

The following excerpts are from Lauren Rosenberg's The Desire for Literacy: Writing in the Lives of Adult Learners, the latest volume in the CCCC Studies in Writing and Rhetoric Series.

Post 1: Chief

Raised on a sharecropper's farm in rural, pre-Civil Rights South Carolina, Chief began working alongside his father and other family members at a young age. His brother was married when Chief was about ten, and so, as the second oldest son, Chief took on the responsibilities of "plowing and mule[ing], and helping my father . . . cutting wood for the fire," which prevented him from attending school regularly. They had two fields, a large field a distance from the house where the men and boys worked and a closer field where the women and girls farmed in addition to maintaining the home. When Chief did go to school, it was usually on rainy days or in winter. Then he walked two to three miles each way. . . .

Chief recalls:

I always wanted to read and write. I didn't get the chance. . . . You always wanted to learn to read. Especially, if when you don't grow up and you—, it helps you to better yourself in jobs, to speak better, and it helps you in a lot of ways. I love to read now; since I learned to read, I read all the time. And it's opened up a new world for me.

During an interview, Chief and I discussed what being nonliterate was like:

It's a, uh, a shyness from when you, ah, can't read and write. . . . You set back and let a lot of other people do the talking because you don't say too much. . . . Uh, you don't want to say the wrong thing. Ah, you get some of the words, big words that are said you don't understand. So you don't want to say nothing that you don't know what you're talking about. . . . Opinions. . . . They might not, uh, even if they don't know you can't read, you still be thinking: my opinion don't mean nothing here.

Underneath the joy he expresses over reading and writing, Chief describes his frustration too. I take in his sense of conflict and regret when his voice becomes low and he looks down. He gets upset when he recalls the past and the losses he experienced, some because of nonliteracy and some because of the conditions of his life. When he articulates regret, his words rumble. I hear the "set[ting] back" he talks about as reticence mixed with sadness. But these words come from a man whose opinions do matter, who knows now (at least much of the time and after many years of uncertainty) that people do want to hear what he has to say. Now people will listen to him and acknowledge that he knows. Yet for most of his life, Chief has wrestled with his "shyness" and turned it in upon himself. Even when he knew what he thought and wanted to express, he still self-censored because of his anxiety about saying "the wrong thing" and appearing ignorant. The stigma he bore as someone who knew some of the words but might not understand the big words caused him repeatedly to doubt his own ability to contribute in conversations. Because he feared that others might judge his opinions as irrelevant, Chief was caught in a cycle of self-doubting and imagining that he was doubted, which rendered him essentially silent.

Post 2: "George"

For nearly twenty years, George worked in drop-forging, a hot, heavy, and precise process of shaping metal.

[I worked at] Moore Drop Forge, making different things for airplanes, and Ford Motor Company, and Sears, wrenches and one type or another. Wasn't a whole lot—they didn't know I couldn't read and write. Far as, um, you see, you had to set up a job. . . . When you set up a job, you got to be, like, you got to set up by a thousand, ten thousand, fifteen or twenty thousand, or either half a inch, a inch, or whatever; you know, you got to be exactly right. But see, I learned this from working with people, you know, from experience. I learned 'cause when you couldn't read and write, you have to make sure you know, you keep, you see, what you see, you know, in your head. You got to know what you learn, what you see other people do. And *I learned*. . . .

Three hundred men viewed him as an expert. They acknowledged that George had "accomplished something." He knew it by his high wages. He was valued and he valued himself. People at the "Drop Shop" didn't need to know that he couldn't read and write, and George was able to keep his nonliteracy covered up with his outstanding workplace performance. But George's prowess didn't last. Sometime in the mid-1980s, the work was outsourced overseas, and the forge closed. The sudden shutting down of the forge, and with it the end of long-term, steady employment, came as a shock.

And they closed it; everybody around there was hurting. Some guys was too old to get another job, and some of them, a lot of guys, was lucky to get another job, you know? And me, I didn't have no education or go get a better job than I had there. And I began to worry, and I began to think . . . I began to think about my education then. You know, what I didn't have, to deal with searching, getting another job. I knew I could get another job, but I wouldn't get a job that paying me like the job that I had. . . . I didn't know where to go to get a education. I knew I couldn't just go to a public school; they wouldn't accept me. I was too old for that. And it took me a while before I found out; I went and got another job, you know, working. It wasn't what I wanted, but I had to live, so I kept, I had, uhh, houses, one stuff or another, you know, mortgage to pay. . . . I've had to work, but I still, in the back of my mind, I still wanted a education.

