a direct line be drawn that connects his encyclopedic reading activity with his nonpareil output of songs, poems, writings, films, performances, and books? Even under the best of circumstances, establishing such unambiguous links is a hazardous proposition, and Dylan himself repeatedly cautioned against such direct associations early in his career. Still, it would be difficult to overlook Dylan’s wide-ranging repertoire of reading history and his (song)written paraphrasings of, for example, Homer’s cautionary tale about the mortal yearning for immortality and its tragic consequences in *Temporary Like Achilles*, or his covering of Virgil’s *Aeneid* about the folly of war and the search for human companionship in *Lonesome Day Blues*, or his referencing of the Job-like acceptances of things impossible to be known in *Bye and Bye*. So perhaps a better question to ask is what does Dylan’s demonstration of reading as daily practice teach you?

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As Chet Bowers (1984) reminds us, that which cannot be imagined, can never be chosen. Reading opens windows to the imagination that you do not think you have so that you can recognize what you have, so that you can encounter a part of your self you never before knew. Seeing your self in a more-dimensional way helps you better see others in the world, thus helping you better to see the world itself. Seeing things more richly helps you identify your own interests, so that you can imagine things that you might want to choose for the substance of your life. The daily practice of reading may not lead you to win any championships, but the chances are good that it will introduce you to a much more profound sense of human richness, as you consider what your writing life is for.

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