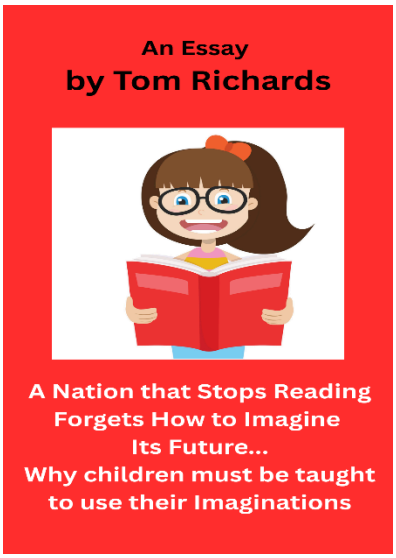


An Essay by Tom Richards

A Nation That Stops Reading Eventually Forgets How to Imagine Its Future

… why children must be taught to use their imagination

"My parents think reading and writing is a waste of time."

A young boy, aged 12, said this to me back in 1995. The single sentence stopped me cold. It was only then that I realized how many skilled, caring teachers and parents can 'quash' children's imaginations, even if they don't mean to.

He said this to me during an authors visit I made to his middle school located in Dublin, Ireland. I asked all the students (over thirty) to create the first few chapters of a novel created by all of them. Most of the students contributed using their amazing imaginations. But the young man, quoted above, refused to contribute anything at all. After our hour-long session, I took him aside and gave him a free copy of my young adult novel *Hotfoot!* which I had been asked by his teacher to discuss in his class.

I signed it for him and he promised to hide that book under his bed so his parents would not find it. A month later, I saw the young man again outside his school. He invited me to visit

his parents in the small apartment they rented in the (now demolished) Ballymun Flats, which at the time was the poorest apartment project in Ireland. When I walked in the door, I saw my novel displayed on a shelf. The only other book the family had was the *Holy Bible*. I was flabbergasted when the boy's parents told me they were both illiterate. They explained their lack of reading skills had made them misunderstand how important books were to their son's learning. But when they watched him read my novel in only three days, they had changed their minds.

I asked them if I could help them learn to read and write. When they agreed, for a number of weeks I visited that small flat of this proud family and did my best to teach them to read a simple book the parents had checked out from a local library. Eventually, they did learn to read. A month later, the parents enrolled in a *free* English class at a local library. Realizing additional education would help their boy, they brought him too.

Literacy should not be a 'gift' given only those who can afford it. Rather, literacy should be given free to anyone who wants to learn.

As a novelist who has spent much of his writing career visiting and talking to students in elementary and middle schools as well as universities, I have learned that literacy is required if young people of any economic background are to succeed. Some critics argue that the simplification of public discourse mirrors broader changes in reading habits.

Reading teaches empathy, develops imagination, strengthens literacy and creates independent thinkers. The United States needs all four of these attributes now more than ever.

WHY READING MUST BE REQUIRED

In a recent broadcast, CNN's reporter, Smerconish, interviewed Rose Horowitch about her 2024 Essay, *The Elite College Students Who Can't Read Books*, published in *The*

Atlantic which focused on the decline in reading by all Americans including Adults and Young Adults. Some of the important points they made were: Reading has declined among all age groups particularly among young adults; today's novels are easier to read than they were in the past — novelists realize Americans will not read complex sentences or stories. For this reason they write smaller sentences using easier words and create stories which do not pose difficult questions. The simplification of novels has led to the simplification of politics. Some government leaders benefit by posing populist, simple, entertaining questions and promises they can never carry ou. Because many people have trouble thinking for themselves, they allow these 'leaders' (and some other government officials) to think for them.

Much of the poor 'reading skills' among Americans are the result of educators and local governments across the United States, and their inability to appropriate required funding. Yet how can students develop ways to think on their own if they do not read?

