

# One Literate Life: A Case Study of a Ninety-Four-Year-Old Reader

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While many studies focus on emergent and beginning readers, and other research explores the literacy practices of reluctant teens, there is little academic focus on seniors. Sumara's (2002) work on literary resources for schools refers to personal connections with texts and intergenerational relationships, weaving personal anecdotes about his mother into theoretical narrative and arguing that "literary experience is a place" (p. xiv). Somewhat more research is available on seniors' writing than on their reading, with a notable focus of this research on memory. Brady and Sky (2003) explore the cognitive benefits of journal writing, and there is research to support the relationship between age, memory, and linguistic ability (Byrd, 1993; Hoskyn & Swanson, 2003). Of the previous studies that focus on elderly participants' functions and uses of literacy, Kazemek's work delineates the need for further research into how elders—people ages 65 and up—engage with writing (1999), and emphasizes that stories from this population can make society "more vital, humane, and just" (1997, p. 523). Inherent in the idea that writing supports society is the idea that reading supports readers, although studies exploring reading in very elderly populations are absent on the landscape of previous literacy research.

As I pondered Sumara's (2002) idea of literary experience as a place, the potential traits of such a place were intriguing. I turned my attention to elderly readers transitioning into years where reading comprehension dwindles with reduced short-term memory, and I wondered what texts support the place of continued literacy experiences of aging populations, and what contemporary literature has to offer in this regard. With this question, I considered *Radical Change* (Dresang, 1999), a theory used to identify the changes in forms and format, perspectives, and boundaries in children's books of the digital age. Dresang discusses how particular picture books may appeal to adults as well as children, "particularly to those of Generation X, born between 1966 and 1977...after television had become commonplace" (p. 83). Dresang's argument is that with the advent of television appears the acquired ability to enjoy visual information, supporting adult interest in the graphic texts their children are now enjoying.

What might graphic texts offer adults born prior to the television generation? Can illustrations support the reading comprehension of seniors in ways parallel to how picture cues facilitate emergent and early reading? Could an exploration of illustrated texts with seniors born prior to 1966 expand on Dresang's theory regarding intergenerational picture book appeal? With these two questions in mind, I devised a case study of a senior citizen who had recently

participated in both a public library writing event and a subsequent research study on the writing processes and preferences of seniors (Park & Brenna, 2011).

## Methodology and Methods

My qualitative research, framed by four research visits, employed three brief semi-structured oral questionnaires to probe reading background, previous reading preferences, and possibilities related to new reading materials. A reader's advisory session offered samples of picture book and graphic novel texts, approximated to fall within a reading range of grades 2–6. Subsequent opportunities for the participant to explore these texts occurred independently as well as within a context of shared reading with the researcher. Research visits were audiotaped and transcribed. The following results paint a portrait of a reader who has evolved away from the more typical reading of her younger years, yet who retains a desire to read and clear preferences related to reading material. Limitations of the study are related to its single-participant design although the results, while contextualized within the lived life of one individual, offer implications related to lifelong literacy support and opportunity including the availability of appropriate resources.

## Portrait of a Ninety-Four-Year-Old Reader

"Em" is a ninety-four-year-old avid reader from a rural background who has spent sixty-two years in a city on the Canadian prairies, the last dozen years in an assisted living complex for seniors. Em constructs herself as a farm girl and a teacher. Born in 1916, she lived through the Great Depression and World War II, and memories of these events are detailed, expressed in stories that Em has told and retold, stories that are now smooth as weathered stones from repeated exposure. She received her teaching certificate from the Regina Normal School in 1935, at age nineteen, and taught for ten years in one-room schools and high schools. She is very interested in the natural world, including prairie wildflowers and endangered birds; she is also interested in multi-cultural learning and has spent considerable time in her reading—past studying various cultures. In addition, she has provided short, "coffee-hour" speeches for the other occupants of her building, generally focusing on poetry, such as work by Robert Browning, Alfred Noyes, and E.J. Pratt—work that she may have studied during the completion of a B.A. in English in 1943/44.

