

# Ending All Literacy Crises

Stephen Krashen presents some very good news about children's literature, some very bad news about access to books, and a solution to end all literacy crises

## A Golden Age

This is a strange time for children's literature, with powerful positive and powerful negative forces at work. One strong positive force is the obvious fact that we are living in a Golden Age of children's and adolescent literature.

In fact, children's and adolescents' books are so good these days that they cross-over; adults read them too. I agree with most people and think that the Harry Potter series is wonderful. It has provided me with a genuine role model, a person after whom I have decided to model my entire career, Gildaroy Lockheart. And in *The Order of the Phoenix*, Rowling has demonstrated her keen understanding of the field of education with her character Dolores Umbridge. Ms. Umbridge, I am told, is a leading candidate to be appointed to the next vacancy on the California Board of Education.

We can all produce evidence that adults like current children's and adolescent literature. I was visiting my son a few years ago when he was a graduate student at the University of Texas. He reads Kant and Shakespeare for pleasure. I was reading *Animorphs*. I left my copy of *Animorphs* number one in his apartment. He not only read it, he read the next five, and bought extra copies of number one to give to friends who had children who might enjoy it.

Here's another one: Ying Chang Compestine's *Revolution* is not a *Dinner Party* aimed at young adults, but is a compelling reading for anyone.

## Young People Like to Read

More good news: Contrary to what you read in the newspapers, as a group, children and teenagers like to read, are reading a lot, and are not reading any worse than previous generations, which is undoubtedly influenced by the phenomenally high quality of literature available (Krashen, 2001, 2008; Krashen and Von Sprecken, 2002).<sup>1</sup>

## Home-Run Books

I have even more good news: It appears to be easy to get children interested in reading, and the best way is the most obvious: Exposure to good books. Jim Trelease has done a heroic job informing the public about reading aloud to children (Trelease, 2006).<sup>2</sup>

Trelease has also suggested that one very positive reading experience can create a reader, one "home run" book experience (Trelease,

2006). My colleagues and I have confirmed that Trelease's idea was right: We found that more than half of the middle school children we interviewed agreed that there was one book that got them excited about reading (Von Sprecken and Krashen, 2000; Von Sprecken, Kim, and Krashen, 2000; Ujije and Krashen, 2002).<sup>3</sup>

## More Reading Ergo More Literacy

And finally, the rest of the good news: We know that the more children read, the better their literacy development. There is now overwhelming research showing that free voluntary reading is the primary source of our reading ability, our writing style, much of our vocabulary and spelling knowledge, and our ability to handle complex grammatical constructions. It has also been confirmed that those who read more know more: They know more about history, literature, and even have more "practical knowledge" (research reviewed in Krashen, 2004).

Research tells us that better libraries mean higher reading scores (see McQuillan, 1998, and studies reviewed in Krashen, 2004) and Keith Curry Lance has provided evidence confirming the positive impact of school library quality and library staffing on reading achievement (Lance, 1994; for easy access to the many Lance studies, see <http://www.davidvl.org/research.html>).

## Poverty and Access to Books

But there are negative forces. One is the fact that today's excellent literature is not available to everybody. Several studies show that children of poverty have little access to books at home, in their community, and at school.

Children of poverty have far less access to bookstores: Smith, Constantino and Krashen (1996) reported that the average child they interviewed in Beverly Hills could walk to five bookstores; the average child in Watts could only walk to one. Neuman and Celano (2001) found that for those in low-income areas, the only books available in stores were in drugstores, with nothing for the older child or teenager. But children of middle-class families had access to several well-stocked bookstores, which had magnificent collections of children's and adolescent literature.

These studies also show that school libraries and public libraries in wealthier areas are far better than those in low-income areas (e.g. De Loreto and Tse, 1999; Neuman and Celano, 2001). In addition, school



libraries in wealthier areas are more likely to have a credentialed librarian (Neuman and Celano, 2001), a factor known to be associated with higher reading achievement (see Lance studies cited above).

### The Altered State of California

California is the worst offender among the states. California's school libraries are drastically under-funded and understaffed. I have documented this in my books and papers, and California librarians, such as Richard Moore and Sandy Schuckett, have tried very hard to inform the public about this sad situation. Recent data released by the National Center for Library Statistics (Holton, Bae, Baldrige, Brown and Heffron, 2004) shows that only 79 percent of schools in California have libraries, compared to the national average of 92 percent (California is last in the U.S.), and only 24 percent of California schools have a library with a certified library media specialist, compared to the national average of 75 percent. (Again, California is in last place.)

The low quality of California's public libraries has been documented (McQuillan, 1998), and again recent data confirms this. According to the most recent "America's Most Literate Cities" report (Miller, 2007), California has the worst public libraries in the country: Out of 69 cities, Los Angeles and Sacramento public libraries were tied for 65th place, Stockton was in 67th place, Anaheim 68th and Santa Ana's public libraries were dead last in 69th place. No wonder California's reading scores are so low.

California is also well-represented at the bottom in terms of bookstores (based on bookstores and members of the American

Booksellers Association per 10,000 people), with Los Angeles ranking 59th out of 69, San Jose at 62, and Santa Ana and Stockton in 67th and 68th place. The only bright spot in California is San Francisco in second place among the 69 cities.

### How to End All Literacy Crises

I think the good news is stronger than the bad news. But the good news is not going to help us if nobody knows about it. People are convinced that children don't read, don't like to read, and don't read very well (see footnote 1), and an influential federal report, the report of the National Reading Panel, concluded that there was no evidence supporting the practice of allowing time for self-selected reading in school, a conclusion I have strongly disagreed with (e.g. Krashen, 2001, 2005).

Somehow, we have to get the good news out: Self-selected voluntary reading is beneficial and pleasant, and is highly effective. Also, it is not difficult to get children involved in reading. For a fraction of what we are investing in testing, and in programs that clearly do not work, we could easily ensure that all children have access to quality reading. When this happens, literacy crises, real or imaginary, will be a thing of the past.

### Notes

**1** A recent report from the National Endowment for the Arts Report claimed that young people are reading worse and reading less than in previous years. A closer look shows they are not reading worse: