

Chapter I

A LETTER TO JOHNNY'S MOTHER

Dear Mary:

I have decided to start this book with a letter to you. You know that the idea came to me when I offered to help John, with his reading. It's really his book — or yours. So the only proper way to start it is with the words “Dear Mary.”

You remember when I began to work with Johnny half a year ago. That was when he was twelve and they put him back into sixth grade because he was unable to read and couldn't possibly keep up with the work in junior high. So I told you that I knew of a way to teach reading that was altogether different from what they do in schools or in remedial reading courses or anywhere else. Well, you trusted me, and you know what has happened since. Today Johnny can read — not perfectly, to be sure, but anyone can see that in a few more months he will have caught up with other boys of his age. And he is happy again: You and I and everyone else can see that he is a changed person.

I think Johnny will go to college. He has a very good mind, as you know, and I don't see why he shouldn't become a doctor or a lawyer or an engineer. There is a lot in Johnny that has never come to the surface because of this reading trouble.

Since I started to work with Johnny, I have looked into this whole reading business. I worked my way through a mountain of books and articles on the subject, I talked to dozens of people, and I spent many hours in classrooms, watching what was going on.

What I found is absolutely fantastic. The teaching of reading — all over the United States, in all the schools, in all the textbooks — is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense. Johnny couldn't read until half a year ago for the simple reason that nobody ever showed him how. Johnny's only problem was that he was unfortunately exposed to an ordinary American school.

You know that I was born and raised in Austria. Do you know that there are no remedial reading cases in Austrian schools? Do you know that there are no remedial reading cases in Germany, in France, in Italy, in Norway, in Spain — practically anywhere in the world except in the United States? Do you know that there was no such thing as remedial reading in this country either until about thirty years ago? Do you know that the teaching of reading never was a problem anywhere in the world until the United States switched to the present method around about 1925?

This sounds incredible, but it is true. One of the articles on reading that I found was by a Dr. Ralph C. Preston, of the University of Pennsylvania, who reported on his experiences on a trip through Western Germany in the April, 1953, *Elementary School Journal*. Dr. Preston visited a number of classrooms in Hamburg and Munich. “After the experience of hearing these German children read aloud,” he says, “I began to attach some credence to a generally expressed opinion of German teachers that before the end of Grade 2 almost any child can read orally (without regard to degree of comprehension) almost anything in print!”

Of course, Dr. Preston, being an American educator, didn't draw the obvious conclusion from what he saw. The explanation is simply that the method used over there works, and the

method used in our schools does not. We too could have perfect readers in all schools at the end of second grade if we taught our children by the system used in Germany.

Now, what is this system? It's very simple. Reading means getting meaning from certain combinations of letters. Teach the child what each letter stands for and he can read.

Ah no, you say, it can't be that simple. But it is. Let me give you an illustration.

I don't know whether you know any shorthand. Let's suppose you don't. Let's suppose you decide to learn how to read English shorthand.

Right away you say that nobody learns how to *read* shorthand. People who want to know shorthand learn how to *write* it; the reading of it comes by the way.

Exactly. That's why shorthand is such a good illustration of this whole thing. It's just a system of getting words on paper. Ordinary writing is another such system. Morse code is a third. Braille is a fourth. And so it goes. There are all sorts of systems of translating spoken words into a series of symbols so that they can be written down and read back.

Now the way to learn any such system is to learn to write and to read it at the same time. And how do you do that? The obvious answer is, By tacking up one symbol after another and learning how to write it and how to recognize it. Once you are through the whole list of symbols, you can read and write; the rest is simply practice — learning to do it more and more automatically.

Since the dawn of time people have learned mechanical means of communication in this way — smoke signals and drums in the jungle and flag language and I don't know what all. You take up one item after another, learn what it stands for, learn how to reproduce it and how to recognize it, and there you are.

Shorthand, as I said, is an excellent example. I don't know any English shorthand myself, but I went to a library and looked up the most widely used manual of the Gregg system, the *Functional Method* by L. A. Leslie. Sure enough, it tells you about the symbols one after the other, starting out with the loop that stands for the long *a* in *ache*, *make*, and *cake*. After a few lessons, you are supposed to know the shape of all the shorthand “letters,” and from there on it's just a matter of practice and picking up speed.