Em discusses an original poem of hers published in a 1948 school reader. She remembers speaking to children at her son's school, who were studying that reader, and

discussing with them the writing process, and the power of the writer to transform subject matter. Em remembers transformations related to the creation of this particular poem. The inspiration for the poem occurred during a train trip to Em's first teaching position. She looked out on the desolate, prairie landscape of the Depression and saw bony horses pawing the ground for the meagre sustenance offered by parched grasses. When the train whistle blew, the horses lifted their heads and ran—and she imagined them in better times, using this image as inspiration for her poem "Wild Horses"—a piece that invokes the beauty of nature, not the heavy hand of the depression years.

Competency is clearly a factor in Em's self-assessments regarding reading behaviour, and she reports not following a lot of what is in the newspapers these days, skipping and scanning to find the pages of word searches and puzzles that appeal to her. "There's not much in it for me anymore," she says, clarifying this to mean that there's not much she reads in the newspaper that she can comprehend. While her preference in reading stance matches Rosenblatt's (1978) concept of 'efferent reading,' in Em's case reading for information related to news afforded by popular culture, because her comprehension ability is dwindling, Em's related reading preferences and strategies are changing. Em's current reading practices are minimal, and can now be contextualized within what Rosenblatt calls 'aesthetic reading', most commonly occurring as Em reads for pleasure by picking up a familiar poem—a poem she has previously written— and enjoying the rhythm and rhyme.

Although Em recently presented without notes a recent "coffee talk" in her building, she has cut back on these presentations and reports being confused sometimes about language, substituting the word "Aunt" for "Grandma" in a letter to her granddaughter and mixing the terms "husband" and "son". She has also given up crossword puzzles, as the words don't come as easily as they used to do. Regarding the memorization of poems, however, she reports successfully maintaining her calm while stuck in an elevator. "You might not know what to think about," she says to me, "because you haven't memorized poetry as part of your schooling." She also thinks memorization has been the key to some of her own writing, in terms of a deep understanding of rhythm and rhyme.

As well as non-fiction and poetry interests in terms of reading, Em still manages to attempt the "quiptocrip" and the "word scramble" from her local paper before 9am, when she offers the remainder of the paper to a neighbour. The associational aspects of reading are evidenced in this sharing of the newspaper, as well as in her interest in giving talks (personal communication, 2009). She is hesitant about reading the new books I have brought, however, possibly unsure whether she will be able to understand them. Once reassured that she can spend time examining them independently, and let me know which, if any, she prefers, Em is eager to move ahead in the study.

## Literacy as a Place

Literacy is more than a handbag of reading and writing skills and strategies. As defined by Barton and Hamilton (1998), "it is an activity, located in the space between thought and text...essentially social...located in the interaction between people" (p. 3). Literacy events are located in time and place, and thus both time and place are important in the context of this case study, within which aspects of Em's practice of reading are explored. A striking feature of Em's background is that while reading emerged and lasted for many years in the traditional framework of community, seeming to serve as an associational behaviour, it has evolved into a mostly solitary and introspective behaviour, supporting aesthetic purposes, and appears primarily motivated as a mental exercise. Her presentations to peers seem to serve a social need, as well, but the need to teach or provide information seems central in Em's motivation rather than a focus on shared experience.

Em reports reading at the kitchen table when she was a child, pages lit by an Aladdin lamp that hung from the ceiling. "That was the only light we read by in the evenings, which meant I didn't read in my bedroom, I read at the kitchen table along with my father, my brother and my sister. My mother didn't do very much reading; she was busy with housework." Farm newspapers were the primary reading material, but as Em got older, she requested work by Ralph Connor and Zane Grey, for Christmas—plot driven fiction that engaged a reader's sense of adventure and romance. I wonder how her reading has evolved so far from these texts, as in adulthood she reports rarely reading fiction, but this is a question whose answer is elusive.

