

SOLOMON OR SALAMI

BY HELEN R. LOWE

A native of Massachusetts and a graduate of Smith College, HELEN R. LOWE is married and is the mother of two daughters. Over the past twenty years she has worked with nearly one thousand students, of all ages, who are in academic difficulty. She thus has had an excellent opportunity to make the observations which follow.

READING is more than a skill. It is an illuminating, enlarging, and quickening experience, to which the majority of our high school and many of our college graduates are strangers. They read of their own volition hardly at all, often little beyond the newspapers, a few magazines, and an occasional best seller. Moreover, of those who reach the high school level, we are told that only 15 to 20 per cent prove, on the basis of tests and cumulative school records, to be capable of a rigorous secondary school or college preparatory program.

To learn something of the causes, the character, and the consequences of what has happened to the teaching of reading and writing let us go straight to the evidence — to the students themselves — and we shall see that many more of them than you think, more of them than you are willing to believe, do not know how to read, in any sense of the word.

The misreadings which follow were recorded objectively and accurately just as they fell from the lips of students of excellent and often superior abilities. These incredible dislocations of sound and sense are not presented for their shock value. They are errors made by tenth-, eleventh-, and twelfth-grade students, taken at random from approximately a hundred thousand similar misreadings from the first grade to the college level:

WORD USED	WORD READ
delicacy	delinquency
bivouac	bifocals
timid	diminished
groceryman	clergyman
hurricane	hammer
bos'n	cow
neurosurgeon	trapeze
phosphate	phosphorus
hydride	hydroxide
God knows	good news
antiseptic	adhesive
Oxonian	example
inert	inherent
industrial	international
imbecility	implicitly
Solomon	salami

In addition to these spectacular distortions,

most students make many less startling errors, through constant deviations in tenses and pronouns and by omissions, interpolations, paraphrases, conjectures, and complete improvisations, so that paragraph after paragraph reaches their minds garbled, blurred, altered, vitiated — and ungrammatical.

Consider the effect of this kind of reading, not merely upon the comprehension of content but upon the capacity to think at all, about anything. This is the reading, remember, of students who pass standardized reading tests. Some of these errors, indeed, were made by students who passed College Entrance Board Aptitude Tests.

No matter how admirable the program or how brilliant the teacher, in every class composed of so-called average students or those who have been identified as academically talented there will be a substantial number of students who read more or less like this. Although some improvement can now be observed in the lower elementary grades, there are thousands upon thousands of these handicapped students still to march on up to the secondary school level.

Regardless of the marks achieved in tests, these students have no conception of reading as an experience that carries them beyond themselves, lights a light that never goes out, and opens doors that never close again. They do not read. This is not to say that they are incapable of reading. What they have been taught is not reading.

I remember a sixteen-year-old boy who could not read coherently at all. I forced him into *The Caine Mutiny*, got him to blunder and stumble along with me and my impassioned comment for seven or eight weeks. One night he came in with a copy of the book which he had bought for himself and stammered, "I can't really read it by myself yet at home the way we do here, but, Mrs. Lowe, I know now that it's there."

What children know as reading is a difficult, tedious, complicated, confusing, time-consuming, uninteresting, and unserviceable exercise in visual recall, association, surmise, invention, prediction, paraphrase, substitution, and interpolation or omission at will — all blighted by an incessant

striving for speed. This uncoordinated exertion mutilates or even obliterates the meaning of the writer. Communication between mind and mind is not even glimpsed as a goal, since the reader decides, instead of discovering, what this meaning may be.

The essence of the matter is not that reading has not been taught, although indeed it has not, but rather that something has been taught which is not reading. Imposed upon the majority of the students of high school and college age today is a perverse and illogical concept of a word as a visual symbol of meaning instead of as a symbol, by grace of the letters which compose it, of the sound which conveys the meaning.

We are not dealing with the practical handicap of slow and unskillful reading but with a disabling and deforming of the learning powers of many of the brightest. This constant distortion of sense by readers at all levels, sometimes slight, sometimes so grotesque and farfetched that it must be recorded to be believed the next day, is not detected as such by standardized reading and vocabulary tests nor reflected significantly and consistently in test ratings. Although the test may give the disabled reader an appropriately low rating, the test scores give no indication of the character of the disability and fail to make it clear that there is no consistent correlation between the test rating and the student's native intelligence.

TO LEARN something about what it is that has been substituted for reading, let us look at one example. Phil is ten, a handsome, bright-faced boy, responsive but a little diffident, and just perceptibly uncertain when he begins to read. The book is an easy, lively story about a boy who went to visit his uncle in Texas and had an exciting and surprising series of adventures while learning what it takes to make a cowboy — small, medium, or large. Phil read without any hesitation, "He didn't eat quite as much supper as he usually did."

I stopped him casually to ask, "How do you spell *supper*, Phil?"

"S-u-p-p-e-r," he told me instantly. "Now, look at the word you read *supper*," I suggested. He looked intently at the word my pencil touched. "Dinner," he said. "I said *supper*, not *dinner*."