Our system of writing — the alphabet — was invented by the Egyptians and the Phoenicians somewhere around 1500 b.c. Before the invention of the alphabet there was only picture writing — a picture of an ox meant “ox,” a picture of a house meant “house,” and so on. (The Chinese to this day have a system of writing with symbols that stand for whole words.) As soon as people had an alphabet, the job of reading and writing was tremendously simplified. Before that, you had to have a symbol for every word in the language - 10,000, 20,000 or whatever the vocabulary range was. Now, with the alphabet, all you had to learn was the letters. Each letter stood for a certain sound, and that was that. To write a word — any word — all you had to do was break it down into its sounds and put the corresponding letters on paper.

So, ever since 1500 b.c. people all over the world — wherever an alphabetic system of writing was used — learned how to read and write by the simple process of memorizing the sound of each letter in the alphabet. When a schoolboy in ancient Rome learned to read, he didn't learn that the written word *mensa* meant a table, that is, a certain piece of furniture with a flat top and legs. Instead, he began by learning that the letter *m* stands for the sound you make when you put your lips together, that *e* means the sound that comes out when you open your mouth about halfway, that *n* is like *m* but with the lips open and the teeth together, that *s* has a hissing sound, and that *a* means the sound made by opening your mouth wide.

Therefore, when he saw the written word *mensa* for the first time, he could read it right off and learn, with a feeling of happy discovery, that this collection of letters meant a table. Not only that, he could also write the word down from dictation without ever having seen it before. And not only *that*, he could do this with practically every word in the language.

This is not miraculous, it's the only natural system of learning how to read. As I said, the ancient Egyptians learned that way, and the Greeks and the Romans, and the French and the Germans, and the Dutch and the Portuguese, and the Turks and the Bulgarians and the Estonians and the Icelanders and the Abyssinians — every single nation throughout history that used an alphabetic system of writing.

Except, as I said before, twentieth-century Americans — and other nations in so far as they have followed our example. And what do we use instead? Why, the only other possible system of course — the system that was in use before the invention of the alphabet in 1500 b.c. We have decided to forget that we write with letters and learn to read English as if it were Chinese. One word after another after another after another. If we want to read materials with a vocabulary of 10,000 words, then we have to memorize 10,000 words; if we want to go to the 20,000 word range, we have to learn, one by one, 20,000 words; and so on. We have thrown 3,500 years of civilization out the window and have gone back to the Age of Hammurabi.

You don't believe me? I assure you what I am saying is literally true. Go to your school tomorrow morning — or if John has brought home one of his readers, look at it. You will immediately see that all the words in it are learned by endless repetition. Not a sign anywhere that letters correspond to sounds and that words can be worked out by pronouncing the letters. No. The child is told what each word means and then they are mechanically, brutally hammered into his brain. Like this:

All the reading books used in all our schools, up through fourth and fifth and sixth grade, are collections of stuff like that. Our children learn the word *sot* by reading over and over again about a duck or a pig or a goat that sot and sot and sot. And so with every word in the language.

“We will look,” said Susan.
“Yes, yes,” said all the children.
“We will look and find it?”
So all the boys and girls looked.
They looked and looked for it.
But they did not find it.

Or this:

“Quark, quark,” said the duck.
He wanted something.
He did not want to get out.
He did not want to go to the farm
He did not want to eat.
He sat and sat and sat.

All the reading books used in all our schools, up through fourth and fifth and sixth grade, are collections of stuff like that. Our children learn the word *sat* by reading over and over

again about a duck or a pig or a goat that sat and sat and sat. And so with every word in the language.