Post 3: Lee Ann

Literacy appears in unconventional forms in Lee Ann's experience. She piles books in her garage and in plastic bags in the closet. But it's not only books and reading that matter to her. She also talks about driving in a way that overlaps with reading and writing. One day during class, when the group has digressed into a conversation about learning to drive, Lee Ann blurts, "We all don't read good, but we're sitting here with driver's licenses. You want something bad, you go out and get it." A few years earlier, Lee Ann had gotten her license, which she considered one of the great achievements of her life. Once she had obtained it, she had a new sense of her own independence. Ironically (and perhaps not merely coincidentally), driving took Lee Ann to Read/Write/Now. She recounts how she first came to the library-based center about a year earlier:

Well, I came—you know how I got to actually come here? I was giving—I help people out a lot. I was giving the neighbor a ride to bring her books back. She lives down my street. And I said, "You know, I wonder if they got anything?" 'Cause a lot of the time they have something for the library. So I turn around, and I went into the, into the, and I went to bring my friend back that lives in the trailer park. I said, "Yeah, right around the corner." The lady in the library said, "Right over here." So then I, then I come in here and investigate. And I talked to Melissa [*a teacher*]. And she pulled out the paper and then turned around and said: Well, when they get a spot for me, they'll call me.

Whether or not Lee Ann already knew that her local library offered a program for adult learners is irrelevant. Perhaps she knew and her trip to the library was more deliberate than she lets on. What matters is that she did it. She entered the library and inquired about its services.

Walking inside a library for the first time was a major step for her, as it is for many of the learners at the center—to enter the building, the home of books, this foreign land that would become the place where she would soon go three days a week, every week, month after month, because now was the time to study. This was the first time in Lee Ann's life that she could sustain herself as a student. Learning, for Lee Ann, is a break from work.

Post 4: Violeta

[Bonny, I found something for your errata list. Notice below that “life book” is highlighted. In the book it is in italics like the rest of the paragraph, but I think it should be in plain roman because it is something Violeta said.]

Like everyone I meet at Read/Write/Now, Violeta describes acquisition of literacy as access to school.

She tells me in an interview:

My mother never liked to put me in school in Puerto Rico. I don't know why. When I was sixteen, and then I decide to go. But it was little bit, not too much. I be in school more in New York, in Manhattan. My mother, we live over there when we get over there. My mother was putting me only in an English, like third grade. And then she has to go back to Puerto Rico, taking me out in the—. And then when we get to Puerto Rico, I never have school. That's confuse me. A lot. . . .

Confusion over schooling: When can you have it? When can you not? School was inconsistently available. Everyone I talked with recalled school as a place she or he had access to only sometimes. Violeta remembers being confused; Lee Ann remembers feeling unable to concentrate; Chief will think of school as a wonderful place where he wished he could spend his days, while George will associate schooling with hunger and terrible weather. No matter the conditions of their individual lives, school was always out of reach. And even if you could go one day, the opportunity to learn might be taken away the next.

Since Violeta lives far from most of her relatives, maintaining her relationships with them matters a lot. Writing and reading letters on her own is one of her main reasons for pursuing literacy. When other people read your mail for you, they know the intimate news of your life before you do. Not knowing how to read, she explains,

It's very sad for me. And then I ask to the neighbor to read my letter when it was convenient, you know what I mean? The other people know before they know me before go in that letter, you know? That's making me turn to over here to learn. I want to read my own letter and everything.

Violeta says she wants to read her letters. She wants to write in her portfolio, which she refers to as her “life book.” She wants to show her children that she can “depend about myself” and does not need the help of others. I hear her express so much desire that is motivating her to learn and to study, and that yearning grows as she continues to pursue what she wants for herself.

I want to learn more, like I say before. I can help my kid with the homework, paper reading, and I do a mom and dad [*meaning she is a single mother*], and I running the house and everything. And I has to learn, you know, read paper, like my bill was on time, before I don't know how to read my appointment, the bill. Or the teacher would send a letter for me about the children home school now. I learning about how to read it, how to depend about myself. . . . I know how to read the letter now. 'Bout my appointment, how I couldn't read my appointment. When I going to do some appointment, they giving me some paper to sign, I want to learn what kind of paper did I put my sign? To read exactly. That's why one of the reason that I do this. Yup.