"Why did you?" I asked.

He replied, "In the story the father was home, and he wouldn't have come home for dinner, would he?"

"Do you have your dinner at night or at noon?" I inquired.

"At noon," Phil replied, with more animation now. "You see, it really was supper."

Two matters took precedence in Phil's mind over the word in the book, the word *dinner*. These were Phil's own meal schedule and his assumption

that although the story explicitly stated that the little boy's father was at home and that what he was served was dinner, Phil was not merely free but obligated to reason out, on the basis of his own experience, whether that meal was dinner or supper. He decided in favor of supper, and he read *supper*. This is called making reading full of meaning.

Once I had a second-grader read "We went into the elephant house" as "We went into the elephant cage." I pointed out that h-o-u-s-e did not spell *cage*. She looked at me with bright consideration. "Elephants don't live in houses," she informed me, to settle that.

Ten-year-old boys who read like this, adapting the text to their own experience, their own expectations, their own limitations, and their own ignorance, arrive at the secondary school level with undisciplined minds and a lot of misinformation. But these are direct consequences, which do show up in reading tests, although no light is shed upon them by the test scores. The far graver effects of this kind of reading, if it is to be called reading, are not so obvious. There is clear and abundant evidence that this dislocation of word and meaning carries over to other areas of learning. In the field of mathematics, students are handicapped not only by their inability to read problems, a sizable handicap in itself, but by the very habits of mind which induced their reading disability. They surmise where they should calculate and predict where they should reason. They pursue their studies in a bizarre kind of confusion unguessed at by those who have never explored it.

Lawrence's baffling problem is an instance in point. This boy's difficulty was with intermediate algebra, which he was repeating. The whole business of algebra was completely meaningless to this sensitive and studious boy, of good but not remarkable intelligence. His unhappy and unsuccessful efforts to make the not very difficult calculations required were, clearly, confused stabs of memory, without relevance or reason. He had industriously memorized the formulas for arithmetic and geometric progressions, but he did not know what a progression was. Lawrence did not understand what I was talking about when I tried to show him how to use reason instead of memory. He was not aware of what it was he did, what it was I wanted him to do, or of any essential difference between the two. I made up a very simple free-association test of the conventional sort, using familiar, neutral words like *house*, *cold*, *food*. I explained the various uses of such tests and the significance of the delayed response. I told him that I should not tell him my purpose in giving him the test until after he had taken it.

He was quick and responsive, as he always was with new material. He gave me a beautiful series of responses of the most obvious and stereotyped

kind to twenty-two of the twenty-five words. Three of his responses were very much delayed. He was keenly interested in these and commented, after some thought, "I was trying to think of sensible words that I liked instead of just saying the first one that came into my head." Then I could make my point — that his difficulty with algebra was rooted deep in his response to it exactly as though it were an association test. Lawrence looked at me for a long minute, then burst out, "But — but that's exactly what I've been doing in physics, and, I can see it now, in history, too! I always thought that remembering something quickly was *knowing*." Just as he had believed — just as he had been taught — that saying what was suggested by words was reading.

Lawrence passed his intermediate algebra examination.

It is of critical importance that we see the connection between the revival of the effective teaching of reading and writing and the genuine restoration of learning. A survey of the recent books and magazine articles dealing with education will disclose little awareness of the relation between the dire straits in which American education finds itself and the failure to reveal to the American student the power and glory of the word. The various proposals for the reorganization of our educational structure evidence little concern for the student, take little interest in his personal hopes or disappointments, nor do they manifest any respect for his desire to make his own choices and decisions.

Particularly misleading, although often extraordinarily plausible and exciting, are those proposals to reorganize and reanimate our educational system without candidly and clearly defining or admitting the primary purpose they will serve or indicating to whose advantage they will really operate. Most people who are working in the field of education would answer that classic, illuminating, inconvenient question, *Cui bono?* — For what purpose? For whose benefit? — with an almost emotional, probably slightly affronted, "For the benefit of the child. What else?"

Well, what else? Before we leap hurriedly onto the new bandwagon and hurtle off, according to pedagogic protocol, in several directions, we should look long and thoughtfully at the bandwagon and where it is going. We should ask, temperately but insistently, *Cui bono?*

The new bandwagon carries some odd and unpredictable characters. Many of them only two or three years ago were declaiming with imperturbable unanimity that children read more today and better than their parents ever did. Those who questioned this were characterized as reactionaries, the lunatic fringe, mysteriously motivated troublemakers, hostile to our system of public

education. Ernest O. Melby, former dean of the School of Education at New York University, recently asserted that in the field of public education the elementary schools have done the best job, the junior high schools the next best, and the high schools the poorest. How can the secondary schools conceivably do a good job teaching the warped material that comes to them from the lower schools? How teach English literature, for example, to students who read *lazy* as *snowing*, *mill bells* as *noodles*, *dish towel* as *sweater*, *attractive* as *several*, *remember* as *rabbit*, *apples* as *scissors*, and *lieutenant* as *lunatic*?

