

BREAKING the word BARRIER

Stories of Adults Learning to Read

Edited by MARILYN LERCH and ANGELA RANSON



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This book is dedicated to all the students
who walked the path to literacy
and to the mentors who accompanied them.

The following is a list of common acronyms found throughout the stories.

LLNB	Laubach Literacy New Brunswick
WFNB	Writers Federation of New Brunswick
GED	General Educational Development
NBCC	New Brunswick Community College
CALP	Community Adult Learning Program
SOUL	Speaking Out by Utilizing Learners
LCNB	Literacy Coalition of New Brunswick
TSD	Training & Skills Development program
ECE	Early Childhood Education

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Reading Is Magic

This book is a tribute to courage. It is about ordinary people doing extraordinary things, about people who do not quit. Their stories are incredibly moving and their dedication to overcoming life's misfortunes is exemplary for all those who have been privileged, fortunate, or have had a much better hand dealt to them. Courage, generosity, and patience are the three most important virtues to survive the cynicism, greed, and frenzied times that we face. I see all of these qualities in the stories of these people, these tenacious people who decided to return to the deck and find the aces in order to start a new game with a winning hand. They are true inspirations, and this uplifting collection is a means for each of us to gain perspective on where we stand in our awareness of our access to information, education, and the gifts we have received, reading being one of the most important of all.

I have great admiration for the authors who were paired with the learners. Their attentive listening can be compared to the tutors who have worked with each learner and have been generous in sharing the keys to their own knowledge. Great stories need the talents of a storyteller to make them come alive. The writers have used their experience, style, and generosity to turn these testimonials into compassionate and engaging narratives.

Reading is a form of affection. It is an intimate moment of sharing information, a way of bonding around a story, a way of participating in the marvels of the imagination. For many of the adult learners in these stories, one of the most common incentives to reach their goal of literacy was the desire to read to their children, to help them with their homework.

Literacy is partly a family responsibility, and learning to read, to enjoy books, or to seek information in the printed word is often a habit that we learn by imitation within the family. Bedtime stories are a strong stimulus to plant a love for books in a child's young mind. Being deprived of such experiences in childhood can lead to the range of struggles later in life. The decision to work to achieve literacy in adulthood is often based on the perception that something important is missing, that an essential component of a balanced life has been lost.

When reading this collection, I have been intrigued by the opening and closing sentences and also by the narratives themselves, but as much as they are about overcoming some of life's most taxing moments, they are also stories with happy endings. The stories reflect the experiences of the writers, the impact that these meetings have had on their lives, and in turn, on ours, for the stories reveal to us a side of life that one might expect to encounter in fiction. Yet, these are not fictitious tales. They are real stories about real people living real lives. They are about people we meet every day — on the street, in supermarkets, at sports arenas, at Tim Horton's, or in convenience stores. They are our neighbours who silently carry a social stigma until they decide to act, until they meet someone they can trust and partner with to break the culture of defeat, someone like the Canadian Tire manager, who understood the destructive drama brooding in Raymond who recalls, "The boss told me he admired me for learning to read. He wanted to shake my hand," and as result he was able to get the Christmas present he wanted to give to his little girl.

I have participated in many literacy events, and I know well the importance of raising literacy skills. We need to work together — organizations, agencies, and the different levels of government — to create a common front. We are often asked to listen to someone who has walked the line, someone whose story could very well have been part of this book and, indeed, whose story turns out to be quite moving and motivating. Yet, most of the focus is placed on literacy skills in the classroom — based on the assumption, as I have heard someone remark, that we must act at an age when it is still possible to change the course of things.

Granted, we have to effect change at all levels, but we must never forget that illiteracy touches too many people beyond the classroom, and it is everyone's business to address it. Adult learners need our support now more than ever, for they are faced with difficulties that might turn into tragedies. Reading skills are among the most important solutions to such emotional and functional distress.

You might recall the slogan that was adopted by the United Negro College Fund in the 1970s: a mind is a terrible thing to waste. The mind, like the body, can be trained to perform amazing and complex operations, and like a high-performance athlete, artist, or visionary, it can be pushed to perform a high degree of accomplishment. But this does not happen overnight. The proper tools are needed to venture out on such a journey. One of the most basic components to building the mind is the ability to access, exchange, and produce information, usually contained in books, but accessible only by the ability to read, comprehend, and retain knowledge. The people, whose touching journeys are described in this book, have realized more than most the importance of such promises. They believed that reading could open a door in their lives and that beyond the cold, grey wall lies a path that could lead toward their dreams.

A mind is a terrible thing to waste indeed. In this small corner of the world where we are so very few, everyone is needed to be part of a winning team. Literacy is part of the game plan and its importance is measured and felt every day, every where, and with every one. This is a collective struggle and undoubtedly the solution must come from all of us. The people in this book have proven that a cycle of dependency can be broken, and their stories confirm that every contribution counts, every word learned is a victory, every sentence read enhances our collective consciousness.

