



Thank you

FOR YOUR
INTEREST IN
CORWIN

Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from Just Read It.

[LEARN MORE](#) about this title!

Warm-Up

An Introduction

For as long as I can remember, I've been a reader. In fact, I recently stumbled upon a letter that I had written near the end of first grade at Underwood Elementary School: *Dear Second Grade Teacher. My name is Jarred Amato. I am 7 years old and My brother is 5. I am good at baseball, basketball, readding [sic], and writing.*

And here I am today, nearly thirty years later, a middle and high school English teacher, an advocate and champion of reading and our readers, and Project LIT Community cofounder, honored to share a bit of my journey with you. I stumbled upon this letter during the summer of 2019 as my brother and I sorted through boxes of our childhood, just after our dad had passed away unexpectedly. Despite his flaws (and we've all got them), my dad was one of my biggest champions (and we all need people who believe in us, no matter what). Gosh, he would have been so proud of me for writing this book. However, my dad was definitely *not* a reader. I wish he had been.

Years ago, my students and I learned that readers tend to live longer than non-readers. We determined there was sufficient evidence to support the claim. From the *Washington Post* (emphasis mine),

Good news on National Book Lovers Day: A chapter a day might keep the Grim Reaper away—at least a little longer. A recent study by Yale University researchers, published online in the journal *Social Science & Medicine*, concluded that **“book readers experienced a 20 percent reduction in risk of mortality over the 12 years of follow-up compared to non-book readers.”**

The data was obtained from a longitudinal Health and Retirement Study sponsored by the National Institute on Aging. The study looked at 3,635 subjects, all older than 50, whom the researchers divided into three groups: those who didn't read books, those who read up to 3.5 hours a week, and those who read more than 3.5 hours a week.

The findings were remarkable: Book readers survived almost two years longer than those who didn't crack open a book.

Accounting for variables such as education level, income and health status, the study found that those who read more than 3.5 hours weekly were 23 percent less likely to die during that 12-year period. Those who read up to 3.5 hours — an average of a half-hour a day — were 17 percent less likely.

In other words, just like a healthy diet and exercise, books appear to promote a “significant survival advantage,” the authors concluded.

I wish my dad could have experienced the joy of getting lost in a great book. I wish he could have cheered for characters the same way he rooted for Mickey Mantle and Derek Jeter. I wish that his story was uncommon. However, with each passing year, more and more of us—young and old—are spending significant time in front of screens and little, if any, immersed in books. We are only just beginning to understand the effects, but as the parent of a toddler and educator of adolescents, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't concerned. And I wish more adults, particularly our policymakers and educational leaders, acknowledged the urgency of the moment. If we do not value reading, if we do not value our readers, the consequences will be dire.

If you are reading this book (thank you!), you probably believe in the power of books to change lives—to save lives. And like me, you probably know that books help us understand ourselves and empathize with others. Books have a unique ability to connect us and comfort us, to challenge us and change us. Books help us heal. Books give us hope.

However, I have to admit: in the years that it took me to complete this book, I often felt hopeless. I found it nearly impossible to focus. I struggled to block out the noise. And, in talking with colleagues in my school and across the country, I know I was not alone. Being an educator in today's climate is not easy—and that's putting it lightly. It wasn't easy before March 2020, and it's infinitely harder now. Somehow, we have been asked to do more with less. Incredible educators everywhere are exiting the profession, or at the very least, seriously considering it. Perhaps you've had your doubts, too; I know I have.

Of course, everyone has their own reasons for leaving, but ultimately, it comes down to this: the “highs” of teaching no longer outweigh the “lows.” Low pay. Low morale. Low respect. Most educators aren’t leaving because of the students; we are leaving because of the adults. Adults who are using educators and students as pawns in their political games. Adults who continue to pile more and more on our plates without taking anything off. Adults who prioritize programs over people. Adults who find room in the budget for scripted curriculum while forcing teachers to crowdsource for books and supplies. Adults who ban books before reading them. Adults who care more about keeping their job than keeping students and educators safe. Adults who value compliance and control more than creativity and innovation. Adults who don’t support us enough. Who don’t trust us enough. Who don’t respect us enough. Who, in far too many places, don’t pay us enough. Educators are finally saying: *Enough*. And I get it. Believe me, I totally get it.

But here’s the thing: Our students need you. They need us! Our students don’t need martyrs. They don’t need saviors. However, our students deserve to have educators who give a damn. Courageous educators, like you, who love and believe in them no matter what. Who have their back in the classroom and cafeteria. Who always seem to know exactly what books to recommend. Who recognize that the little things are, in fact, the big things. Who care about strengthening our communities and building a better future for all.