In 1973 and 1974, when I was a student at Rolling Meadows High School, Rolling Meadows, Illinois, we were required to read many different types of books. The English literacy class taught by Ms. Sharon Barron focused solely on reading novels and historical biographies. We had a choice of books placed on a cart in our classroom which we could check out and take home. After reading one book a week, we were required to turn in a book report. Some of my favorite novels included *The Red Pony*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Good Earth*. These are novels that continue to influence my own writing and the writing of many of my peers.

Ms. Barron asked us hard questions in class which forced us to understand the important themes, characters and plots of all the books we had read. Her often-complex questions forced her students to learn to think for themselves. Ms. Barron demanded us to understand how the

words in those novels reflected the cultures of the world; how the historical conflicts in the stories affect our society; and how the 'worlds' created in novels continue to influence us today.

Due to Ms. Barron, I learned to find reading fun. She was exceptionally well read and motivated me and all her students to keep reading and writing for the rest of our lives.

THE LACK OF LITERACY UNDERMINES THE WORLD'S CREATIVITY

The CNN interview also discussed falling literacy rates across our country. Adults and their children either cannot read or write at all, or their literacy rates are far below other developed countries. Let's look at some recent statistics:

The OECD found that: nearly one in three American adults struggles with anything beyond straightforward reading, while relatively few are exceptional readers capable of interpreting complex texts.

Which Countries Perform Best?

The strongest reading countries include:

1. Finland
2. Japan
3. Sweden
4. Norway
5. Netherlands

These countries consistently emphasize:

- Reading for pleasure from an early age.
- Well-funded public libraries.
- Strong teacher preparation.
- Parents reading with children.

- Less dependence on standardized testing alone.
- A cultural respect for books and lifelong learning.

The OECD also reports that adult literacy has remained stagnant or declined in most developed countries over the past decade, with declines especially noticeable among lower-performing readers. Experts point to several contributing factors:

- Less recreational reading.
- Increased screen time.
- Greater reliance on short-form digital media.
- Reduced attention spans.

NOTE: The OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) is an international body representing 38 of the world's most developed economies. Its literacy surveys compare reading skills across member nations, making the OECD average one of the most widely respected international benchmarks for educational performance.

Why This Matters

This essay argues that children and young adults should read many more novels as well as all kinds of books throughout their lives. International research strongly supports this position because people who read regularly generally develop:

- Larger vocabularies.
- Better comprehension.
- Greater empathy.
- Stronger critical-thinking skills.
- Better writing ability.

- Higher educational achievement.
- Greater career opportunities later in life.

These findings remind us that literacy is not simply the ability to recognize words; it is the ability to understand, analyze and think critically. One of the most effective ways of developing these skills is through the regular reading of novels.

READING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

No research is required to conclude that many adults, young adults and even children spend more time on their ‘smart phones’ or watching television than they spend reading novels, newspapers or any other source of ‘factual’ information. While novels are fiction, writers of novels use ‘facts’ as a method to construct a world of imagination which plunges readers into places they will never have a chance to visit. Science fiction novels allow readers to journey to the center of our Milky Way, and travel to distant galaxies. Historical fiction takes readers back in time to cultures they will never be able to visit. These novels teach any reader historical facts where they will meet three-dimensional characters such as Long John Silver, John Adams and Abraham Lincoln. Novels enable readers to go back or forward in time; journey to the center of the Earth, take a voyage on a three-masted frigate or dive down a rabbit hole to join Alice’s adventures in Wonderland. Readers can enjoy all of these creative worlds without leaving their chair, table or desk.

The lack of literacy in the United States prevents many people from learning about the wonders of life which they may never have learned or heard of before. The lack of reading skills also prevents those people from escaping into the depths of an author’s imagination.

HEAVY DEPENDENCE ON AI RISKS WEAKENS INDEPENDENT THINKING

The CNN interview also discussed the use of AI among young adults. It concluded that AI was dampening the use of individual's reasoning skills. Heavy dependence on AI risks weakening the habits of independent thinking and creative problem-solving if students cannot learn those skills.

