

An excerpt from

Open a World of Possible

*Real Stories About the Joy
and Power of Reading*

Lester L. Laminack

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Finding the Magic of Reading

I was an onlooker, a lusting voyeur.

I sat perched on the wide arm of that oversized chair looking over the shoulder of my brother. He sat next to my mother, open book spread across his lap. He was in first grade, I was going on five, and I was in awe. I watched in amazement as my brother placed his finger under a word and it spilled forth from his mouth, filling the air with sounds.



I listened to the music of that rhythmic language—

I do not like them, Sam-I-am. I do not like green eggs and ham . . . One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish . . . The sun did not shine. It was too wet to play. So we sat in the house all that cold, wet day.

It was that music that I carried with me around our upstairs apartment. I walked about chanting, “I do not like them here or there. I do not like them anywhere. I do not like green eggs and ham. I do not like them, Sam-I-am.”

I was an onlooker, an eavesdropper longing to join the magical club of readers. I wanted to place my finger under a word just so, and have those words spill forth from my mouth. I wanted to sit in the big chair next to my mother with a book spread across my lap. I wanted to make the music that was somehow trapped on the page waiting for the touch of a magic finger. I wanted that finger to be mine.

I listened and watched every evening. I carried the music everywhere, chanting the memorable language that continued to resonate long after.

I did, of course, hold the books and lick the tip of my index finger before carefully turning each page. I did chant the music as I touched the words and I did believe with the faith of childhood that I had found that magic.

Then I went to first grade. I met Dick and Jane. See Dick. See Jane. I met Spot. Run, Spot. I met Sally. Oh, Sally! I met Puff. Get down, Puff. I sat in small circles as we took turns telling everyone to “Look,” or “Get down” or “Run, run, run.” We took turns saying those words, touching them with our fingers, but the music was gone. There was no memorable language. Nothing would resonate long after.

I did, of course, learn to read. As I recall, that was neither a remarkable event nor a struggle. Just another occurrence in the journey called childhood.

But somehow, the magic and the music had vanished. It wasn't until third grade when I finally heard the music again, it played on the slow-paced, smooth, southern voice of Mrs. Hand, our school librarian.

It started with Uncle Remus tales and moved to weekly adventures with Henry and Violet and Jesse and Benny as they struggled to survive in that old boxcar with their adopted dog, Watch. I longed to be Henry, the brave leader. I longed to dam up the stream and make a pool that doubled as the refrigerator. I could taste the cold milk and feel the crack in Benny's cherished pink cup as I drank with him.

It was Mrs. Hand who revived the music I longed to hear. And I continued to cherish the sound of it. Although I had the power to take hold of that sound with my ear, I still could not echo it with my voice. That would take a few more years.

In the fifth grade, my family moved to Key West. It was supposed to be a short stay so we rented a furnished place. It had no TV. The weather was warm and pleasant even in the fall evenings and filling the time outdoors with my brother and friends was no challenge. But the night, the dark and quiet night, was another thing altogether. We played cards and board games, but that grew old quickly. At my mother's suggestion, I resorted to reading a book. We bought a copy of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. It took only a few pages before I was hearing the music, the rhythm of the story, the voices of the characters, and finding myself living among Dorothy, the Tin Man, the Cowardly Lion, and the Scarecrow.

I had found it. And once you do, it is yours forever.



Lester L. Laminack, Ph.D., is professor emeritus of Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, North Carolina, where he received two awards for excellence in teaching. Laminack is now a full-time writer and consultant working with schools throughout the United States. His academic publications include *Learning Under the Influence of Language and Literature*, *Reading Aloud Across the Curriculum*, *Climb Inside a Poem*, *Cracking Open the Author's Craft*, *Unwrapping the Read Aloud*, and *Bullying Hurts: Teaching Kindness Through Read Aloud and Guided Conversations*. His newest professional book is *The Writing Teacher's Troubleshooting Guide*. Laminack is also the author of six children's books: *The Sunsets of Miss Olivia Wiggins*, *Trevor's Wiggly-Wobbly Tooth*, *Saturdays and Tea Cakes*, *Jake's 100th Day of School*, *Snow Day!*, and *Three Hens and a Peacock* (2012 Children's Choice K-2 Book of the Year Award).

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