I Won’t Read and You Can’t Make Me
REACHING RELUCTANT TEEN READERS

Marilyn Reynolds

HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH
To the legions of teachers, librarians, aides, and administrators who work with diligence and enthusiasm to enable low-level, unmotivated, reluctant learners to join the community of lifelong readers. You are the heroes who help level the playing fields of our disenfranchised youth.
Contents

Acknowledgments ix

1 An Overview 1
   Fate’s Fickle Finger 2
   The Demographics of Misunderstood High School 2
   Why Stay at Misunderstood High School? 3
   The Gift of a Reading Habit 4
   Gaining Credibility and Consciousness 5
   Reading for Life 5
   The Fusion of Teaching and Writing 6
   From Teacher/Writer to Writer/Teacher 7
   Teach to True Standards 8
   Practical Information on What’s to Come 8
   Readers Ask 9

2 I Won’t Read and You Can’t Make Me 11
   The Challenge of an Outspoken Reluctant Reader 11
   Simple Requirements for English Credit 12
   Journals 13
   Finally, a “Hit” Book for Nancy 14
   Readers Ask 16

3 Let Me Tell You This, Reading Will Lead Lives 18
   José Appreciates the Value of Reading 18
   Reading for Pleasure Opens Closed Minds 20
   Books—A Place to Be When One’s Own World Is Toxic 21
## Contents

**Reading Toward Healing and Wholeness**  
Readers Ask  

4 **Do You Ever Get in Trouble for Using Bad Words in Your Books?**  
No Bad Words  
Realism Is Necessary in a Molestation Story  
Estelle and the Whispering Angel  
*Telling* Offers Insight to Others  
Realistic Fiction Offers New Insights  
Who Has the Right to Deny Materials for All Children?  
Fighting Censorship  
Readers Ask  

5 **Bibliotherapy Is Not a Four-Letter Word**  
Reading versus Busywork  
A Defective Listening Gene  
A Hunger for Books That Reflect Life  
The Healing Power of Books  
The Importance of Free Choice  
Reading for Life  
Readers Ask  

6 **What Makes for a Successful SSR Program?**  
An SSR Program for Juvenile Offenders  
Teacher Support  
A Community of Readers  
A Thrilling Experience  
The Press Acknowledges Kids’ Potential—Worthy of Respect  
Continued Success for SSR at Esperanza  
Perfection Is Not a Requirement  
Basic Training  
Readers Ask
## Contents

### 7 Why Bother with the Ones Who Can’t or Won’t Get with the Program? 54
- I Can’t Read and You Can’t Teach Me—the Dilemma of Herman 54
- What to Do with Herman? 55
- In the Midst of Failure, Remember the Successes 57
- Why Bother? 58
- Another Lost Cause 59
- We Bother Because We Must 62
- Readers Ask 62

### 8 Beware of Weapons of Mass Instruction 63
- How We Learn to Read 63
- SSR and Low-Level Readers? 64
- Frightening Trends 65
- Momentarily Setting Aside My Missionary Zeal for SSR 67
- The Lifelong Reading Key 71
- Readers Ask 71

### 9 From Teacher to Writer 73
- The Price of Eggs? 73
- Reality Checks from In-the-Field Educators 74
- Help from Teachers Who Write 75
- The Hard Way 75
- From Rejection to a Room of My Own to Publication 77
- Begging You, Please 79
- More Serendipity 79
- Blending Teaching and Writing 80
- Priming the Inspiration Pump 82
- A Crooked Path 82
- Readers Ask 83
Acknowledgments

It turns out that not only does it take a village to raise a child, it takes a village to write a book. I am ever grateful to the inhabitants of my book-writing village for gifts and guidance, great and small.

My thanks to my editor, Danny Miller, for his insights, encouragement, and quirky humor—the best possible blend for getting the job done. To Carol Fifield, for inspiration and unwavering behind-the-scenes support. To Kathy Harvey, for her finely honed sense of organization and structure, her willingness to give close readings to yet one more draft, and then one more, and most of all for decades of shared highs, lows, and in-betweens along the jagged path of teaching “those” kids. To Corry Dodson, for her unfailing efficiency and good humor in pursuing and tying up myriad loose ends. To David Doty, Jeanne Lindsay, Judy Laird, and Karyn Mazo-Calf for their early enthusiasm for this project, and for close readings and comments of early drafts.

