Alphabet Soup: My Life as a Reader
By John Almy

One of the first things I learned in school was that I was stupid. Really stupid. Talk about lifelong learning! That’s one lesson that has stayed with me my entire life. Today, from where I sit in my office writing this paper, I can’t help but ponder over a school system that is capable of doing so much good, or so much harm. I felt humiliated in classrooms for ten years. I was consistently moved from one level to the next, and in the end I was blamed for not learning how to read. I’m old now (and when I say old I mean gasoline-was-35 cents-a-gallon old), but I don’t care how old you are: When you first go to school, and you can’t learn to read and write like all the other kids do, it has a way of taking some of the shine off.

When I first started going to school it was fun. Really fun. We crawled around, pushing toys like those big yellow plastic bulldozers, climbed all over the jungle gyms, “parachuted” out of swings, rolled in the dirt and wrestled over stray marbles, and (at least if you were a guy) chased girls around and pulled their hair (which really meant that we liked them but we hadn’t figured out how to kiss yet). Anyway, school was great, until we got to the alphabet, and that’s when everything went south for me.

In our third or maybe fourth week of class, the teacher wrote a lower case b on the chalkboard and then asked us what letter that was. And we were all wiggling and waggling and waving our arms and finally she said, “Yes, John, what letter is that? And I ever-so-enthusiastically yelled out, “BEEEE!” And oh my God, when she flashed those pearly whites at me and said, “Yes, that is absolutely correct!” I thought I would pee my pants.

I made it all the way through the letters a, b, and c, and then my days of glory as a reader came to a screeching halt with the letter d. (That must be some kind of a world record, don’tcha think?) I was on such a hot streak with that b, and loving every second of it, that when the teacher wrote a neat little d on the board, I didn’t even wait for her question; I just screamed out “BEEEE!”

Think about this: certain letters, b, d, p, and q for instance, are the very same symbol, but in our alphabet we turn them in different directions to stand for different letters, like a b turned around is a d, right? I’d never seen anything like that before; I mean turn a dog around and what have you got? A cat? No way. So from my point of view, when I was five years old, a b was a b was a b. I didn’t care what direction you turned it in or how many times you flipped it around, the damn thing was still a b. In the time it takes to say “a, b, c, d” the alphabet turned into an indecipherable bowl of alphabet soup, a
magical illusion. The magician—our teacher—would write a letter on the board and all the kids (except me, of course) would yell out “QUUUUU!” or “PEEEE!” How in the hell did they all know that this time the b was called a q or a p? I was flabbergasted. It was pure magic! They might as well have pulled rabbits out of their butts. From then on, I just started guessing what the next answer might be, but instead of yelling out “BEEEE!” I’d whisper, “b?” And most of the time my classmates were yelling out something else. When teachers say things like, “Now students, I want all of you to take turns naming the letters of the alphabet as I write them on the board,” and you’re the only one who can’t do it, weird things begin to happen. In no time at all the words “Public School” turn into “Public Humiliation.” See how magic works? And that was it. No more pretty smiles. No more days of educational glory.

I’m not saying that in the ten years I spent in school no one tried to help me read. That would be pure poppycock. Several teachers gave it a good shot. But they also had twenty-nine other students to think about, and when I just couldn’t keep up, they had to cut the loser and help the winners. And make no mistake, I was counted among the losers because of my struggles with reading. According to the tests I took, I didn’t learn to read past a fourth grade level the whole time I was in school, including high school, and that was a great source of shame and unhappiness for me, but I did learn, over time, to love reading.

When I was in the fifth grade, we all had to go to the school library once a week (or more if we were in trouble). The librarian, Mrs. Wilson, floated around the library in an invisible bubble like the good witch Glenda in the Wizard of Oz, and, in my case, hit me in the head with her magic book-reading wand. When she saw that I couldn’t read (and that is a mortal sin to most librarians), she made me come to the library five days a week to sit down at a table with her and read aloud.

Before we got started on a book, Mrs. Wilson talked to me for awhile and asked me about the things I liked. Once we got past pizza and cheeseburgers and chocolate malts and movies, we came up with dogs. I would have done anything to have a dog. I used to chase down all the strays in the neighborhood and drag ‘em home with me, but my mom, who was a waitress, said because my dad was an “illusionist” (he disappeared and never came back) that we couldn’t afford to feed a dog. And that was that. So when Mrs. Wilson heard how I felt about dogs, she glided over to one of the shelves and brought back a book titled The Wolf King by a man named Joseph Lippincott.

At first, reading out loud was embarrassing. At least we sat in an area where no one else could hear me. After the false starts, and the blushing and stumbling and stuttering over letters and words I didn’t recognize, I was lost in the world of a fearless black wolf, who from the time he was a pup was the target of men and other animals who wanted to kill him. Through courage and cunning and a fierce will to live he overcame all obstacles, even my inability to read.
While my friends were out shooting marbles and pulling girls’ hair, I was in the library (they thought I was in detention) which had, in ways I never could have imagined, magically transformed into rugged snow-covered forests, alive with danger, and all the while I was running wild with my beautiful black wolf, praying that nothing bad would happen to him. In other words, I was hooked.

The Wolf King ended in knuckle-chewing suspense. My beloved wolf had narrowly escaped what seemed like certain death at the hands of a man I had come to hate, a tracker who hunted my comrade relentlessly. By then, I would have beaten that man to death with a baseball bat if I had had the power to do so.