One example of the innate use of creative 'out of the box' thinking (without the use of Artificial Intelligence) in highly risky situations is Apollo 13 and its aborted mission to land on the Moon. When the Oxygen tanks of the Command Module exploded, the Astronauts and scientists at Mission control became convinced that all three men onboard the stricken spacecraft would die. But none of them ever gave up.

In Houston's mission control, Astronaut Ken Mattingly (who was originally selected as the Apollo 13 Command Module Pilot but was replaced by Jack Swigert at the last minute) worked to solve a very complex problem using an Apollo 13 capsule which exactly replicated the one that had been so damaged. Working side by side with other Ground Control scientists, Ken discovered how to reduce the Amperage of all the Capsule's instruments in order that those same instruments could be rebooted prior to the re-entry of the Command Module into the Earth's atmosphere.

At the same time, another group of scientists worked hard to design a system that would clean most Carbon Dioxide from the limited air supply the Astronauts were breathing in both the Command Module and the LEM which was now the crew's Lifeboat. They did find a solution after a great deal of struggle which meant the three Astronauts had enough air to breath until they climbed out of the Command Module in the middle of the South Pacific Ocean.

All these scientists and Astronauts extensively used their imaginations to think 'out of the box'. If it had not been for their creative thinking and the imaginative skills they had honed

during their careers and as students in elementary, middle, high schools and University; if they had not read novels, books on science, mathematics, history and technology, those three Astronauts could have died at any time after the Oxygen tanks exploded. AI, of course, had not been invented then which meant all of those intelligent scientists had to rely on their own imagination, knowledge and skills.

Imagination, the use of creativity and independent thinking all go hand in hand. That long process starts when children have not yet learned to read. Parents need to take time to read to their children. By reading imaginative books written by such famous authors as Dr. Seuss and sharing the story's words and illustrations with them, children can learn to read and write at a very early age. As they become older, most will remember how their parents read illustrated storybooks to them. The payoff is most of these children will read to *their* children when they become parents. Literacy is passed from one generation to another if and only if parents (and their grandparents or their adult guardians) spend time reading to their young children starting at a very early age. Too, they need to answer any question their children will ask. Listening is also an important skill which is part of the learning cycle. If we are not taught to listen, we can't ask the right questions. If we can't ask the right questions, we can't learn.

Is AI quashing creative thinking and imagination? In this writer's opinion, it is unless we find a way to harness the way it is used.

WHY NOVELS AND READING ARE STILL IMPORTANT

I was fortunate because I learned to use my imagination at a very early age. My parents and my many teachers insisted I use my imagination to solve so many problems I encountered in my life. My father, the now deceased Captain Bill Richards, worked for United Airlines. He insisted that I use my imagination when he taught me how to fly at the age of thirteen. He taught

me highly complex aeronautical principles using methods a young boy could understand. As one example, my father showed me how the principle of lift worked.

Using an empty envelope and some smoke, he showed me how the smoke runs faster above a wing than below a wing. The smoke Dad blew at the edge of a standard bent envelope travelled faster above it than below it. What amazed that very young Tom Richards was how the small streams of smoke met at the same time behind the wing (the envelope). My father then said, "Tommy, that's why any wing has lift. The smoke moving over the top of a wing moves faster than the smoke at the bottom. Pressure above the wing is therefore lower than the pressure below the wing which is why any wing, depending on its size, has enough lift to carry the weight of even the largest aircraft ever made."

My father used his imagination to turn a highly complex principle of flight, Bernoulli's Law, into a visual lesson I could understand.

STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF CREATIVE GIANTS

By 'standing on the shoulders of past novelists such as Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald and Joanne Harris, I learned about many subjects I will never be able to experience myself, just as anyone can.