Every word in the language! You know what that means? It means that if you teach reading by this system, you can't use ordinary reading matter for practice. Instead, all children for three, four, five, six years have to work their way up through a battery of carefully designed readers, each one containing all the words used in the previous one plus a strictly limited number of new ones, used with the exactly "right" amount of repetition. Our children don't read Andersen's *Fairy Tales* any more or *The Arabian Nights* or Mark Twain or Louisa May Alcott or the Mary Poppins books or the Dr. Doolittle books or *anything* interesting and worth white, *because they can't*. It so happens that the writers of these classic children's books wrote without being aware of our Chinese system of teaching reading. So *Little Women* contains words like *grieving* and *serene*, and *Tom Sawyer* has *ague* and *inwardly*, and Bulfinch's *Age of Fable* has *nymph* and *deity* and *incantations*. If a child that has gone to any of our schools faces the word *nymph* for the first time, he is absolutely helpless because nobody has ever told him how to sound out *n* and *y* and *m* and *ph* and read the word off the page.

So what does he get instead? He gets those series of horrible, stupid, emasculated, pointless, tasteless little readers, the stuff and guff about Dick and Jane or Alice and Jerry visiting the farm and having birthday parties and seeing animals in the zoo and going through dozens and dozens of totally unexciting middle-class, middle-income, middle-I.Q. children's activities that offer opportunities for reading "Look, look" or «Yes, yes" or «Come, come" or «See the funny, funny animal.» During the past half year I read a good deal of this material and I don't wish that experience on anyone.

Who writes these books? Let me explain this to you in detail, because there is the nub of the whole problem.

There are one or two dozen textbook houses in America. By far the more lucrative part of their business is the publication of readers for elementary schools. There are millions of dollars of profit in these little books. Naturally, the competition is tremendous. So is the investment; so is the sales effort; so is the effort that goes into writing, editing, and illustrating these books.

Now, with our Chinese word-learning system you can't produce a series of readers by printing nice, interesting collections of stuff children of a certain age might like to read. Oh no. Every single story, every single sentence that goes into these books has to be carefully prepared and carefully checked to make sure that each word is one of the 637 that the poor child is supposed to have memorized up to that point—or if it's the 638th word, that it appears in just the right context for optimum guesswork and is then repeated seventeen times at carefully worked-out intervals.

Naturally, the stupendous and frighteningly idiotic work of concocting this stuff can only be done by tireless teamwork of many educational drudges. But if the textbook house put only the drudges on the title page, that wouldn't look impressive enough to beat the competition. So there has to be a "senior author" — someone with a national reputation who teaches how to teach reading at one of the major universities.

And that's why each and every one of the so-called authorities in this field is tied up with a series of readers based on the Chinese word-learning method. As long as you used that method, you have to buy some \$30 worth per child of Dr. So-and-so's readers; as soon as you switch to the common-sense method of teaching the sounds of the letters, you can give

them a little primer and then proceed immediately to anything from the *Reader's Digest* to *Treasure Island*.

I have personally met some of the leading authorities in the field of reading. They are all very nice ladies and gentlemen, and obviously sincere and well meaning. But they *are* firmly committed to the application of the word method, and it would be inhuman to expect from them an objective point of view.

Consequently it's utterly impossible to find anyone inside the official family of the educators saying anything even slightly favorable to the natural method of teaching reading. Mention the alphabetic method or phonetics or "phonics" and you immediately arouse derision, furious hostility, or icy silence.

For instance, in the May 1952 *Catholic Educator*, Monsignor Clarence E. Elwell published an article "Reading: The Alphabet and Phonics." Monsignor Elwell is Superintendent of Schools of the Diocese of Cleveland and knows what he is talking about. He says: "In a language based on an alphabetic (that is, phonetic) method of coding the spoken word, the only sensible way to teach how to decode the written symbols is (1) by *teaching the phonetic code*, that is, the alphabet, and (2) the manner of coding — letter by letter, left to right. It is as nonsensical to use a whole word method for beginning reading as it would be to teach the Morse code on a whole word basis.... A child who has been taught the code and how to use it ... gains a confident habit in attacking words. Instead of guessing when he comes to a new word, as he did when taught by the sight word method, he now works through a word and to the surprise of the teachers usually comes up with the right answer.... After four years' experiment with the introduction of a strong program of phonics at the very beginning of grade one, the experimenter finds teachers convinced and children apparently happier in their success."