As Em's reading advanced and she brought home high school texts, she remembers leaving *David Copperfield* on the kitchen shelf and finding her father reading it. "*I'm a lone, lorne creatur, and everything goes contrary wit me,*" she recalls him quoting. It appears that Em identifies with her father more than her mother. Although her dad only completed education to grade six, he was an avid reader, time permitting. He would also occasionally publish poetry in the farm newspapers to which the family subscribed.

In the one-room school where Em began her elementary years, the physical place of literacy was primarily oral for the younger students. There was a sparse library, and fairy tales were the main genre available, but books did not feature largely other than school readers. Em remembers sitting with plasticine and making shapes while listening to the older grades recite from their readers. "I heard my brother's class reading, and I was quite excited by the poems I heard...I remember hearing him read John Gilpin's Ride, and I looked forward to getting to that grade so I could study that poem as well...I wanted to learn how to read. I saw the other boys and girls stand up in front of the teacher and read to her, and I wanted to be able to do that, too, the way they did. It was a passion, learning to read...We were taught using the

alphabet and we sounded it out...that would be 1922. Later on, this method was disproved, because it made a reader slow—to sound out the letters.” The one-room schoolhouse certainly supported rehearsed reading, thanks to the natural listening opportunities provided, unlike more modern schools where ‘reading ahead’ was discouraged and adult readers falsely appear to have spontaneously developed proficiency with texts (Mackey, 1993).

One important connection between Em’s reading at home and her reading at school was that these contexts were limited by the small number of texts available. Em was not involved in making choices about her reading materials, which may have shaped her reading interests into non-fiction and poetry, and may also have affected her writing repertoire: she has published non-fiction essays and poetry in outlets such as *Folklore* and *The Western Producer*. Until last year’s advance of vision problems, she regularly entered poetry in a senior’s competition at her local public library. This year she entered a previously written poem and short essay, with the help of her daughter. The essay is part of a collection of published work that her family offers through <http://www.lulu.com>, a website where such self-published collections can be purchased. Much of Em’s previous writing seems inspired from childhood publication in the *Torchbearer’s Magazine*, where she eventually held the position of chief poet, reviewing and commenting on the work of others.

### Reading as a Personal Act

Em’s individual interests also shaped the content of her reading within familiar genres. A love of wildflowers, begun with a teacher who invited the students to make pressed flower booklets, prompted her to explore and continue to enjoy identification manuals. This doesn’t explain her evolution into, and out of, romance fiction, yet there may be a link if one considers some of her favourite poetry. She recalls a favourite poem by Alfred Noyes, “The Highwayman,” and I connect it to the highly romanticized Zane Gray of her childhood: perhaps Em has not, after all, strayed from her reading past. Although her associational reading has changed, her passion for particular topics has endured.

As we move into the exploration of the contemporary texts I bring to the table, Em is forceful with her opinions. Spire’s (2009) *Binky the Space Cat* and the 2010 title *Binky to the Rescue* are “peculiar. Perhaps children would find the pictures cute, but they don’t go on a storyline I am familiar with.” As we talk about ‘storylines’, it is apparent that Em is referring to the sense of story explicitly produced by story grammars with which she is familiar. Such grammars include a beginning outlining the setting, a middle that includes rising action, and an ending or finale (Applebee, 1976; Mandler & Johnson, 1977).

While enjoying a chance to scan *Babymouse*, a graphic novel she identifies as having “cute pictures,” Em expresses

that the audience for this text would definitely be children. While operating on what Em identifies as a recognized story pattern, the content does not deeply encourage her in any sort of reader text transaction (Rosenblatt, 1978). Since Em cannot engage with the content of *Babymouse* in any personal way, therefore, “it is a book for children.” Another graphic novel, Phelan’s (2009) *A Storm in the Barn*, is identified as somewhat interesting in its depiction of the dirty thirties, a time period Em well remembers. “But it’s kind of crazy. The storyline is all mixed up. I’m not sure I’d recommend it for anyone.”