To other villagers who, perhaps unbeknownst to some, have provided fuel for the fire: Nancy Blackburn, Dan Brewer, Susan Canjura, Carla Cozart, Lynda Culp, Dale Dodson, David Doty, Renee Hamilton, Anna Humphrey, Kathy Ikeda, Sheila Konfino, Adina Lawson, Michelle Leddell, Betsy Levine, Adele Levy, Helen Mann, Mary Lynn McMillan, John Myers, Gloria Miklowitz, Marsha Miller, Sandi Moon, Kathy Orihuela, Patty Rangel, Carol Schneider, Ellen Shimamoto, Alan Sitomer, Bitsy Wagman, and Jeannie Ward.

To Mike Reynolds, who may not have known exactly what he was getting into with his “for better or worse” vow, for his enduring love and support.
Chapter Seven

Why Bother with the Ones Who Can’t or Won’t Get with the Program?

School explains only so much about a student. The largest clues to success or failure lie beyond Seward Park’s portals, in the home and on the street.

Small Victories, Samuel Freedman

I Can’t Read and You Can’t Teach Me—the Dilemma of Herman

Herman was one of those who couldn’t get with the program. A Big Baby Huey kind of guy, he had a mouth that even his peers were soon sick of. Although he was seventeen, he had failed so many classes that he was still officially categorized as a ninth grader. He’d been in my reading class for several weeks, said he couldn’t read, and he wouldn’t try.

When he came to class reeking of marijuana, I suspended him for three days. He decried the injustice of it all. Herman claimed he’d only done it for me. I
wanted him to work on reading, and he could do better with a buzz. Now, I’d gone and suspended him for trying to do better! He could do a lot of things better after several tokes, like drive a car, take care of his little brother, play basketball, concentrate, and get along with his mom.

**A Simple Evaluation**

Except for the few obvious excellent readers, my practice was to do an informal WRAT (Wide Range Achievement Test) with students to keep in their folders, along with their Reading Questionnaires and Reading Log sheets. The reading segment of a WRAT takes five to ten minutes to administer and provides a fairly accurate “guestimate” of most students’ reading levels. It doesn’t reveal that a student, like Herman, can recognize and say words but not comprehend text; however, that glitch is quickly revealed in other ways.

Herman’s test placed him somewhere in the mid-fifth-grade range. It soon became obvious that although he could say the words, he couldn’t comprehend the meaning of a paragraph that contained the words. He had a thorough understanding of the stories I read aloud to the class. He had a strong narrative sense that, to my great consternation, he exhibited orally and forcefully during SSR.

**A Master of Distraction**

When Herman returned to class after his suspension, he was still angry. He complained loudly about his unjust treatment. He proclaimed that reading was useless and those who spent their time that way were fools. Herman was, to offer the epitome of understatement, disruptive.

I walked him out of class and admitted that I couldn’t make him read, but I wouldn’t tolerate behavior that distracted others from their reading. That worked for a few minutes.

**What to Do with Herman?**

I called his mother to enlist her help. This is a mother who had been getting calls from Herman’s teachers for the past eleven years. My guess, while talking with her, was that her mother had received calls about her all through school.

I brought his name up during a faculty meeting. His other teachers were equally frustrated with Herman. The one thing at which he was successful was cleaning out the rabbit cages for the petting zoo. I couldn’t figure out how to transfer that strength to the reading classroom.
Unfortunately for him, but fortunate for the peace and sanctity of our class, Herman was absent more often than he was in attendance. When he did come to school, I read with him from *Midnight Express*, which had been made into a movie of the same name and was one of his favorite movies. As with several other students, I read a sentence, then he read a sentence, then we talked about the meaning. He did all right with that, but he couldn’t get the meaning of the next paragraph when he read it on his own.

**Herman’s History**

In the service of keeping an open mind, it was my practice not to look at a student’s records until I’d known him or her for a while. After three or four weeks, I took a look at Herman’s file. I would have predicted that he was sent to us for drug use or chronic truancy. Wrong. He was sent our way for having thrown a chair at a teacher.

Herman had been in all manner of special programs from first grade on. He had been given numerous evaluations, both psychological and academic, and referrals to a variety of doctors and institutions for more diagnostic procedures. It was not obvious from his file whether there had been consistent follow-through on referrals or not. It was obvious that his teachers had been greatly frustrated while working with him. Some had seen his sweet side and struggled mightily to help him adapt and advance. Others saw him as hopeless and wanted him placed anywhere but in their classrooms. Where to go with a student for whom all known resources had failed?