What do you think happened when Monsignor Elwell said publicly that our whole system of teaching reading is nonsense? Absolutely nothing. So far as I know, none of the reading "experts" has paid the slightest attention to the Cleveland experiment.

Or take the case of the late Dr. Leonard Bloomfield, professor of linguistics at Yale. Dr. Bloomfield wasn't just any scholar in the field of language; he was universally recognized as the greatest American linguist of modern times. His masterpiece was a book simply called *Language*, published in 1933.

In the last few pages of that book, Bloomfield dealt with the teaching of English and reading in our schools. "Our schools," he wrote, "are utterly benighted in linguistic matters.... Nothing could be more discouraging than to read our "educationalists" treatises on methods of teaching children to read. The size of this book does not permit a discussion of their varieties of confusion on this subject."

Several years later, Bloomfield took time out to prepare an alphabetic-phonetic primer, based on strictly scientific principles. It was an excellent piece of work, carefully designed to teach children quickly and painlessly. After Bloomfield's death in 1949 his literary executor offered the manuscript to every single elementary textbook publisher in the United States. Not one of them considered it. As I am writing, the book is still unpublished.

(The primer was published in 1961 : Leonard Bloomfield (1887-1949), Clarence Lewis Barnhart, *Let's Read, A Linguistic Approach*, Wayne State University Press, 1 juin 1961 - 465 pages).

The introduction to this Bloomfield primer was, however, published as an article in the *Elementary English Review* in April and May, 1942. I ran across that article eight or ten years ago and that's what started me on this whole business. Taking the ideas of that article and

applying them in homemade fashion, I taught my eldest daughter Anne to read when she was five years old. Well, you know Anne: she's ten now and reads anything and everything, all the time. Here is what Bloomfield told the country's elementary English teachers twelve years ago: "The most serious drawback of all the English reading instruction known to me ... is the drawback of the word-method.... The child who fails to grasp the content of what he reads is usually a poor reader in the mechanical sense.... If you want to play the piano with feeling and expression, you must master the keyboard and learn to use your fingers on it. The chief source of difficulty in getting the content of reading is imperfect mastery of the mechanics of reading.... We must train the child to respond vocally to the sight of letters...."

And what did the teachers and reading experts do after the greatest scientist in the field had explained to them their mistake? Absolutely nothing. Except that several years later, in 1948, Dr. William S. Gray, of the University of Chicago, published a book, *On Their Own in Reading*. There, in the first chapter, was a lengthy quotation from Bloomfield's paper, followed by this statement: "The recent trend toward ... the old alphabetic or phonic methods is viewed with alarm by educators...."

The most conspicuous example of this deadly warfare between the entrenched "experts" and the advocates of common sense in reading is the reception of the primer *Reading With Phonics* by Hay and Wingo, published by the J. B. Lippincott Company. By some miracle, this textbook company decided to jump into the fray and publish the Hay-Wingo book, the only primer on the market today that is based firmly on the alphabetic-phonetic principle. Well, the book was duly reviewed in *Elementary English* magazine by Dr. Celia B. Stendler of the University of Illinois. I quote: "*Reading With Phonics* does not fit the modern conception of the place of phonics in a reading program.... One wonders at the naiveté of the authors.... One wonders, too, whether the authors have ever had the thrill of seeing a group of children learn to read by the use of modern methods. The zest with which these children approach reading and the zeal with which they read will almost certainly be lost if we turn the clock back twenty years with *Reading With Phonics*." (This from someone who is all for turning the clock back 3,500 years!)

I'll have more to say later in this book about the Hay-Wingo primer which produces first-graders reading news items from the daily paper — and about the zest and zeal with which our children read:

Jack ran out to see the truck.
It was red and it was big—
very, very big.
It had come to take Jack
far away to his new home—
far away to his new home
on a big farm.

