



# Pleasure: How and Why It Inspires Our Desire to Read

by JEFFREY D. WILHELM

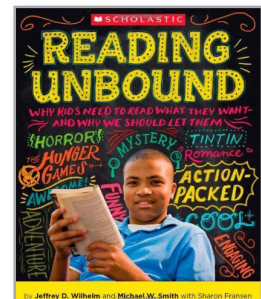
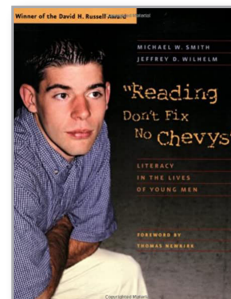
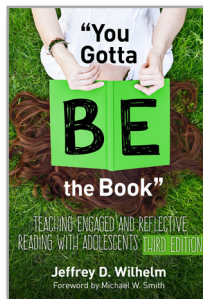
*If we are committed to creating lifelong readers, we must recognize that the greatest motivator to read is pleasure; indeed, pleasure is essential to the continuing impulse to engage with reading. Pleasurable reading is multi-faceted, and fully engaged readers experience the full range of pleasure each time they read. Those of us who want to promote pleasure reading and all the benefits that accrue as a result, need to actively promote every pleasure associated with reading.*



## LITERACY CHAMPION: JEFFREY D. WILHELM

A classroom teacher for 15 years, Jeffrey Wilhelm is currently Distinguished Professor of Literacy Education at Boise State University and is the founding director of the Maine and Boise State Writing Projects. He is the author or co-author of 40 books about literacy teaching and learning. He has earned the NCTE's Promising Research award for [You Gotta Be the Book](#), and the David

H. Russell Award for Research for [Reading Don't Fix No Chevys](#), which explores the literate lives of young men both in school and out, and for [Reading Unbound](#), a groundbreaking exploration of the powers of pleasure reading and how to promote them. Jeff has devoted his professional career to helping teachers help their students, and he is particularly devoted to equitably assisting students who are considered to be reluctant, struggling, or at-risk in any way. He is an internationally acclaimed speaker.



## What to Know: The Importance of Pleasure Reading

Pleasure is essential to motivation in any domain, and fully engaged readers experience four types of pleasure (and an important sub-category). These pleasures mirror the different benefits that engaged readers experience, and the specific transformative possibilities of reading. Since pleasure reading in youth has been shown to be highly significant (and perhaps the most important action) for promoting later educational attainment and social mobility (primarily because it promotes cognitive progress over time), one can argue that pleasure reading is a civil right that is necessary to achieving social equity and justice; and that parents, teachers, and schools must consciously and deliberately cultivate pleasure in reading to help all learners access this civil right. Stunningly, research findings show that pleasure reading is more powerful to actualizing future life chances than parents' educational attainment and socioeconomic status (SES), and that pleasure reading can significantly roll back the negative effects of SES. (See the British Cohort study, 2013; Guthrie's PISA/OECD study, 2004.)

### What Are the Different Kinds of Reading Pleasure?

**Play pleasure.** The first, pre-requisite, and most obvious pleasure is that of play—when we read to experience the sheer joy of living through an experience or the ideas presented. As Jazzy, an informant in our “The Nature of Pleasure in Reading” study, said: *“I read it because I like it! I like living through the stories!”*

**Social pleasure.** This pleasure operates on several dimensions, including:

- Relating to authors, characters, and other readers
- Staking one's identity: “I am a real bookworm.”
- Affiliating with groups of readers/interest groups: “We are vampire readers!”
- Doing social “work” in discussing, thinking through, and applying what one has learned through reading

**Intellectual pleasure.** This pleasure derives from reading as an intellectual puzzle, whether it is figuring out how a book works for meaning and effect, or using reading to think through and navigate an intellectual challenge. Alex, in our “The Nature of Reading Pleasure” study, told us: “[Reading's] like being a detective almost. It's taking the evidence and the information and everything that's happened; taking all that and putting it together. Processing through it and seeing what ends connect, and then finding, once all those ends connect, what that last piece is.”

**Work pleasure.** This entails using reading as a tool to get something functional done in the world. Callie told us: “But beyond that, with the knowledge I gained from these books, when I get into conversations and/or arguments with people, I have a perspective that they wouldn't usually see, and I can bring out that and make them consciously think about how we are the future.”