That’s why I’m not going anywhere. I am committed to this work for the long haul. At the same time, I believe wholeheartedly that teaching should be sustainable. Teaching should be rewarding. And yes, teaching should be *fun*. Despite the challenges, teaching middle and high school English for the past decade and a half has often been all three of those things for me, which is one of the reasons I decided to write this book. To remind myself—along with all of you—why this literacy work still matters. Why this work is still worth doing.

I also wrote this book for my son, Lucca, who was born in the fall of 2021. He devours books—quite literally. And I hope that he never stops. Because my dream for Lucca is the same dream that I hold for every child in this world. That he is always surrounded by books. All sorts of books. Books that make him laugh out loud. Books that move him to tears. Books that he implores his mother to read to him before bedtime. Books that he wants to stay up late reading under the covers. Books that teach him all sorts of wonderful things about himself and the messy, magical world around him.

My hope is that reading always remains meaningful. That it never feels like a chore or punishment. That when Lucca gets to school, he is showered with an abundance of patience, love, and support from incredible teachers who receive the same. That he can always find refuge and community in the library. That when he returns home, while we are sitting around the kitchen table, he will ramble on in excitement about the stories he's reading and the conversations he's having. That his third-grade teacher will help him publish his first "book" and make him feel like a real writer, the way Mrs. Madsen did for me.

My hope is that Lucca's love for literacy and learning does not fade as he heads into middle and high school, like it does for so many of today's adolescents. That expert educators will encourage him to read widely and read often. To engage with different ideas and perspectives. To find his voice. To pursue his passions.

I wrote this book because I believe, with all my heart, that all of this is possible, not just for my son but for every child. I have a feeling you believe it, too. At the same time, we know there are closeminded people working relentlessly to limit what we read, what we teach, and what we can imagine. We cannot be naïve. Yet we cannot lose hope. It's a delicate balance.

Parenting, like teaching, feels overwhelming, if not impossible, at times. The doubt. The fear. The big questions. *Am I good enough? How can I keep my child safe? How do I sleep at night knowing that I can't?* The small ones. *What in the world are we going to have for dinner? How has he already outgrown that shirt? Why is fruit so expensive?* In these moments of stress, I try my best to be present. To sit on the floor with Lucca as we build a block tower or read *Brown Bear, Brown Bear*. To get outside and play in the sprinkler. To walk to the library. To run around the bookstore. (My apologies to the Barnes and Noble staff for the titles Lucca routinely pulled from your shelves and left scattered across your store during the summer and fall of 2022.)

I try my best to seek out and savor these moments of joy in the classroom, too. In a society where teachers and parents are constantly told what they are doing wrong, I take time to appreciate all that we are doing right. There is no such thing as a perfect parent or teacher. I wrote this book to remind myself, and all of you, that our good is good enough—more than enough.

I also wrote this book to honor and amplify my former students—Adrian, CJ, David, De'Montre, De'Sean, Faith, Gerrick, Jakaylia, Jay, Lauren, Paisley, Rodrea, Sean, Selena, TJ, Ty, and so many more. Young people who rallied an entire community around reading and ultimately transformed a class project into a national

literacy movement. The foundation of our work has been a relentless commitment to independent reading, writing, reflection, and relationships. That is the “secret” to our success, and that is what I plan to zoom in on in this book.

Admittedly, the principles of access, choice, time, and community are not new. They have been the focus of countless books; you and I have probably read many of them. Yet, our literacy challenges persist. My students and I took the principles, outlined brilliantly by the likes of literacy giants such as (but certainly not limited to) Nancie Atwell, Kelly Gallagher, Penny Kittle, and Cornelius Minor, brought them to life, day in and day out, year after year. By any measure, we were successful. We have so many moments and memories to share. Even more, we hope to show you that the “magic” can happen in every classroom in this country, no matter the barriers, no matter the obstacles. We promise.

My hope is that this book serves as a resource for schools and ELA teams as we continue to reimagine education. To be clear, reimagining does not mean overcomplicating. Let’s keep things simple when we can. Let’s get the “easy” things right first and go from there. Over the past fourteen years, I have taught in four schools across six grade levels (seventh through twelfth) and two states. An under-resourced middle school and high school serving primarily Black and brown students. An early college high school serving a small, diverse group of ninth and tenth graders. A suburban middle school serving primarily white students. Each experience was different. However, in many ways, each classroom functioned and felt the same, and that’s because of our commitment to independent reading.

Instead of searching for (and often arguing over) the “best” book to teach, trying to write the perfect lesson plan, or finding time to “do SEL,” let’s focus on establishing a positive literacy culture from day one—and cultivating it throughout the year—one step, one book, and one conversation at a time.