My goal with Herman became simply to keep him from disrupting the other readers. That put me in the same class as the currently much-maligned “teachers with low expectations.” At the time my decision seemed in line with a slight variation of the ubiquitous serenity prayer. I accepted what I could not change—Herman’s ongoing reading problems—and gathered the courage to change that which I might—Herman’s disruptive behavior.

Herman and I continued to read together with the same expected results. He didn’t know why he didn’t get it and neither did I, which I freely admitted. I consistently demanded that he not be loud and disruptive. When he was, I sent him to the office to sit out the rest of the class period. At least, then, my students and I were able to read in peace.

**A Tempting Proposal**

Eventually Herman managed to become less disruptive during SSR, spending much of his time looking at illustrated books of cars, or motorcycles, or people
resplendent with tattoos. “Less disruptive” was still a far cry from nirvana, but we did achieve something approaching manageable. He continued to claim that he could learn more easily if he were buzzed and wanted to prove that to me by way of an experiment. He proposed that we work together after school, since he was not allowed to be under the influence of a controlled substance during school hours. He would leave campus for a very short time, get a quick buzz, then return for a reading lesson. Herman assured me he could be back at school by the time the bus left to take students home—that’s how close and available his drug of choice was.

I’ll confess that I was tempted to take it on. It would have been an interesting experiment. At the time though, I planned to teach for another fifteen years and needed to hold on to my teaching credentials.

The Mystery of Herman’s Area of Reading Expertise

As far as I know, Herman never learned to attach meaning to the printed word. It was not until his second year at M.H.S. that a colleague and I realized there was a major exception to his comprehension problem. Herman could make sense of street signs, and he could follow a map! This was revealed to us when we set up a program that consisted mostly of field trips to places of historical interest, or to events where we could see examples of government in action.

Herman loved the class and was our most accurate navigator. Of course, he was still Herman, and the days when he was absent were easier and more productive than were the days when he showed up.

About five years after Herman turned eighteen and stopped coming to school, he came back to say hello. He still couldn’t read. He was a roofer and claimed he got along just fine. Three years later, I heard he was in prison for manslaughter.

In the Midst of Failure, Remember the Successes

There are the kids who can’t read because they can’t afford glasses. Maybe the school can help, but usually it’s a very lengthy process, sometimes longer than the students’ time of enrollment. There are kids who work late into the night and can barely, if at all, stay awake. Hungover, stoned, addicted, abused, heartbroken, suicidal, hearing voices, pregnant, homeless, sick—all kinds of students walk through the doors of our classrooms. Some things we cannot fix, though we can never stop trying. In the midst of three A.M. tossing and turning over the Hermans in our realm, we must also keep in mind the readers like José, and Nancy, Gabriel and Estelle, and all the others who, because of our efforts and the
efforts of others like us, are becoming lifelong readers, reaping the plenteous benefits of that practice.

Why Bother?

The “why bother” question hits hard at a Tuesday morning faculty meeting. About fifteen staff members are gathered in Room 5, waiting for the school counselor before we start the official meeting. We’re talking about an upcoming school board election, a new lunch place nearby, a girl we suspect is pregnant, whatever . . .

Ms. B arrives a few minutes later, wearing a look we’ve seen all too often. Talking stops. She sighs, “Joe Ramirez. Drive by.”

Ms. T, sitting beside me, puts her head down on the table, arms folded in front, as if preparing for a rainy day recess game of 7-Up. This is no game though.

We listen as Ms. B reveals the details: Gang related. Hit in the chest. Joe’s cousin, too, is dead. All payback for a killing the previous month.

“I thought Joe wasn’t involved in that. I thought he’d left the gang life,” one of the less-seasoned teachers says.

Ms. B reminds him that none of this is rational.

Joe was seventeen, looked thirty, even acted thirty at times. At other times, he acted as if he were a two-year-old. He came to M.H.S. with a reputation of being one of the toughest of the tough, in the toughest local gang. (Because I don’t want to give any gangs specific recognition, let’s just abbreviate toughest local gang to TLG.) Joe was third-generation TLG.