**Inner work pleasure.** This is a subset of work pleasure. Perhaps our most striking finding is that our participants derived deeply moving pleasure from using their reading to help them become the kind of people they wanted to become—a kind of pleasure we termed inner work. “Inner work,” according to Jungian scholar Robert Johnson, “is the effort by which we gain an awareness of the deeper layers of consciousness within us,” and use these to rehearse who and how we want to be in the world. Helen told us: “Well, I learn about myself through books when

I imagine myself in the different situations. And then I really can think about what would I really do. You can sort of help yourself change in that way, and when you really admire a character in a book who's really brave and stuff, you kind of can idolize them and become more like them. So it's not really learning about yourself, *it's learning about what you could be . . .*

## What to Do: How to Promote Pleasure Reading

**Quick answer:** We need to make pleasure central to our work with readers, always and foremost. How?

- **Focus on pleasure.**
- **Privilege interpretive complexity over text complexity**, i.e., focus on what new growth areas readers are developing with any text they enjoy versus the complexity of the text itself.
- **Provide access to a wide variety of texts** through classroom libraries, book carts, books as gifts, [Bookelicious](#), and more.
- **Provide opportunities for choice**, both in the context of instructional units and through a free reading program.
- **Promote free choice reading and response, and ...**
- **Prompt the specific pleasures!**

Here are some additional experiences, which you can plan for your students to encourage wide-ranging pleasure reading.

- **Use play, including drama-in-education techniques** like revolving role play, in-role writing, good angel/bad angel, hot seating, and alter ego. Encourage and reward all students for entering and living through story worlds, becoming characters/relating to characters in the way committed readers do. (See Wilhelm, [Deepening Comprehension With Action Strategies](#).)
- **Be social: Be a fellow reader with students.** Read one of their favorite books: "I'll read one of yours; you read one of mine," e.g., *1984* unit and *Hunger Games*.
- **Foster peer discussion of reading and response in pairs, triads, small groups, literature circles, book clubs, etc.**
- **Do group projects with reading that are then shared:** videos, PSAs, dramas, visual displays, talk shows, etc. Schedule Family and Friends nights to share the efforts.
- **Have a free reading program;** promote books through book talks, online reviews, etc.
- **Tap intellectual pleasure:** Frame units of instruction (or free reading projects outside of school) as inquiry-framed with essential questions, as a problem to be solved. (See [Engaging Readers and Writers with Inquiry](#).)
- **Read a book for the first time along with your students**—figure it out along with them— modeling your fits and starts and problems through think alouds and discussion.
- **Pair an assigned reading with self-selected reading from a list**, or a free reading choice that pertains to the topic.

- **Teach learners to use student-generated questions for discussion and sharing,** e.g., QtA (Questioning the Author) or QAR (Question-Answer Relationship). Use discussion structures like Socratic Seminar that make it clear there is no authoritarian agenda to fulfill as far as insights to achieve. (This approach is consistent with the Next Generation standards across the curriculum, which focus on strategies over content.) (See Wilhelm, *Engaging Readers and Writers with Inquiry*.)
- **Frame texts and units as inquiry**—as a problem to be solved by using essential questions. (See Wilhelm, *Engaging Readers and Writers with Inquiry*.)
- **Work towards culminating projects**—service and social actions that reflect readings. (See [The Activist Learner](#).)
- **Use Drama strategies that connect to understanding and application:** e.g., Hotseating, mantle of the expert. (See [Deepening Comprehension With Action Strategies](#).)
- **Encourage Inner Work.** Ask learners to respond to readings with imaginative rehearsals for living: inquiry geared towards current and future action, inquiry for service, drama as characters in dilemmas or agents (like the good angel) who advises characters, writing for the future/to a future self, corresponding with characters and authors to advise them, cultivating a spirit of transfer through constant reflection, e.g., what does this reading mean to me, to the way I want to engage, know, think, do, and be in the world? (See [Planning Powerful Instruction, grades 2-5](#) or [6-12](#).)

## More to Know and Do

Read *Reading Unbound* or any of the texts suggested in this toolkit. They all teach readers how to develop new interests and capacities, while deeply experiencing the pleasures of reading and the pleasure of outgrowing themselves as readers, writers, and people.

See the [Webinar on promoting pleasure in reading and writing, with Tom Newkirk](#).

## How to Reach Jeff

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