Reading is a wonderful gift. We did not invent this system of communication. We are merely its inheritors, but we have the responsibility to share it, to add to it, and to transmit it to future generations. We live in an exciting age, in a wonderful country where education is free and where all children have access to the wonders of a civilization to which they will eventually contribute. This is the perfect script, at least on paper. However, reality is

somehow slightly different. Granted, there has been a democratization of knowledge and access to the tools of learning, and there have been strong incentives to acquire the skills that seem so essential to the fulfillment and enjoyment of our heritage as humans. Why, then, do we continue to face a high rate of illiteracy? Why do we do not seem to find adequate solutions to a problem so pervasive that we hesitate to acknowledge its real consequences? The rate of illiteracy is so alarming that a new social contract is required to come to terms with it. We need to ask ourselves the real questions, and we need to find effective solutions.

This is a most inspiring collection of stories about real people who decided to win. Their personal victories will eventually turn out to be our collective triumph. They have ventured into another world, which happens to be their own, for reading expands skills and opens doors to a whole new life. As one of the learners reflects, "My new path leads to other doors that I'm sure will open on unimagined vistas of possibility." To open a book or a newspaper or a computer document is like opening the door to a world that we travel line after line, word to word on a path to greater knowledge, entertainment, and even enchantment.

Reading is magic for it transforms the world around us, and yes, it can also grant wishes. This book is a testimony to that power.

HERMÉNÉGILDE CHIASSON
Lieutenant-Governor of New Brunswick

Preface

Two years ago, Laubach Literacy New Brunswick (LLNB) and the Writers Federation of New Brunswick (WFNB) entered upon a joint project to promote literacy in our province. This endeavour was undertaken in response to the appalling literacy statistics revealed by the 1993 and 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey for New Brunswick. The result is *Breaking the Word Barrier: Stories of Adults Learning to Read*.

Seventeen members of the WFNB volunteered to interview seventeen adult students engaged in either literacy programs or academic upgrading classes. The students ranged in age from nineteen to seventy-one and came from cities, towns, and rural communities across New Brunswick. An estimated two hundred hours of interviews were conducted. This process empowered and enlightened students and writers.

Those struggling to read and write face many barriers, not the least of which is the stigma imposed by society — if you are not functionally literate, you are somehow inferior. Admitting that one needs help and seeking it under these conditions can be extremely difficult, and that is why we consider the seventeen students featured in this collection to be heroes. The narratives, crafted from the interviews, are a tribute to the students' courage and determination as they faced and overcame daunting challenges. We hope the joy they found in improving their literacy skills will inspire those who listen to or read *Breaking the Word Barrier*.

The heartfelt wish of all those who participated in the creation of this book is that it will encourage thousands of older youth and adults to seize the

opportunities readily available and that it will draw the public's attention to the serious literacy deficit in New Brunswick.

Thanks must be given to Noeline Bridge and Angela Ranson, WFNB members who spent many hours working on the committee that established procedures and guidelines for the project. Ana Watts, Rhona Sawlor, and Cathy Fynn volunteered their editing services.

Without the generous donations from the Atlantic Lottery Corporation and the Province of New Brunswick the book would have remained a dream. Additional funding was gratefully received from the Greater Moncton Literacy Advisory Board, Legs for Literacy, Laubach Literacy New Brunswick, and the Moncton Regional Learning Council.

Finally, LLNB and the WFNB owe a debt of gratitude to Goose Lane Editions, to its publisher Susanne Alexander, managing editor Akoulina Connell, and editor Paula Sarson for bringing the dream to publication.

MARILYN LERCH, President, WFNB
PETER SAWYER, Board Member, LLNB

The Word for Love

BETH POWNING

When Linda was fourteen she was in grade five, attending school in East Saint John. After school she walked almost two kilometres home to her grandparents' house. When she stepped into the kitchen one March afternoon, her grandmother snatched her lunch can. "Grampy's been asking for you all day. Quick, go upstairs," she said. Linda hurried to her grandfather's room. Fifteen minutes later, he had passed away.

After his death, Linda quit school to stay home and help her grandmother. She did not know how to read. Arithmetic was a mystery. She could write only her own name.

"I couldn't do it anymore. I wasn't learning anything," she later recalled.

Linda was born in Saint John in 1950. At the age of sixteen months, she fell down a flight of stairs. She went to the children's hospital in Toronto and then was sent to the Montreal Shriner's Hospital. She sustained head injuries and damage to her left arm and leg. The doctors told her parents that she had a fifty-fifty chance of survival. Her mother had a job that she didn't want to give up to look after a disabled child. Linda was sent to live with her grandparents.

Her grandmother was a minister's daughter from Nova Scotia. Her grandfather, from St. Martin's, was totally blind. Linda became his faithful attendant, even though she herself walked with a limp and had the use of only one hand. She helped him bank the house with sand. She helped him

saw wood, haul coal, lug buckets of water. She led him by the hand, became his eyes. She adored her grandparents.