At times his reputation worked toward keeping peace at school. He had clout with the wannabe gangbangers, the ones who most often have to prove something. If a fight were brewing, Joe only needed to say “not at school” and things calmed down. He could be funny, and charming, and was always quick to take a box of supplies from any teacher’s hands and carry it into the classroom. He was into drugs, TLG, and all that goes with life on the street.

All of our students are “causes,” but some loom larger than others. Joe was Ms. T’s cause. He became her right-hand man for “Friday Night Live” events. He helped run the snack bar. He decided to work on math—something he’d given up on years ago. He was becoming one of those “turn-around” kids that offer us all hope. And he was dead.

Ms. B spoke of how best to handle the news with students, who all was thought to be involved, what repercussions might be in store.

When Ms. T eventually raised her head, her only comment was, “But he’d just finally learned his times tables.”
Another Lost Cause

One of my causes was Luis. Although he, too, was affiliated with TLG, he was mostly a loner. His mother, who apparently had been his sole means of both financial and emotional support, had died two years earlier of breast cancer. He now lived with his grandmother in the house his mother had owned, but the grandmother was not up to the task.

Luis was bright, an avid reader, and a good writer. He loved the Tolkien books and took seriously my admonition to write from the heart. Much of what I knew about him came from his journal writings. He wrote of watching his mother struggle against cancer, of his last year with her, his sense of helplessness, and now his loneliness.

I arranged for Luis to attend a “grief group” at his old high school. He went once but decided he didn’t need it. He had his own ways of dealing with grief.

His dream was to be an artist. So far, the only work he had shown publicly was on a freeway overpass, and the side wall of a bar not far from where he lived. He wanted more though and, according to Mr. N, our art teacher, Luis showed great potential.

For weeks at a time, Luis would be an exemplary student, working diligently and creatively, amassing credit quickly. Then, inexplicably, he would disappear. As Luis’s advisor, one of my jobs was to call home. His grandmother was unaware that Luis hadn’t been coming to school. She promised to check. The next day I called again. She told me that there was some mistake. Luis had been coming to school. He told her so.

We might hear that Luis and others from TLG had gone into rival gang territory and stirred up trouble, or that someone had seen him at a party. I would call the grandmother again and ask that she get Luis to school, and again be told that he was coming to school. I got help from the attendance clerk, and the counselor, but nothing really helped. Of course, we could turn his information over to the state’s Attendance Review Board for stronger action, but he was only seven months away from eighteen, so would not be a priority.

In his own good time, Luis would return to school and again become an exemplary student. Early in April, Mr. N took Luis and three other promising students to visit a highly regarded art department at a nearby community college. Luis came back from that trip glowing with enthusiasm. He was determined to get into the art program he had visited, and both Mr. N and I set about helping Luis get things in order. High school graduation was within the realm of possibility, even though he was behind in credits.
The plan Luis and I agreed on was demanding, but it would assure him of meeting all requirements by mid-June. With Mr. N’s guidance, Luis worked on rounding out his portfolio. Mr. N contacted the head of the art department and sang Luis’s praises.

**A Plan in Jeopardy**

All went well until the middle of April when Luis disappeared for a week. Both Mr. N and I called the grandmother and tried to impress on her the importance of Luis being in school at this crucial time. “Tell Luis to come back to school,” I would say to anyone with even the remotest connection to the talented, truant boy.

Luis’s absence only lasted a week, which was less than previous disappearing acts, but greatly significant in light of his timeline. I bombarded him with questions of why had he been absent when he needed every school hour he could get to graduate on time, what was he thinking, where had he been; his answers were vague and unrevealing.

**Beyond Death—a Mother’s Influence**

Although Luis didn’t have much to say about what had kept him from school, his journal writings were slightly more revealing. There were times, he wrote, that he missed his mother so much he just had to take time for her. He felt her presence in his backyard, where she used to plant a big vegetable garden every year, and where there were several rosebushes that she had cared for with great love and tenderness. Even though the garden was now shabby, and Luis felt guilty for not taking care of it, he could always find his mother in the garden. She was, he wrote, very pleased about his plan for art school, and he wanted her to be proud of him. Luis tackled his remaining tasks with energy, and Mr. N and I were again hopeful.

I found his writing to be somewhat disconcerting, but what I’ve observed in others, and experienced in myself, is that the dead live on in the minds of the people who loved them. I thought that this was especially true for Luis. Although I generally consider journal writings to be confidential, I felt a need to mention Luis’s talks with his mother to Ms. B. She called him in, ostensibly to talk with him about progress toward graduation, then led the conversation toward the grieving process. Ms. B’s take on things was that Luis’s “meetings” in the garden were a way for him to gather strength from the memory of his mother and that it was an important aspect of his healing.