In doing research for this book, I ran into exactly the same kind of hostility. I wrote a letter to the National Council of Teachers of English, asking for information on the phonetic method of teaching reading. I got a brief reply, referring me to Dr. Paul Witty of Northwestern University (one of the top word-method people) and to a pamphlet "What About Phonics?" by Dr. Alvina Treut Burrows of New York University, which turned out to be violently anti-phonics. I also wrote the U.S. Office of Education. That time I got a

somewhat longer reply, referring me to Dr. Edward W. Dolch of the University of Illinois (another well-known word-method man) and to the same biased pamphlet by Dr. Burrows.

At a later stage in my research I found an excellent paper by a Dr. Agnew who had compared the results of teaching reading in the schools of Durham and Raleigh, North Carolina. The monograph was published in 1939, at which time the schools in Durham produced splendid results by teaching phonics. So I wrote to the Superintendent of Schools in Durham, asking for information. The answer was that the teaching of phonics there had been discontinued seven years ago.

Then I ran across a book by the Italian educator Dr. Maria Montessori, published way back in 1912. Dr. Montessori, who was a world-famous progressive kindergarten teacher, taught her little Italian four-year-olds (!) the shapes and sounds of the letters of the alphabet and had them reading within weeks. I found that there was a Child Education Foundation in New York City carrying on Dr. Montessori work. I wrote to them, asking about their method of teaching reading. The answer came back: "For a number of years we have found other methods to be more effective, so have not used Montessori."

Now that I have gone through dozens and dozens of books on reading, I know how well it all fits together. The primers and readers are keyed to the textbooks on how to teach reading, and the textbooks are all carefully written so that every teacher in the land is shielded from any information about how to teach children anything about letters and sounds.

It's a foolproof system all right. Every grade-school teacher in the country has to go to a teachers' college or school of education; every teachers' college gives at least one course on how to teach reading; every course on how to teach reading is based on a textbook; every one of those textbooks is written by one of the high priests of the word method. In the old days it was impossible to keep a good teacher from following her own common sense and practical knowledge; today the phonetic system of teaching reading is kept out of our schools as effectively as if we had a dictatorship with an all-powerful Ministry of Education.

And how do you convince thousands of intelligent young women that black is white and that reading has nothing to do with letters and sounds? Simple. Like this:

First, you announce loudly and with full conviction that our method of writing English is *not* based on pronunciation. Impossible, you say? Everybody knows that all alphabetic systems are phonetic? Oh no. I quote from page 297 of *Reading and the Educative Process* by Dr. Paul Witty of Northwestern University: "English is essentially an unphonetic language."

This is so ridiculous that it should be possible to just laugh about it and forget it. But the reading "experts" have created so much confusion that it's necessary to refute this nonsense. Well then: *All* alphabetic systems are phonetic; the two words mean the same thing. The only trouble is that English is a little more irregular than other language. How much more has been established by three or four independent researchers. They all came up with the same figure. About 13 per cent of all English words are partly irregular in their spelling. The other 87 per cent follow fixed rules. Even the 13 per cent are not "unphonetic," as Dr. Witty calls it, but usually contain just one irregularly spelled vowel: *done* is pronounced "dun," *one* is pronounced "wun," *are* is pronounced "ar," and so on.

So our English system of writing is *of course* phonetic, but has a few more exceptions to the rules than other languages.

The next step in this great structure of nonsense and confusion is careful avoidance of the teaching of the letters:

“Current practice in the teaching of reading does not require a knowledge of the letters,” says Dr. Donald D. Durrell of Boston University. “In remedial work, such knowledge is helpful.”

“The skillful teacher will be reluctant to use any phonetic method with all children,” says Dr. Witty.

“The child should be allowed to ‘typewrite’ only after he has a certain degree of ability in reading,” says Dr. Guy L. Bond of the University of Minnesota “Otherwise he is apt to become too conscious of the letter-by-letter elements of words.”

And Dr. Roma Garas of Teachers College, Columbia University, tells us simply and starkly: “In recent years phonetic analysis of words at any level of the reading program fell into disrepute.”