The sequel to The Wolf King was a book titled Wilderness Champion. Mrs. Wilson ordered the book especially for me. She no longer had to force me to come to the library. The library was pretty much all I could think about (except chasing girls, which was getting better all the time). I still hated school and all of my classes, and I rarely read anything in class, nor did I seem to read much better than before I started going to the library. But, as they say, the seed had been planted. It would just take another ten years or so to take hold.

The following spring, Mrs. Wilson left the school to become a mother. When we came back to school after summer break, and I found out that she had gone and wasn’t coming back, I went to the library and stole both The Wolf King and Wilderness Champion. I kept both books for more than thirty years.

I didn’t read anymore books after Mrs. Wilson left. I went to the library with the rest of the kids, but there were so many books that I felt overwhelmed, so I quit trying to find something to read. What I did start to read was comic books: Superman, Batman, Aquaman, and even Archie. Comic books were cheap, or better yet easy to steal. And once again, reading was fun. I couldn’t wait to get my hands on the newest edition so I could sit down somewhere—anywhere—and read for the pure pleasure of it.

I owed Mrs. Wilson big time for teaching me to love to read, but it took me a long time to read anything boring, like so many school books I had encountered. I tried as hard as I could to read those books. I would start at the top of the page and the next thing I knew my eyes were at the bottom, but I had no idea of what I had just “read.”

I was finally put out of school when I turned sixteen. The principal sat behind his big fat polished desk and smugly told my mom that I was reading and writing at less than a fourth grade level. She sat there in her waitress uniform, the only clothes she ever wore, even on her one day off; then she got up, walked over to me, and started slapping me in the face and head (nothing new for me, but an obvious eye-popper for the principal). As she flailed away she kept screaming, “I told you you were stupid! I told you you were stupid!” And I couldn’t help but think she was right. Really right.
I went to work as a busboy, then in a factory, where every hour seemed more like two or three. Over time I began to read more and more to escape the drudgery. I would find an adventure book that I liked, and then read everything that that author had written. But when it came to reading anything like school books, I still couldn’t do it.

In time, a couple of my friends decided to join the Navy, so I volunteered too. But because I wasn’t a high school graduate, they didn’t want me. I still managed to get into the Army. I thought the experience might improve my life. It didn’t.

When I got out of the Army, I got a job on the loading docks, a good-paying job. But several months later, when I got a promotion, the boss did a background check on me and found out that I had lied on my application. I had put down that I was a high school graduate. I always lied about that, to everyone. Instead of getting the promotion, I got fired for lying. That was the most embarrassing moment I had ever known as an adult. Because I couldn’t read well enough, I had no high school diploma. I lied about that because I was ashamed, and that shame had just cost me my job and my self-respect. That’s when I knew it was time to do something about my lack of education.

I called the local adult-education program. They held classes at a nearby community college (which seemed roughly the size of a small city). The following day, I went there to sign up, but for me school and public humiliation were still branches on the same tree, so I was scared. Really scared.

After I tested into the lowest classes the college offered, I started attending remedial English five days a week. My math wasn’t any better than my English, so I started taking basic math as well. In time, I learned that school wasn’t all about brains. In fact, school had a lot more to do with self-discipline and perseverance than it did with brain power.

When I had to read something I thought was too difficult, I stopped giving up. I read small portions at a time and made notes about each one. I got a dictionary and started looking up words, sometimes the same word over and over again (something I still do until this day).

In the next three years or so, I got my high school diploma. I was twenty-five years old. I also got an AA degree. I was proud of that. Really proud.

I tried to go to a university, one that made the community college look like a small village. And even though I was doing well in all of my classes, I soon convinced myself that I had no business going to a university, that I was too stupid (remember what I said about life-long learning?). The truth was that I was too much of a coward to stick it out and do the work. I left college and went back to the kind of jobs that made one hour seem like two: moving man, asphalt worker, stevedore, and the list goes on.

So what good did learning how to read do me? Plenty! For one thing, I started reading to my daughter from the day she came home from the hospital. And I taught her to read
long before she ever set foot in a public school. No one was going to mess with her the way they did with me. In fact, when she was old enough, I unpacked The Wolf King and Wilderness Champion and night after night, when the dishes and homework were done, out came our books and we would take turns reading aloud to each other. Those stories meant just as much to me then as they did when I was a kid because this time my daughter and I made that incredible journey together.

You want to teach your kids to love reading? Read with them.

Another way that being able to read helped me was a complete surprise: When I was thirty-seven years old I lost my job. When the lay offs started, I was working in the mountains as a line cutter for a survey crew. The entire area fell apart (sort of like the whole country is today). I had a wife, a newborn daughter, three dogs, and two cats (in case we needed something to barbeque—I'm kidding!). Most of the guys I worked with could barely read, but I could. So as soon as I quit freaking out and feeling sorry for myself, I picked my butt up and—determined to set a good example for my little girl and to change our lives forever—I returned to college.

Don’t just tell your kids education is important, show them. Right?

As a teacher, I do my level best to help others learn to read and write (and that is an honor, indeed). I still have problems with English, both reading and writing, and I’m a lousy speller, but I do ok. Nowadays, on my way to work, I often give thanks for being where I am in life. I am here because of the California community college system. I am here because I can read well. I am here because of a wonderful, caring librarian by the name of Mrs. Wilson, who took time out of her busy day to teach an illiterate ragamuffin what it meant to run wild through the forest with a beautiful black wolf by his side. See how magic works?