A point that must be made is that a student who reads like this reads everything like this, to a greater or lesser degree, and if he can be induced to make his errors faster, not much has really been accomplished.

The failure of the American educational system to provide the high-caliber trained manpower now suddenly become urgently necessary should not be equated with the inability of American schools to do this. A staggering number of illiterates were discovered among the men drafted during World War II, but when a man is found to be unable to read there are at least two reasonable assumptions: one, that he is incapable of learning, and the other, that he has not been taught. The assertion that only 15 to 20 per cent of the students reaching our high schools today are able to handle effectively a first-class secondary program should also be explored to see whether this 15 to 20 per cent is not actually the measure of the product rather than of the material, with many more potentially capable of learning at this level, which after all is not so very advanced.

We should not permit ourselves to be misdirected by the assumption that aptitude for learning above the elementary level is relatively rare — a flat statement astonishingly made in one of the most vigorous, forthright, and honest among the current spate of books about education in the United States. This statement cannot be disregarded simply because we do not like it. Certainly, however, as Robert Hutchins has pointed out, if no more than a small percentage of the students in our schools are educable, in the commonly accepted sense of the word, we must reconsider the implications of universal suffrage.

There have been three decades of almost imperceptible, progressive deterioration in the purposes of our system of public education. This system, unperfected, experimental, inadequate always to the tremendous problems thrust upon it by territorial expansion, immigration, industrial development, new mediums of communication and transportation, and the expanding bounds of human knowledge, nevertheless kept its sturdy wagon hitched to that bright star which shone far beyond the limits of the United States — equal opportunity, equal educational opportunity for

everyone. Now, the fact that we did not follow our star all the way to our high goal discredits neither us nor the star.

We believed in the human mind, we believed in it passionately, and we believed in it practically. We believed that a nation which developed all its intellectual resources, the mind in every man, would inevitably be greater than a country which developed the abilities of a selected few. We were not so unrealistic as to believe, in spite of the noble words of the Declaration, that all men were born with equal intelligence. We did hold fast down through the years to our clear purpose of guaranteeing, to the best of our ability, to everyone who wished it, the opportunity to learn. No matter how many mistakes we made, how much we left undone, the common understanding of the common man was that schooling

was inalienably his and that his opportunity to take advantage of this would be impeded only by his circumstances and his personal limitations, never by the decision of the school itself. Equal opportunity neither promises nor produces equal achievement, and who on earth ever thought it did?

Today, to work out practical plans to afford such equality of opportunity is of incalculable difficulty; the solution, however, within the framework of the American idea, cannot be to bypass the problem by classifying the average student as an uneducable dullard and assigning him by electronic decision to his proper station in life and learning in these United States. We cannot leave him to surmise, "All opportunities are equal, but some opportunities are more equal than others."

Without reading, there is no opportunity.

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Helen R. Lowe

Comments on "Solomon or Salami" by M. J. Van Wagenen.

This article, by Helen R. Lowe, who has for many years concerned herself with preventing and retrieving educational casualties and with redirecting bright students who have not responded to or have been confused or retarded by classroom instruction, was not written to prove a theory by statistical evidence.

It undertakes to give the educated layman a clear impression of the actual results of present day reading instruction in our schools. The conclusions drawn and presented in this article were based upon the study of thousands of misreadings written down or taped precisely as they were made by hundreds of students over a wide range of subjects and grades, often over considerable periods of time.

These errors were carefully analyzed and classified according to their significance. Only a clinical study can assemble data of this kind and interpret such material simply and understandably in terms comfortably understood by the layman. Misreadings of this kind can not be detected and collected by standardized group tests, nor can they be analyzed in the same way as distributions of actual measurements. It is upon a penetrating analysis of individual errors that Mrs. Lowe's article is based.

In "Solomon or Salami" she has attempted to illuminate the plight of the countless stu-

dents of excellent native abilities whose learning is inhibited and whose intelligence is not merely unstimulated but damaged, because in addition to being unable to read they have had imposed upon them a perverse and stunted idea of what reading really is.

The so-called reading of the disabled readers is largely meaningless and without interest; their reading vocabularies are very limited in range, their speaking vocabularies childish, commonplace and confused. Their ability to score on mental tests has become so seriously restricted by their low level of reading vocabulary that above the fifth grade it is difficult to distinguish a reading problem case bright pupil from a mentally dull one. These children are mentally retarded in an exact sense of the word, but they are not dull. They are mentally as well as educationally handicapped by their reading disability, and they are demonstrably rendered vulnerable to emotional disturbances, so often related to delinquency. Many of these children are as seriously handicapped mentally as poliomyelitis paralytic children are handicapped physically.

It is with the cause and the nature of this grave damage that the foregoing article concerns itself. To return to a realistic and intelligent type of reading instruction will require many changes, some unwelcome, many practically very difficult, all demanding competent, honest, and uncompromising thinking but it is not to be believed that we shall not see leaders emerge to do the job.