Post 5: Just Because You Can't Read

[Bonny, something else for your errata list. Notice below that “getting it” is highlighted. In the book it is in italics like the rest of the paragraph, but I think it should be in plain roman because it is something Lee Ann said.]

The Desire for Literacy explores the literacy experiences of four learners who attended the Read/Write/Now Adult Learning Center, a library-based informal education site in Springfield, Massachusetts.

Everybody at Read/Write/Now has a story. There's Calvin, who has been in and out of the center since it opened. He still sounds out every word when he reads, tracing a line under the text with his leathery brown fingertip and attempting to make meaning. And Terrance, who seeks advice from the teachers about how to handle his divorce. Sometimes he tears up when he talks about how his wife abused him, but then his tears reveal another level of frustration and anger as he describes his meetings with the lawyer, who demands that he sign here and here. The lawyer won't explain what the documents mean. He won't read them aloud to Terrance. He talks to him like Terrance doesn't understand. “Just because you can't read doesn't mean that you don't know,” Terrance trembles when he says this. “It's unjust! I'm like a blind man.” He explains that people manipulate you when you don't know how to read and write, and their actions can be “very hurtful.” There are women who had babies when they were girls or who had to raise their mother's babies, women who have endured jail sentences, abuse, depression, diabetes. There's always poverty. This book is about the literacy experiences of four particular people who studied at Read/Write/Now, but it could have been about many other learners who went there because, despite the challenges of their lives, they had always wanted to read and write. ...

One day while I am observing, Lee Ann and her classmate Terrance wrestle with a writing assignment. They both ask me for assistance to the point that each becomes annoyed when I give attention to the other. Lee Ann finally bursts out that writing is too hard, she can't do it; she storms out of the classroom and out of the building. Terrance remains in the room, worn and quiet. But before long Lee Ann returns, and then she is able to talk with Terrance and me about the frustration they both experience when writing. It's not like reading, which unlocks culture and offers itself up to them. Writing is about too many rules. It brings back their earlier failures and blocks, reminds them of feeling unable.

I think of Lee Ann at home in her kitchen, showing me the letter magnets on her refrigerator, which she has attempted to form into the “five wh's” in a list (who, what, where, when, and why), but not all of the “wh” words are correct. This is a self-imposed task, not an assignment she would get at Read/Write/Now. I wonder why she has set up this exercise for herself, and then Lee Ann tells me: this display is her effort at “getting it.” As I listen to her explain her reasons for displaying and memorizing the “wh's,” I start to understand her rationale: practicing a conventional act of literacy acquisition will give her the winning ticket, the way in to acquiring standard spelling.

Post 6: Are We Your Guinea Pigs?

“Are we guinea pigs?”

I’ve just given a simple explanation of who I am and why I’m there, but George rebuts my introduction to his class. I argue a weak “no,” (his teacher, Melissa, looks at me quizzically, as if to ask, how are you going to respond to that one?), but George’s remark has already said it: I don’t believe you, white lady. ...

When I approached the people I hoped to work with as case study participants, the two women responded immediately with excitement, asking when we would begin. Chief, though less enthusiastic initially, said okay, it would be fine. But George, who I assumed would be willing, even forthcoming, would not make eye contact. What would he have to do, he wanted to know?

Meet with me to talk about your writing.

Are you going to take pictures?

No, I’m just going to talk with you, no pictures. And, I’m going to make a copy of all your writing.

It’s not any good.

It doesn’t have to be good. I’m just going to talk to you about your writing.

I’ll have to think about it. I’ll let you know.

How could this be? George’s reluctance forced me to confront myself—white, younger, literate, female—and guess at how he might rank these categories. I figured that literate trumped the others, but I worried over the way I was presenting myself to him. When I spoke with Pamela, the program coordinator, she told me it was none of that. George doesn’t want his picture taken. He doesn’t want people to see that he goes to a literacy center. He is afraid of being evaluated. It had taken him years to trust Melissa and her. And you should see how he used to resist writing. For his first few years in the program, George wouldn’t write anything. Melissa was adamant that it would be good for him to have to discuss his writing with me. So she spoke with George, he said yes, and we moved ahead, but cautiously. I was so careful preparing for George’s interview and interacting with him at the center. I wanted to do all the right things to show I was an ethical researcher who respected him. Over time I would come to understand that his frequent displays of reluctance were a performance; that he was, in fact, preoccupied with how he would appear in public, as Pamela had claimed. But at that moment, I tried to compensate for his unwillingness, as well as my own anxiety that he would show up at the interview and refuse to speak, by completely rewriting my questions to suit him. I softened them. “How can I draw him out so he won’t quit?” I asked myself again and again as I prepared for our meeting.

