

# ***Supporting Up-and-Coming Readers Through Books***

by REGIE ROUTMAN

*Never doubt that one caring person, committed to providing choice and access to interesting books, can transform a child's life.*



## **LITERACY CHAMPION: REGIE ROUTMAN**

**Regie Routman** has been a champion for equity and literacy for many decades. She has served in underperforming schools and districts as a classroom teacher for all the elementary grades, Reading Recovery teacher, reading specialist, teacher of students with learning disabilities (“differently abled”), mentor and coach to teachers, principals, and leaders at all levels—nationally and internationally. She is the originator of the *Transforming Our Teaching* residencies, a video-based literacy series, where Regie and colleagues explicitly demonstrate how to create and sustain a trusting, joyful, intellectual school culture where all learners thrive. Regie is also the author of 12 professional books for teachers and leaders.

For full information on her work and resources, visit her website [www.regieroutman.org](http://www.regieroutman.org) and follow her on Twitter @regieroutman

## **Books of Choice Are a Requirement for Becoming a Reader**

While I have been successfully teaching reading my entire professional life, it wasn't until recently—when I began tutoring an adult non-reader—that I fully grasped how crucial it is for every reader to choose just about *all* the books they want to read. Ted, as I will call him here, was a 53-old-man I knew who had recently lost his custodian job during the pandemic. Feeling anxious and lonely, he phoned to ask if I'd be willing to teach him to read and write and make his life more interesting. So began our twice weekly tutoring sessions with our phones, our only available technology. Ted did not have and had never used a computer or email. It required everything I knew about forming trusting relationships and teaching reading to figure out how to best reach him and teach him

remotely. Click [here](#) for the full story and lessons learned after four months of our work together when he was just about to complete the reading—out loud and on the telephone—of his first adult book, *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway. I had chosen that book for the simplicity and cadence of the language, the main character who has a life of struggle but never gives up (“like me” Ted said), and the prize-winning quality of this relatively short text.

At this writing, I have been working with Ted for 10 months; he is now a fairly fluent reader and proud owner of several books, which he keeps on a newly established shelf in his apartment. My “aha” moment about what real choice means came when Ted called me from Target to tell me he had just bought the Obama memoir, *A Promised Land*, and that “this will be our next book to read.” His choice stunned me as it was such a huge reading leap. Nonetheless, instead of thinking, “This book is too hard for him,” I thought “How can I make reading this book possible for him?” After we’d read the Prologue together, he offered that he’d prefer to just listen to the audiobook for this “complex” 700-page book.

A week later, back browsing books at Target, he purchased *One Life* by Megan Rapinoe, a riveting, new memoir about a world-class soccer player that he’d heard about on NPR. By his actions and statements, Ted made it clear to me that he needed and wanted to choose *all* the books he/we read and discuss. Ted is fast becoming a book person, visiting used bookstores on day trips and looking beyond the front cover of the book—reading the back cover copy and sampling a couple of pages—before making his next, cherished purchase.

Working with Ted continues to be a privilege and a gift as well as a profound heart-mind endeavor for us both. He ends each of our sessions with “Peace. Thank you. I love you” and I say the same back to him and mean it. Our experience affirms that becoming a reader is possible and life changing—at any age. Research confirms that avid reading is a strong contributor not just to depth in reading understanding but also to emotional well-being, empathy, and living a fuller and more civically engaged life. Ted taught me many things, most importantly that no book is beyond reach if an up-and-coming reader is determined to read it and can receive full support to do so.

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## **Change a Life: Help a Child “Rewrite” Their Future Life Story—Through Books**

Access to books that are culturally relevant, well written, beautifully illustrated, and mesmerizing in some fashion—and many of these are picture books—are life giving. Through the books students read and hear read aloud, they can envision new possibilities for themselves, that there is not one fixed story limiting what they can become, and that relatable characters in the books they are reading and listening to can help them cope with the curveballs living a life throws each of us. Ted tells me he has noticed that in the books he chooses, the hero in the story overcomes some type of life challenge. One of the

things both Ted and I loved about *One Life* was the question the author poses in the opening epigraph by Mary Oliver and throughout the book, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” Too many students don’t know what real possibility might look like or that they are capable of having agency in their lives. This is the magic and brilliance of *Bring Me a Book* and *Bookelicious*—providing equitable and easy access to an array of amazing book choices for all learners of all cultures and backgrounds. In doing so, books become a powerful vehicle for expanding possibilities for learners to become their truest selves who can envision and “write” their own life story—imagining a life and identity that is not pre-ordained at birth and is, in fact, quite positive and optimistic.

All my working life, I have been teaching, demonstrating mentoring, and coaching in underperforming schools with low-income populations; many of these students are students of color, and many are second language learners. In just about every case, and this was true for Ted as well, expectations by adults for what learners can accomplish remained dismally low. Perhaps, more than any other factor, it is those low expectations coupled with a lack of access to first rate resources—expert teachers, caring supporters, and excellent books and libraries—that prevent kids of all ages from dreaming big and achieving big.