While the graphic novels I provided seem out of Em’s preference group due to their disconnectedness with Em’s life as well as their unfamiliar story patterns, picture books are favoured, although it’s not the story arc alone that draws Em. The first book that Em selects as her favourite from the collection of picture books and graphic novels is Downie’s (2005) picture book *A Pioneer ABC*. She indicates that the pattern of the book is an expected one, in that it is an ABC book, and that the audience for this book would be universal, including adults, even though their reading focus would not be on learning the alphabet. “I think (it would be appropriate for) all ages. I’m not a child, and I liked it.” Her favourite sections involved particular animal depictions, including the wild geese included on the G page, and the cattle that appear on O for Oxen as well as the cattle appearing incidentally on the T page. She also notes particular flora, commenting on trilliums, also under the letter T.

Why did the wild geese page interest Em? “Because I see them from my window.” And the cattle? “They were out in the pasture at home. My dad raised Herefords. I thought their calves were adorable. Sometimes we had a school fair and children could take an animal they had raised and lead it around the ring. Judges would decide on prizes. Some years I took a calf. I would brush it and give it lots of milk to drink—the milk went into the cream separator and milk would come out one spout and cream the other, but before it went into the separator, the calf would get its share.”

Em elaborates further on the school fair. “In my home town, we had to tie them (the calves) into a barn until it was time to lead them out into the ring. I came in one day and a boy was sitting on my calf’s back. I was very angry because I knew he would be bending the back in, and the judges wouldn’t like that.”

“What did you do?” I ask.

“I dragged him off.” Em smiles. “And I won first prize. A red ribbon.”

In terms of her preference for the page illustrating trilliums, Em is succinct. “I think we had them in the garden,” she says.

The pages she chooses as preferential within this self-selected preferred picture book involve concepts with which Em is familiar: animals and garden flowers. Her reader/text transaction is catalyzed by background knowledge, fixed

in long-term memory, whose activation produces happy anecdotal memories.

"Why did you like this book?" I ask, seeking to further support my conjectures about the value of personal response potential in Em's evaluation of texts.

"Because of the animals," she says succinctly. "My dad raised Herefords."

Three other picture books Em selected as personal favourites assist further in illuminating a rationale for her choices. Lloyd's (2007) *Looking for Loons*, Kurelek's (1973) *A Prairie Boy's Winter*, and Beshara's (2009) *When I Visit The Farm* contain illustrations to which Em responds, as well as particular sections of evocative language.

"I envy those who can do this art work," Em states, flipping back to front through the warm family tale *Looking for Loons*. She points out a picture of a loon that particularly appeals to her. "Maybe I saw loons at the lake." She also notes the mosquitoes. "Quite large. I'd hate to be bitten by one of them!"

Em comments on an aspect of the illustrations I hadn't noticed in *Looking for Loons*. "Where's Grandma?" she says. In fact, Grandma isn't represented visually until the last page, but Em has missed it. A number of times Grandma is referenced in the text, but the visuals centre on the children. "None give a picture of her," Em says, critical literacy at work here in terms of attention to what's missing (Luke and Freebody, 1997).

As she flips through *Looking for Loons*, it isn't the storyline to which she responds, but individual illustrations. A chipmunk elicits an "Ooh! Are their tails that long?" Possibly Em's original non-fiction interests are underpinning these comments, although she doesn't read adult non-fiction anymore due to comprehension issues. Even the local newspaper is difficult, but she continues to subscribe for the word puzzles.

Paging through *A Prairie Boy's Winter*, also back to front, she comments on items of particular interest. "Well, you see, I grew up on a farm and I remember watering the cows." She points to a cow in the illustrations. "We never had a combine. I remember the binder, pulled by horses, and the wheels of it rolled the grain around and formed sheaves that lay on the ground. My brother and I would stack them up. He would say that if we left them on the ground, they would get damp. And that is my memory about harvesting." It's important to note that no prompting was used to get Em to divulge her memories. These were offered as inspired responses from the texts at hand.

In addition to enjoying the pictures in *When I Visit the Farm*, Em seems also to enjoy the language, which she reads out loud in our repeated look at this text, and recites as if to herself: "As free as a dandelion seed...Grass, between my toes." Em smiles. "Well, my goodness." She goes on to interrogate the text, flipping this time from front to back. "...visit my animal friends" she quotes. "Well, there's only two there."