As an example, I am currently reading *When the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens. This story takes place starting in 1952. Its setting is in a swamp filled with colorful birds of all kinds. The author creates a 'murder mystery' within a world of beauty and splendor. The 'star' (the protagonist) of the story is a young girl who cannot read because she is abandoned by her parents. Yet, after a free education and with a good teacher supporting the 'swamp child', she becomes literate and a college graduate. The writer allows me and all readers to visit a time and

place many us can never visit. Her novel also teaches us life lessons we may never be taught except by reading her bestselling novel.

Some young adults are never given the opportunity of learning to read or write, or they struggle with both. Years ago, I befriended a 13-year-old young man named Paul. His mother died when he was only six. His father, not knowing how to raise an only son, abandoned him. Paul went to elementary, middle school and two years of high school. However, he always failed any subject which involved reading and writing.

Paul passed all his other subjects with A's and B's. He was the top of his class in math and the sciences. He was tested for dyslexia but his doctor discovered that was not the problem. Instead, a childhood of disruption and stress was the problem. Paul left High School before he graduated to become a car mechanic due to his frustration at not being able to read. I kept in touch with him as he grew older. I offered to teach him how to read and write. He was a quick study and soon learned basic English. He then hired a tutor who taught him advanced English. Paul went on to University where he graduated with honors in Finance. Today, he is a Director of a small financial investment company. In addition to his various responsibilities, he also manages a fund which helps children and young adults overcome reading and writing difficulties.

The development of imagination is of critical importance to young people in the United States. If we choose not to use our imagination, we simply lose it. If we choose not to think for ourselves, we will allow others to think for us. If we choose not to use our creativity, we will never reach the level success we all aim to achieve in our lives, long or short.

My position regarding imagination and creativity is simple. We must learn to *freely give* those gifts to other people, including children and young adults. Paying it forward takes some work but not too much. We must all take time to teach children to read and write as soon as they

can start learning; teach them to use their vivid imaginations even when they are told by others to suppress that wonderful gift; teach them to be independent thinkers; teach them to always ask questions when they do not understand what they are seeing, hearing or learning. As adults, we must never tell a child or any young adult that a question is stupid. I learned a long time ago that there is no such thing as a ‘stupid question’. The results of asking even what appears to be ‘the stupidest question of all time’ can lead to a thoughtful answer which will then lead to more questions. ‘Stupid questions’, when answered, lead the smallest of children to a life of wonderful imagination. Walt Disney used his unending imagination to create some of the most colorful, enjoyable animated stories in the world.

Whether encouraged by his family, his teachers, or simply by his own curiosity, Walt Disney, like all creative thinkers, repeatedly asked the question, 'What if? In Mr. Disney’s case he would have posed the following questions: “What if I drew a little mouse on a thin piece of paper. What if I did that over and over and over again, but the mouse’s body shifted with ever small frame? What would then happen if I put them in order then fanned all those small frames as fast as possible? I wonder if my little mouse would move?”

The answers to all the above questions posed by Mr. Disney is: *Yes*. The result of his questions has resulted in some of the most wonderful animated films ever to be created.

Every child is born with an imagination. Reading is the spark that keeps that imagination alive. A novel teaches a child to ask, "What if?" That simple question has inspired explorers, scientists, inventors and writers throughout history. If we stop encouraging children to read, we risk raising a generation that knows how to search for answers but never learns how to ask the questions that change the world.

- End –

Tom Richards is a Bestselling Novelist. He focuses on Novels for Young Adults. His first two Novels for Young Adults were The Lost Scrolls of Newgrange – an Irish Times No 5 bestseller – and Hotfoot! (an Irish Times No 1 Bestseller which was distributed throughout Ireland, much of the U.K and in bookstores across the United States). He has also written the Global Number One bestselling Novel for people of all ages, Dolphin Song.

To Contact Novelist Tom Richards:

Tom Richards
Storylines Entertainment Ltd and our LLC Subsidiary
(U.S. Contact Details):
511 Golf Road, Crystal Lake, IL 60014
Tel: +1-779-396-0101
E: tomrichards141@gmail.com
Author Website: https://storylinesent.com
Film Website: https://lostloversfilm.com