*When describing a reader, let’s shift our beliefs and actions to reflect a positive mindset and hopeful language. Think “up-and-coming,” “strengths,” “interests,” and “books”—not “struggling,” “deficits,” “needs,” and “skills sheets”.*

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## **What to Do: Seek Out Trusted Supporters Who Help Build Positive Reading Identities**

Becoming a reader does not primarily happen through getting good at phonics and word reading. While that is a necessity, of course, word-solving skills are insufficient for becoming a reader—someone who chooses to read for enjoyment and information and to live a fuller life. Books provide the firm foundational bridge that make an enriching reader-life possible.

While working with Ted, I was pleased early on when he told me he could now read the texts a good friend was routinely sending to his phone. Not only that, his friend had taught Ted how to respond to a text by using just his voice. Knowing how difficult writing was for him, why hadn’t I thought of that? Supporters are all around us and are there to help us and our up-and-coming readers if we just look for them and invite them in. Consider grandparents, retired teachers or administrators, older siblings, neighbors, librarians, an elderly person living alone, or any person who is kind, caring, and willing to help foster a child’s success and enjoyment with a book.

It is loving books, not leveling them, that ultimately makes a reader—or not. A few examples of support that reading helpers might provide are facilitating book access and choice, reading the chosen book aloud, partner-reading the book, dramatizing the story, having a conversation about the book via phone, Zoom meeting, or in-person visit. One way I continue to support each of Ted’s choices is to ensure he has an accompanying CD audiobook. In between our tutoring sessions, he practices reading by following along visually in the text which has increased his fluency, word recognition, focus, stamina, and confidence.

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## How to Help

The following actions and resources can help us support up-and-coming readers to experience and celebrate reading success.

### ***Participate in Expert Professional Learning***

If you are a teacher, educational leader, literacy advocate, librarian, or deeply involved with kids and literacy, knowing how to support up-and-coming readers so they become self-monitoring, joyful readers requires a solid foundation of knowledge and a big dose of compassion and kindness. Parents fit here, too.

With my esteemed colleague, Literacy Champion Sandra Figueroa, we cowrote the research-based [Transforming Our Teaching](#) Series—a professional learning, literacy-centered video series that goes inside culturally inclusive classrooms to demonstrate and discuss what’s possible when we establish shared beliefs and apply those beliefs to principled practices. Such practices must include access to a wide range of books. In particular, the classroom library—organized with students—must be the focal point in the classroom, vitally important as so many classrooms today still do not have libraries where kids get to choose relevant, interesting books and have sustained time to read and talk about them. Click [here](#) for online mini-courses in reading and writing and [here](#) for an overview and much more information on the three virtual Transforming Our Teaching Projects: *Reading/Writing Connections*, *Writing for Audience and Purpose*, and *Reading to Understand*.

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### ***Be a Reader and Keep a Reading Record***

The importance of teachers and leaders as readers cannot be overstated. We simply cannot teach reading well or inspire a passion for reading if we don’t read. For the past 20 years or so, I have joyfully chronicled my reading history in a small notebook where I list all the books I read each month along with the author, genre, and a \*star rating if the book is exceptional. Even young children can keep similar reading histories. Semi-annually, I publish the books I’ve loved, highlighting several standouts along with commentary

that connects my present reading and thinking to the classroom and educational issues. See this [recent posting](#) and [archives](#) dating back to 2007.

### **Value Storytelling: Help Children “Rewrite” Their Futures**

The books that Ted and I read are not just “good” books that entertain. They are also excellent examples of how the decisions and actions a real-life character makes can enhance understanding of our past to change the trajectory of our future—a future that need not automatically be pre-determined by income, status, where you live, or the color of your skin. The “best” books are pleasurable and thoughtful but also often offer insights into how we might live deeper, more satisfying lives. Picture books provide some of the most excellent examples here. In my most recent book, [Literacy Essentials](#), I deliberately interwove [personal and professional stories](#) into the text because literacy, learning, and living are intertwined; our stories document, validate, and value who we are.

Encourage students and all children to tell and record their personal stories, hopes, and aspirations through podcasts, journals, original books, multimedia, and more.

### **Begin with Poetry**

Of all the books I’ve written, [Kids’ Poems: Teaching Children to Love Writing Poetry](#)—a series for kindergarten, grade 1, grade 2, and grades 3–4 and written for teachers, students, parents, and caregivers—has been the most well received.

I believe that’s because writing free-verse poems is a great equalizer; everyone joyfully succeeds. See also videos [“Nurturing Writer in Uncertain Times”](#) and [“Nurturing Writers with Equity in Mind”](#) for demonstrations and discussion of teaching poetry writing and the reading-writing connection.

### **More Resources to Support Your Efforts**

See [Regie’s website](#) for her books, including her Essentials Series: *Reading Essentials*, *Writing Essentials*, *Teaching Essentials*, and *Literacy Essentials*. You will also find short, practical articles on reading, writing, professional learning, and equity as well as links to her podcasts and videos.

### **Join Conversational Sessions**

Regie Routman and Sandra Figueroa will be offering occasional, conversational Zoom sessions where they discuss issues of the day around reading, books, equity, and literacy and also respond to participants’ questions. Contact Regie through her website to learn what’s possible.