"Touch a nose as soft as velvet," she reads. "Oh yes!" She sits and thinks for awhile. When prompted, she talks again about the cows on her childhood farm.

Em reads a passage about a nest. "Where's the nest for the chicks?" she self-questions. "Oh yes. In her (the little girl's) skirt." She addresses the picture.

She reads about a chipmunk. "Oh yes, there he is," pointing to the illustrations. She reads about a hen, and points to it in the pictures. "She (a hen) too has a dream," Em reads aloud, and then interrogates the text further: "Oh? How does she know that?"

I draw Em's attention to two popular children's picture books: Lionni's *Frederick*, and Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*. She read them both carefully, front to back, noticing their familiar story patterns and commenting on individual points of interest. "Like you and I..." she reads from Sendak. "That's wrong grammar. 'Like you and like I'?" She smiles at the boy's response when his mother calls him 'wild thing' and he tells her he'll eat her up. "He was flippant," Em observes.

Her evaluative response to these two picture books is: "Cute." But she definitively categorizes them as books for children, not books for adults.

"What makes a book appropriate for adults?" I ask.

Em cannot verbalize an answer, but fishes out her earlier favourites from the box.

"A magazine wanted memories," she tells me, explaining, as she pages through farming illustrations in the self-selected picture books, of a call for submissions by a seniors' publication. "I wrote them a little note. 'My father rode on the binder pulled by horses. It swiped down the long stalks of grain and bunched them up. They were dropped on the ground. My brother and I stooked them into sheaves. They looked like tiny little houses with pointed roofs.'" "You sent your work into the magazine to be published?" I clarify, and she nods. "Do your memories remind you of the content of these books?" I ask. She nods again.

### Summary and Implications

It appears that it isn't simply the aspect of supported reading through the provision of visual information that makes graphic texts appealing to Em. For her, worthwhile literary experience is a place where familiar patterns invite the reader into the text, where accessible language is apparent for enjoyment and interrogation, and where personal connections are inspired. The employment of an interest inventory that identifies potential reading topics as well as clarifies an individual's reading history may be a strategy to assist anyone working with elderly readers.

Two particular keys to literary preferences for Em involve the opportunity to engage in reader/text connections, and access to a textual form that is familiar and based on traditional textual patterns. These two characteristics serve as implications for choices related to the illustrated texts selected for seniors who may find the

illustrations supportive of comprehensive reading. While readers' advisory personnel may sort for common story grammar in texts recommended for inclusion in seniors' reading diets, it is important to consider a wide range of content and subjects, so that individuals may match personal connections on a more intimate basis.

A consideration of Radical Change theory as framing an evolution of books with respect to changing forms and formats, changing perspectives, and changing boundaries (Dresang, 1999) puts an emphasis on the textual content underpinning the reader/text transaction. As findings emerged from this case study with respect to one particular reader, we may also think of audience as an additional and changing part of the transaction equation. In addition to changing forms and formats, changing perspectives, and changing boundaries that are occurring within the body of available texts, considerations of the intergenerational potential of reading audiences may support new thinking in terms of societal structures that promote reading. Libraries and classrooms, in addition to the publishing industry, might do well to consider intergenerational reading resources as an avenue through which to support literacy.

In addition to a call for variety in resources offered to particular populations, the potential of picture books in appealing to older readers suggests the need for considering the picture book's place as a viable intergenerational reading resource. Public libraries are thus encouraged to house collections of picture books in adult areas, and promote particular picture books with aging populations, in order to encourage the continuation of literary practices into the senior years where particular textual content may be supportive to some readers. Publishers would also do well to consider the potential of crossover titles, work that appeals to a variety of age groups, and market these titles accordingly.

Further research with populations of elderly readers to further investigate their responses to picture books is suggested as a way to deepen and further generalize the results of this study. The dearth of research on this population in terms of literacy, as noted in the review of the literature, offers a provocative call for further study, and one that cannot be ignored if we view literacy as an important and ongoing aspect of human existence.

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