We are alone in the library. George asks me whether I will be publishing the interview in the newspaper. No, I assure him, nothing in the news and no photos of him, ever. He likes going over the consent form; it relaxes him a bit. I ask the first questions: “Did you attend school? Where? When?” George launches into the entire story of his education, his lack of schooling, coping with nonliteracy throughout his life, his desire to get an education in recent years. He speaks with hardly a pause for one hour, and then, “Well, I guess I gotta go now,” and we are done.

Post 12: Violeta and a Door Open

Violeta states that there are many reasons why writing matters. Some of her intention is functional:

When I have to sign form or when I sign my paper for Section 8, before I was no doing that. Now I sit down, and I read it, and I sign it. I no was doing that before. Like my paper for Section 8, it was a lot of paper. Before I was going crazy. I had to get it from help. I do that now with myself. ...

By the time I met her, Violeta already spoke of writing as a means of becoming, my word but her concept, a theory without the theoretical language. Most of her comments about writing connect the process with working out the story of her life. We talked about that relationship:

What do you like to write?"

About my life. About my life, yeah.

So when you do the kind of projects that Carolyn [her teacher] has you doing here, are those enjoyable to you?

Mm hmm. I do, partly, part of my portfolio is about my life. That's what I do. Because that helping me a lot to get out what did I go in and explain to me. And I do about my life book. I want to see when I before, was Violeta before? Was Violeta right now? The progress that I make.

So you want to look at your progress?

Mm hmm.

Is it special to you to get down those stories too?

Is special for me. *Porque* I can see the difference. I can, when I do that, when I was writing about my life, I can see I was afraid before. I not right now. I can see the progress. I was before afraid [to] get out [in] front of the world. Before I would say, "I cannot do this. This is not for me. Uh-uh." I don't know how to get it, *pero* when get any and open the door for me and I do it, I can see the difference about my life.

Violeta continually refers to education as a "door open." Before, the door was closed, and even though she knew what lay behind it, literacy was unattainable. She was locked inside, the door sealed between her and both street and school, preventing her from having the freedom to pursue anything more than domestic responsibilities. Now Violeta raises her own children and also cares for her daughter's babies. She worries about the children of her son in prison. She worries about her own compromised health. But she also finds time to acknowledge that there is a "door now open" and that she can slip through that door to give herself the literacy education she has wanted all her life. There is nothing specific that she wants from literacy, but Violeta's discussion makes it clear that she has begun a process she wants to "keep moving."

Post 8: Chief's Inspirational Note

Chief writes himself inspirational notes. They are tucked into his portfolio between the goal statements and the editor's letters he used to publish in the Read/Write/Now Daily News. This one is from his early years in the program:

Dear Chief

I am writing to tell you how proud I am of the work you have done this year at R-W-N. Some of the thing you should be most proud about are that you have learn to read and understand what you are reading. I am glad you are enjoying it. I'm proud that you have read eleven books. A couple of your most important stories are on Black History Month about Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X.

I understand you like your teachers here at R-W-N. You like working with the Monthly News. And you like working with your good friends. I hope in the next year you continue to read and write more. I am proud to see you have done well. I like the two stories you wrote about Dr. M.L.K. Jr. and Malcolm X.

Keep up the good work

Chief

Now Chief can be his own good father, giving himself the nurturance he suggests he wishes he had had as a boy. Chief can also be his own good teacher, assessing himself at the end of the school year: I am proud of you, Chief. Encouraging himself, celebrating his reading, his writing, especially when it's on history and race, and his leadership as editor. "I am glad you are enjoying it," Chief tells himself, because now he finally gets to have what he has always wanted. He savors it; he acknowledges the joy he gains and not just that reading and writing will qualify him for a better job someday. Literacy is not just fodder for employment. Although he is the first to admit—often with sadness—that he could have gone much further than he did in the workforce if he had been more literate, he also is aware that literacy carries much more value than credentials for work. Chief is very clear about the multiple purposes of literacy in his life. When we talk together, Chief's remarks make me realize that he has contemplated his desire for literacy throughout his life and that he sees the processes of reading and writing as multifaceted.