If they had their way, our teachers would *never* tell the children that there are letters and that each letter represents a sound. However, that isn't quite possible for the simple reason that a good many children are bright enough to find this out for themselves. So, if systematic phonetics or phonics from the outset is taboo, there has to be some sort of an answer when a child in second or third grade begins to notice that the first letter in *cat* is different from the first letter in *sat*. This is called “phonetic analysis” and — lo and behold, — it does get mentioned in the textbooks. For instance, if you turn to the index in *Learning to Read: a Handbook for Teachers* by Carter and McGinnis of the Psycho-Educational Clinic of the Western Michigan College of Education, you will find *one* lonely page reference to “phonetic analysis.” Turning back to that page, you will learn that phonetic analysis “grows out of the fact that words are made up of letters or letter combinations that have known sounds. Phonetic analysis, then, is the process of associating the appropriate sounds with the printed forms. At this stage of development [third and fourth grade] emphasis should be placed upon beginning consonant sounds.”

Otherwise, phonics is usually discussed in this literature as something that stupid and ignorant parents are apt to bring up. Yes, I am not joking: Our teachers are carefully coached in what to answer parents who complain about the abandonment of phonics.

For instance, let me quote from an “official” pamphlet on *Teaching Reading* by Dr. Arthur L. Gates (of Teachers College, Columbia University) published by the National Education Association. “When a mother storms to the school,” writes Dr. Gates, “to protest delaying the starting of the child to read or what she imagines is the failure to teach good old phonics, it is likely that things have already happened in the home which are having a disadvantageous — indeed, sometimes a disastrous — influence on the pupil's efforts to learn. Had the mother understood the school's policy, provided it is a good one, the home life might have been organized in such a way as to assist the pupil greatly.” In other words, if a parent complains that you don't teach her child the sounds of the letters, tell her the child can't read because she has made his home life unhappy.

That's what you get on the subject of phonetics in our literature on the teaching of reading. And what do the books contain instead? With what do they fill all those fat volumes with hundreds of pages if they don't mention the letters and sounds of the alphabet? Very simple: Those books are not about reading at all but about word guessing.

Because, you see, if a child isn't taught the sounds of the letters, then he has absolutely nothing to go by when he tries to read a word. All he can do is guess.

Suppose a child tries to read the sentence “I saw a kangaroo.” Suppose he has never seen the word *kangaroo* before. If he has been trained in phonics, he simply “sounds out” the *k*, the *a*,

the *ng*, the *a*, the *r*, and the *oo*, and reads “kangaroo” as easy as pie. (“Ah, kangaroo!” he says. Of course he has known the meaning of the word for years.) But if he has no training in phonics, if the meaning of the letters has been carefully hidden from him, he can only guess. How can he guess? Well, the educators say, he can guess from context. With the sentence “I saw a kangaroo” that is extremely difficult, however, because it could just as easily mean “I saw a giraffe” or “I saw a flea” or “I saw a piano.” So, the next best thing, the child looks at the top of the page to see whether there is a picture. Usually in those factory-produced readers, when an animal is mentioned there is a picture of it somewhere on the page, so ten to one he’ll find that the word means “kangaroo.” And what if there isn’t any picture? Well, then he has to rely on the sound of the first letter *k* if he knows *that* — or the length of the word — or its general shape — or just sheer luck. He might guess “kangaroo” or he might guess “plomber” or he might guess “forget-me-rot” or — most likely — he might just sit there with a vacant look, waiting for the teacher to tell him what the word is. He knows very well she’ll tell him eventually. Learning to read, he knows, is guessing or waiting until you are told what the word means.

You think I exaggerate? On the contrary: I am describing exactly what I saw in one classroom after another and what is detailed endlessly in all the textbooks on how to teach reading. Lister to them:

“Little is gained by teaching the child his sounds and letters as a first step to reading. More rapid results are generally obtained by the direct method of simply showing the word to the child and telling him what it is.” (Irving H. Anderson and Walter F. Dearborn, *The Psychology of Teaching Reading*. Anderson is at the University of Michigan, Dearborn is a professor emeritus of Harvard.)

“The simplest solution when a child does not know a word is to *tell him what it says*.” (*Teaching Primary Reading* by Professor Edward A. Dolch, University of Illinois. The triumphant italics are by Dr. Dolch)

«If the word is *daddy*, the pupil may give the word *father*, or *papa*, or *man*, since the basal meaning is the same. If the word is the noun *drink*, the pupil may say *water* or *milk* or some other fluid. Similarly, words related to a common situation or to a general topic, such as *cow*, *horse*, *pig*, *sheep*, *chicken*, are likely to be mistaken for each other.