Linda learned as a young child that her mother had not wanted to care for her. Forever afterward, when her parents arrived on occasional visits, Linda refused to see them. She went across the street to her best friend's house and would not come home until she saw the car leave the driveway. The hurt and bitterness of abandonment set in at an early age.

She started grade one in a combined one/two class, with grades three/four and five/six in the same room. Aside from learning disabilities as a result of her accident, Linda missed months of school, since every six months she went to the Montreal Children's Hospital for surgeries on her arm and leg. The teacher did not have time to help her. She was put in the slow learners' class. The other children teased her and called her "stupid."

At home in the green house on the Old Black River Road, Linda lived as an only child, although she did have two brothers and three half-sisters. The house had a sun porch filled with her grandmother's plants, and she would lie there on sunny summer days or play on the baseball diamond or in the nearby fields. She did not have the escape of television or the companionship of children's books. Her grandmother occasionally read aloud to Linda and helped her with her lessons but was unable to teach her to read.

Linda missed her grandfather terribly. Although she loved her grandmother, she and her Grampy had been close. Not only did they love each other, but she had been his helpmate, and this had given her a sense of responsibility and independence. After his death, Linda's grandmother moved downstairs to a room off the kitchen, and Linda asked if she might move into the bigger bedroom that had been her grandparents'. She could feel her grandfather's presence there. At night, she lay in the warm bed, wrapped in the sense of someone who had loved her for who she was. Without the comfort of a bedtime book, she remembered — and imagined.

* * *

At eighteen, she was pregnant. Her grandmother counselled her to stay single and raise the baby at home, but Linda married and had three children. Those were hard years. Eventually, she left her husband and went on welfare. She learned to read a few words and struggled to fill out her own welfare papers. Usually she had to rely on her half-sister for help. In the grocery store, she could not read the labels on boxes and cans. Although she worried about the fact that there was diabetes and heart disease in the family, she did not know whether the foods she bought contained salt or sugar. At church, she could not follow the words in the program or on the board or in the songbook.

She didn't feel lonely, only embarrassed. She did not want people to know she couldn't read. "If they found out, they would say — shocked, fascinated — 'I didn't know you couldn't read!'" She hated having to ask for help. One of her most painful memories is that she could not read storybooks to her children.

She noticed that people loved books. "Books made me feel bad. I wanted to know what the words said." She would try to read, propping her damaged arm on the left-hand page and running the finger of her good hand along the first sentence. She would make up her own story as her finger travelled down the page. She would turn the page and resume running her finger along the black, lacy lines, murmuring her imaginary tale.

She raised three children and eventually had five grandchildren. It never crossed her mind that she could ever learn to read. She was shy and retiring, afraid to talk to people, especially afraid to speak up in public.

"You won't amount to anything," people told me. The more people told me that, I got it into my head that I was going to be stupid for the rest of my life."

Linda volunteered at the Salvation Army for ten years. One day, when she was fifty years old, the program director came into the kitchen with an intriguing invitation. "Would any of you people like to learn to read and write?"

Linda's first thought was, "I'm kind of old."

Her grandfather came to her often in her dreams. On that day, she heard his voice repeatedly urging her on, "Do it, Linda! Do it. Put your mind to it."

At the end of the day, she went to the director's office. "I'll give it a try."

She was assigned a tutor, Gwen. Going to her first lesson, she was nervous, thinking the teacher might be "cranky or strict." Gwen and Linda liked each other, and the lessons went well. At first, it was very difficult for Linda to link sounds with letters, but she thrived with one-on-one teaching. She persevered, worked hard, and did her homework. "I learned more from my tutor than I ever did in school." Starting with a grade three proficiency level, in four years she had progressed to a grade nine level.

Linda's life changed.

In the fall of 2008, Linda and I arrange to meet in a private room at the Saint John Free Public Library. I see a small woman sitting in the library foyer. We shake hands. We're the same age, the same height. We both have grandchildren. I sense that she's nervous and determined. I feel her courage. She sits at the end of the table, patient and eager. She is ready to tell me more of her story. She carries her good news like a gift that she wants to share.

As she talks, I begin to see two people. There's the grey-haired woman who sits before me, one arm as muscled as a man's. With this strong arm, she lifts and settles her other arm on the table, making herself comfortable. She waits for my questions, brave in her composure. Her face is grooved by pain, despair, love, loss. Her eyes lilt with an impish delight, and her laugh lifts my heart. Then, gradually, I see the child, a small girl who is self-confident and capable. This little girl tells her grandfather how high to lift his shovel, where to push his wheelbarrow. She tells him what she sees: a raft of geese, autumn leaves, a sunset. She has the strength of character to follow her feelings — to disappear at the sight of her parents' car, to watch through a window, waiting for them to leave. I see the little girl who is tough and honest at the start of her life's journey, when people are just beginning to tell her that she won't amount to anything, and she doesn't, yet, believe them.

This is Linda now. "I met one of those kids I went to school with. I said, 'Have you seen me?'" He answered, "You've been on TV. You've been on radio,