



FOR THE LOVE OF READING *A Book-loving Teen's Perspective*

By Shelly Tremaglio
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Shelly Tremaglio spent her 2008 summer as an Intern volunteer with the Reading Tub, Inc. When the summer began, we asked Shelly for her thoughts about how we – the adults and literacy advocates who want kids to read – can better engage high school students in a love of reading. She wrote this article for us ...then headed out the door to go home and work on her reading journal and questions for her assigned summer reading!

“Disk-kerning?” A classmate looks apologetically at our English teacher after stumbling over the first sentence on the syllabus. Worry, confusion, and anxiety flash conspicuously across her face. Welcome to AP English Composition, a “college-level course” offered in high school.

My classmate is only one of the befuddled teens scattered around the classroom. Looking around, 80 percent of the class seems lost, and we have only read a few lines of the course description. I am shocked, too, and worried. It isn't the difficulty of the first phrase and the word *discerning*, but rather by the material we are going to cover. We must read and be prepared to discuss Twain, Vonnegut, Ellison, Salinger, and many others ... in just nine months. What are we going to do when only a handful of my peers can correctly pronounce the difficult words in the course description, much less comprehend them?

Ours is an affluent public high school, and yes, this really happened in August 2008. I can't help but wonder what this scene would look like at an inner-city school? My point in presenting this anecdote is to bring light to an important issue: many young Americans cannot read well. I am not trying to bash teenagers, but the truth is many of us cannot read at the level we should be. Sadly, others cannot read, period.

Adolescents are not the only culpable party in this sad phenomenon. Parents, educators, publishers, and many others have been working **too hard** to get kids to read. In their efforts to market literacy to my generation, they have ruined the simplicity and joy of just sitting down and reading a book.

During my internship at the Reading Tub, I have observed many strategies aimed at getting young people to buy and read books. As a lifelong reader and teenage girl, I am offended and appalled by many of these sales tactics. Take, for example, book trailers. Authors are creating electronic “book jackets” similar to movie previews, complete with professional actors, music, etc. for their publications. From my perspective, these book trailers discourage and stifle imagination. Painting pictures of characters and places from novels has always been one of my favorite parts of reading. There is something so special about the fact that every little girl who has ever read one of Carolyn Keene's *Nancy Drew*

books has a unique image of Nancy in her head. Book trailers, movies based upon books, and even some photographic covers, take away the joys of crafting these extraordinary worlds.

Marketing is just one piece. Authors and publishers have also changed the subject matter of books. Chick Lit, a recent genre, is specifically geared for teenage girls. On a recent visit to the Young Adult (YA) Section at my local library, I was surrounded by hot pink, lime, and aquamarine books. The plethora of bright and peppy titles outnumber and overshadow handful of older, somber colored books on the shelves.

My issue with the genre, though, does not lie with its appearance (trust me, I know the cliché) or with the fact that the books are meant solely for teenage girls. What bothers me is the repetitive story line that graces many of these novels. Authors often write about the unhappy and unfulfilled girl who lacks a boyfriend and/or a perfect body. Although many of these stories end with the sweet revelation that looks and boys do not make a girl content, it upsets me that the female lead is almost always insecure. I am not denying the fact that many teen girls have self-esteem issues but rather proposing an alternate way to approach the problem. Authors could create role models – strong and wholesome teen girls. Personally, I would read much more Chick Lit if the books featured female heroines not damsels in distress.

By far the gravest error that I believe adults have made is telling kids to read. It really does not help – trust me. The giant posters of celebrities reading plastered in classrooms across the country and public service announcements about reading are pointless. We don't actually believe that our favorite actors, musicians, and athletes lean on the stacks at the library and delve into a good book. Come on, a kid would be yelled at or would knock over the shelf in minutes. Can't we go back to the simpler days when reading was a joy discovered by each child in good time? Reading, today, is an activity provided with a specific purpose. Older adults tell young adults to read in order to improve their vocabularies thereby ameliorating their performance in school and on the dreaded SATs. Even younger children are told to read to gain rewards from their parents, schools, or even web sites like Book Adventure. Reading for means discourages reading for pleasure and spoils the rewards books inherently hold. Books are being pushed upon young readers for the wrong reasons in the wrong ways.

The future for literacy is not desolate though. There are plenty of new books for children and teens with beautiful pictures and stories, spurring the imagination and stretching the mind in innovative ways. This summer, I have enjoyed everything from picture books with my sister to middle-grade, YA, and non-fiction. Perhaps, though, "grown-ups" trying to improve literacy need to take a new approach.

- ✓ Take your children to the library or bookstore and let them pick out what they are drawn too. Suggest your favorites or classics but don't force them upon your children.

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- ✓ Read aloud to all different ages – and that doesn't just mean books. A functionally literate adult needs to be able to read everything from a restaurant menu to a prescription medication bottle.
- ✓ Leave some books around the house and get caught reading.

However hard it may be for you dedicated parents, don't push reading on your child. Let them discover the magic of books by themselves. Once they do, you will have a completely new problem on your hands. Just ask my Mom. She can tell you her biggest problem is to find out how to get her daughter to resurface into reality and stop reading.