“Errors of this type are frequently regarded as evidence of carelessness on the part of the pupil. In some instances he may be reprimanded for having made a “wild guess,” when in fact, from the point of view of meaning the guess is not at all wild. In the early stages of learning to read frequent errors of this type are to be expected. They are ... evidence of keen use of the device of guessing words from context.” (Professor Arthur I. Gates, *The Improvement of Reading*, pp. 184-185. This is generally considered the most authoritative text of them all.)

And finally, here is a perfect summary of the situation from *Teaching the Child to Read* by Bond and Wagner. Professor Guv L. Bond is at the University of Minnesota.

The usual first unit of reading material is short and simple, rarely running more than four or five pages and introducing but few words. It is concerned with the common experiences of boys and girls of first-grade age whose activities are to be followed throughout the first year. Usually the boy and girl are introduced and some little story or incident told about them, mainly through the pictures with but little reading material. The pictures in the initial unit carry the story, and the words are so closely allied to the picture story that they usually can be guessed by the children. The teacher's major tasks during this time are to introduce the words in a meaningful fashion so that the children have contextual clues to aid them in “guessing” the word and to give repetition of the words so that those words may become the

nucleus of a sight vocabulary. The words should be recognized as whole words. It is detrimental indeed to have the children spell or sound out the words at this stage.

Most of the modern readers have carefully worked out vocabulary controls so that the child will not encounter many new words in comparison to the number of words he actually reads. In various ways, which have been mentioned, the child is prepared for reading those words. In fact, he has been either given the name of the word or has been led to recognize the word before he meets it in his purposeful reading activity. When, however, he does have trouble with a word, that difficulty should not be focused upon as a difficulty. The teacher should at this stage tell him the word or lead him to guess it from the context.

What does all this add up to? It means simply and clearly that according to our accepted system of instruction, reading isn't taught at all. Books are put in front of the children and they are told to guess at the words or wait until Teacher tells them. But they are *not* taught to read — if by reading you mean what the dictionary says it means, namely, “get the meaning of writing or printing.”

Now you say that all this applies only to first grade. Not at all. If you think that after this preparatory guessing game reading begins in earnest in second grade, or in third, or in fourth, you are mistaken. Reading *never* starts. The guessing goes on and on and on, through grade school, through high school, through college, through life. It's all they'll ever know. They'll never really learn to read.

When I started to work with Johnny, I didn't quite realize all this. In my innocence, I gave him what I thought was an easy word for a twelve-year-old: *kid*. He stared at it for quite some time, then finally said “kind.” I tell you, it staggered me. Nobody born and raised on the continent of Europe can easily grasp the fact that *anyone* can mistake *kid* for *kind*.

Later on, when I had done a good deal of phonics work with Johnny, I gave him, as an exercise, the word *razzing*. He hesitated, then read it as *realizing*. I said, “Don't guess, Johnny.” I don't know how many hundreds of times I must have said to him, “Don't guess, Johnny.” To my mind, a remedial reading case is someone who has formed the habit of guessing instead of reading.

You see, remedial reading cases are harder to teach than first-graders for the simple reason that they already have four or five or six years of guessing behind them. It usually takes at least a year to cure them of the habit. There wouldn't *be* any remedial reading cases if we started teaching reading instead of guessing in first grade. (Did I say this before? Forgive me. I have fallen into the habit of telling people the simple facts about reading over and over again. It seems to be the only way.)

And how do the educators explain all the thousands and thousands of remedial reading cases? This is what really got me mad. To them, failure in reading is *never* caused by poor teaching. Lord no, perish the thought. Reading failure is due to poor eyesight, or a nervous stomach, or poor posture, or heredity, or a broken home, or undernourishment, or a wicked stepmother, or an Oedipus complex, or sibling rivalry, or God knows what. The teacher or the school are never at fault. As to the textbook or the method taught to the teacher at her teachers' college — well, that idea has never yet entered the mind of anyone in the world of education.