**Scholarship Decisions**

Every June we gave twenty or so scholarships to graduates, or to students who were continuing their studies in a variety of ways including community colleges,
the California Conservation Corps, and on-the-job training programs. The scholarships ranged in value from $25 to $500.

The annual faculty meeting at which we decided which students got which scholarships was a cross between a very intense tug-of-war and a peashooter fight. We all had causes, and we wanted our own causes to get the best scholarships. The year of Luis's graduation, Mr. N and I lobbied hard for him to get the $250 award. Peas were fired. Luis was too unpredictable. He didn't have the history with us that Brenda, another cause, had. We tugged hard on the rope. He was a kid with great talent and he knew exactly what his next step was. We shot a pea. Brenda was a sweet girl but she had no idea what was next for her. Another tug of the rope from Brenda's side—near perfect attendance. We shot the family support pea—Brenda had plenty of it, Luis had none.

Mr. N and I, along with a few other allies, prevailed. The $250 award went to Luis, with one of several $100 scholarships being designated for Brenda. The $500 scholarship was a no-contest decision for a girl who was everyone's cause. The others were tug-of-war, peashooter contests, but as always the decisions were made before dinnertime and we all breathed a sigh of relief that we wouldn't have to do this again for another year.

Luis Wins, and Loses

By the day of graduation, Luis had completed all of his necessary credits and had developed an impressive and well-balanced portfolio. His face shone with joy as he clutched his scholarship envelope and thanked Mr. N and me for all the help we had given. We, in turn, told Luis how much we had enjoyed working with him and urged him to keep in touch. He gave me a quick hug before getting on the bus and waved his scholarship envelope at me as the bus pulled away.

Mr. N, along with the principal and a few other designated staff, rode the bus that day too. There had been a rumor that a group of TLG rivals would be waiting at the bus stop where Luis and other TLGs got off. The plan was to thwart the rumored confrontation by having the bus driver change her usual route and let the TLGs off several blocks beyond the expected stop. This plan would probably have worked, except that when four girls without gang ties got off at the usual TLG place, several of the targeted TLG boys pushed out right behind them, ready to fight. Luis was among them. The bus driver radioed police and continued on her route. Mr. N told me later in the afternoon that his last vision of Luis was of him holding his scholarship check in one hand and hurling a broken beer bottle at one of the rivals with his other.

A week after school started in September an ex-student stopped by to tell us Luis had been found dead in his backyard. She said Luis had been sitting out there
on a short stool, day and night, drinking for at least a week. He was wrapped in an Indian blanket, still sitting, stone cold dead when his grandmother found him.

We Bother Because We Must

Indeed, why bother? Because we have to. Because we can never predict who will be the turn-around student and who will meet an early death. And even for Luis, and Joe, and all of the others who come to an untimely end, we’ve offered hope and promise along the way. If it wasn’t enough to save them, it was enough to brighten a few days. That’s what I tell myself when the tossing and turning questions pop up in the dark, early morning hours. It’s usually enough. (For more information about help for students, see TOTT: Getting Help for Troubled Students Who Can’t and/or Won’t Get with the Program, pp. 123–124.)

READERS ASK

Dear Ms. R,

Herman would never have been allowed to come back to my school if he’d been caught under the influence of a controlled substance because we have a zero tolerance policy for drugs, weapons, violent behavior. Don’t you think all schools should have such policies?

Big on School Safety

Dear BOSS,

I think “zero tolerance” does a disservice to our most needy and disenfranchised students. Each case should be considered with all of its details and uncertainties. Even though Herman was not a success story, and admittedly was a trial to his teachers, I believe he was better off in school than roaming the streets without guidance or concern. Zero tolerance is an easy answer to very complex questions.

M.R.

Questions Only You Can Answer

❖ Is there a student, or students, in my class who I’ve given up on?
❖ Is there one more step to take that hasn’t been taken?
❖ How can I deal with the disappointments of teaching without losing sight of the successes?
Thank you for sampling this resource.

For more information or to purchase, please visit Heinemann by clicking the link below:


Use of this material is solely for individual, noncommercial use and is for informational purposes only.