“JUST READING”

Before we get too far in this book, I must make two quick points:

1. There is nothing wrong when students are “just reading.”

Shouldn’t that be one of our goals? Instead of asking educators, “Why are your students reading all the time?” we should be asking, “How are you getting your students to read all the time?” Why are we shaming teachers who have

successfully managed to get teenagers off their phones and into books? Shouldn't we be asking them to share their strategies and secrets? Why are we making educators feel like they are breaking the rules to provide students with the positive literacy experiences they deserve? Shouldn't we be thanking them for going above and beyond to nurture the next generation of readers? Why are we okay with students "just sitting" in rows listening to a teacher lecture for an hour, "just answering" low-level recall questions from a textbook or TPT handout, or "just Snapchatting" with their friends because they finished their work for the period? Shouldn't we want all students to be engaged and empowered?

2. Getting to a point where all students are "just reading" (and actually reading) is a lot harder than it looks.

If you walk into an ELA classroom and all twenty or twenty-five students are "just reading," it means their teacher has done a lot of wonderful work behind the scenes (work that we will attempt to name and unpack in this book). It means their teacher deserves praise, not ridicule. It's also worth pointing out that our students are never "just reading"—they are thinking critically, asking questions, developing empathy, gaining confidence, relieving stress, setting goals, building stamina, discovering themselves, expanding their vocabulary, connecting with others, improving their concentration, fueling their imagination, acquiring knowledge, sharpening their writing and communication skills, exercising their brain, and so much more.

I have no problem admitting that it took me a long time to get to a point where every student was "just reading." Too long. In fact, there are still plenty of days where we fall short of 100 percent. That's okay! Every student has a different relationship with reading; every student enters our classroom at a different point in their literacy journey. I try my best to meet them where they are and to embrace progress over perfection. And I encourage you to do the same.

WHAT I HOPE YOU'LL GET FROM THIS BOOK

My sincere hope is that the activities, ideas, inspiration, and strategies shared over the next eight chapters strengthen your conviction and empower you to make an even greater impact in your classroom, school, and community. While this book can be read from start to finish, I know that if you are like me, you may

want to jump to specific sections, depending on what you need (and how much time you have). Therefore, here is what you can expect to find in each chapter:

PART 1 – THE FUNDAMENTALS OF INDEPENDENT READING

In Chapter 1, I bring you into our classroom and recount our journey with independent reading—our difficulties with the “traditional” ELA approach, the important distinction between literary and literature, how we developed our Read and WRAP framework, what it looks like in practice, and why we continue to stick with it year after year. (WRAP is an acronym that stands for Write, Reflect, Analyze, and Participate.)

In Chapter 2, I outline what it’s going to take for all students to establish, or reestablish, a positive reading identity—a strong sense of purpose, a clear understanding of our readers, and a simplified approach (that hopefully includes our Read and WRAP routine).

In Chapter 3, I show how we can transform the principles of access, choice, time, and community into actions. In other words, I offer specific tools and strategies to increase book access (especially on a teacher budget), promote choice, guarantee time, and build community.

PART 2 – STRATEGIES TO SUSTAIN INDEPENDENT READING SUCCESS

In Chapter 4, I walk you through our “Intro to Lit” unit, which includes a wide range of activities, texts, and tasks that help us hit the ground running (or in our case, reading and writing) from day one. From our student surveys and book tasting activity to our “Best Nine” and “Ten Things” writing assignment (along with much more), this chapter includes more than a dozen resources to start the year strong, build community, and invest students in our Read and WRAP routine. My hunch is that you, like me, will return to this chapter each fall.

In Chapter 5, I share our extensive collection of WRAP prompts that help us engage and empower readers day in and day out, week after week. This chapter attempts to answer the question “When the timer goes off and our notebooks come out, what does it look like to WRAP?” Book reviews and narrative continuations, grammar and poetry, character analysis and creative projects—this chapter is jam-packed with prompts varying in length, difficulty, and purpose to help you meet the specific needs of your students.

In Chapter 6, I outline several meaningful end-of-year projects and activities, from “For Every One” and our “Lit Awards” to “My Ten” and our sample “Independent Reading Project,” that help us come full circle and end the school year even stronger than we started.

PART 3 – LEVELING UP AND MAXIMIZING THE IMPACT OF INDEPENDENT READING

In Chapter 7, I discuss how to leverage student feedback (via WRAP prompts, one-on-one conversations, quarterly reflections, and formal reading surveys) to fine-tune our Read and WRAP routine throughout the school year.

In Chapter 8, I reflect on our Project LIT journey and invite you and your students to join our movement and launch a “chapter” of your own. It would be an honor to continue leading and learning together.

© Corwin, 2024