In the book *How to Increase Reading Ability* by Professor Albert J. Harris of Queens College, New York City, there are long descriptions of remedial reading cases with all sorts of supposed causes and reasons — except the fact that Jimmie “confused *m* and *n*, *u* and *v*, *b* and *d*, *p* and *q*, *k* and *f*, and *y* and *w*,” and Bruce “was unfamiliar with all of the short vowel

sounds and with some consonant sounds." Fortunately Dr. Harris hit upon a phonics book, the Hegge-Kirk *Remedial Reading Drills*, and that was enough in most cases to bring those unhappy children up to par in their reading. (The Hegge-Kirk drills are what I finally used with Johnny. I'll come back to that book later on.)

There are also detailed case descriptions in *The Improvement of Reading* by Dr. Arthur L. Gates, the widely used text that I mentioned before. For instance, he tells about a ten-year-old girl who "often confused the sounds of *m* with *n* and had difficulty sounding the letter *y*. She also confused *l* with *i*." A seven-year-old boy, in a "test of ability to give sounds for individual letters, did not know the following: *f, d, z, r, m, l, q, u, w, h, n,* and *v*." An eight-year-old girl, "in a test where she was asked to give the sounds for individual letters, missed the following: *e, x, z, q,* and *g*."

And how do. Dr. Gates account for all this? He obliges us by giving each of his cases a simple explanatory label. The first of the cases is labeled

Good Intellect, Poor Reading Techniques; Sibling Rival, a Causal Factor.

The second case is headed

Reading Difficulties Resulting From Parental Interference.

The third is a case of

Poor Reading Resulting Largely From Parental Anxiety and Family Conflicts.

Dr. Gates, in contrast to Dr. Harris, didn't give his remedial cases phonics and consequently didn't help them; apparently he just gave the parents a good bawling out and let it go at that.

Most educators, however, don't go quite as far as that. They do use phonics in remedial cases — in dribs and drabs, testily, and rather furtively. Ordinary children, they say, shouldn't be deprived of the privilege of guessing words; but those poor unfortunate ones who didn't catch on to the guessing game — well, let's teach them the sounds of the letters as a last resort, purely as an emergency measure. (Remember the dictum by Dr. Durrell: "Current practice in the teaching of reading does not require a knowledge of the letters. In remedial work, such knowledge is helpful") And so you find phonics discussed, if at all, tucked away in a section dealing with remedial reading with a careful explanation that this rather nasty medicine shouldn't be given to nice, average children who can guess the few hundred words contained in the "basal series."

The irony is that phonics is also recognized when it comes to the children *above* average — those that somehow learn to read properly and effectively *in spite of the way they were taught*. Those boys and girls, the reading experts tell us, have unusual phonic ability — which means that they managed to figure out by themselves which letter stands for which sound. Of course, you can't really read at all if you don't know that; but for our reading teachers it's a miraculous achievement, only to be explained by special gifts and extraordinary graces.

Not long ago, in January, 1954, Dr. Ruth Strang of Teachers College, Columbia University, published an article on the "Reading Development of Gifted Children" in *Elementary English*. "It may be," she wrote, "that the phonetic approach is more appropriate for the quick-learning than for the slow-learning and because of the former's greater analytical ability." (How she reconciled this observation with the fact that phonic methods are the only thing that works with retarded children I don't know.)

The article was based on statements by gifted boys and girls in junior high school. Here are some of them:

“How did I learn to read? First my grandmother taught me, then I caught on to certain words and got accustomed to sounding out words.”

“By very small words and sentences. Also by syllables and the letter's sound.”

“In first grade the teacher was dismissed for teaching phonetics, but I think phonetics has helped me very much in sounding out new words.”

It seems clear to me that those bright twelve- and thirteen-year-olds know more about reading than all the faculties, students, and alumni of all of our teachers' colleges and schools of education taken together. And I *don't* think that those children are a bit more gifted than your John. They were just luckier. Just lucky enough to find out in time that learning to read means learning to sound out words.