

Facts & Arguments

Literacy opens a brighter world

I thought I would teach my students great literature, but they really needed to read recipes and get their driver's licences. **BY IRENE DAVIS**

Memories from 15 years as a volunteer tutor in adult literacy include the following:

Bob had a broken ankle and couldn't come to the library where the program is based. I went to his house; his mom stuffed me full of Italian fruit bread and insisted I take a loaf home.

Jeanne telling me: "I was blind and now I see." We had just eaten the cinnamon buns she had made at home after learning how to read well enough to follow the recipe. Months later, long after she had left the program, I found myself being hugged at the bus stop.

Tom's letter to me, written as part of an exit assessment in which the co-ordinator told him to write anything he likes: "You have made me taller in life."

Like many people, I had never realized that a large section of the population was functionally illiterate, nor had known that adult literacy programs existed. Then I attended a writers' conference, where a speaker from Frontier College — a Canada-wide volunteer literacy organization, which I also had no idea existed — addressed a session, described the need and I was hooked. I looked for a program in my area and found the library.

When I began as a volunteer with the program I had grand visions of opening the wide world of books to my learners, awakening a love for reading such as I had had since my father taught me to read, when I was three years old. Instead, I found myself helping people learn to function: at home, in the supermarket, at work.

Imagine not being able to do something most of us take for granted. Think of everything we do that involves reading and writing, and then imagine the plight of those who have difficulty with these functions. Grocery shopping becomes a matter of looking at the pictures on the cans and packages and hoping what's inside is what you want. Getting around town means memorizing landmarks because you can't read street signs or bus and subway stops. Taking medicine is hazardous

because you can't understand the labels or dosages. Driving a car is not possible because you can't pass the written driver's test.

Reading to your child? Forget it. Notes from school, work-related memos and instructions, banking — all present enormous difficulty. There are only so many times you can pretend to have forgotten your glasses.

Writing? A nightmare. Filling out forms, whether job applications, required forms in doctors' offices or government forms is an exercise in frustration. At work, there are reports, memos and telephone messages. Even those with basic writing skills get hung up on grammar and spelling, sometimes to the point of making what they write unintelligible, and always leaving them open to censure from their supervisors.

Eventually, these frustrations drive people to an adult literacy program. People with low literacy skills often work in low-level, unsatisfying jobs; a prime motivator for them is to be able to get a better job. Others come because they want to be able to read to their children and help them with homework; still others because they are tired of feeling stupid.

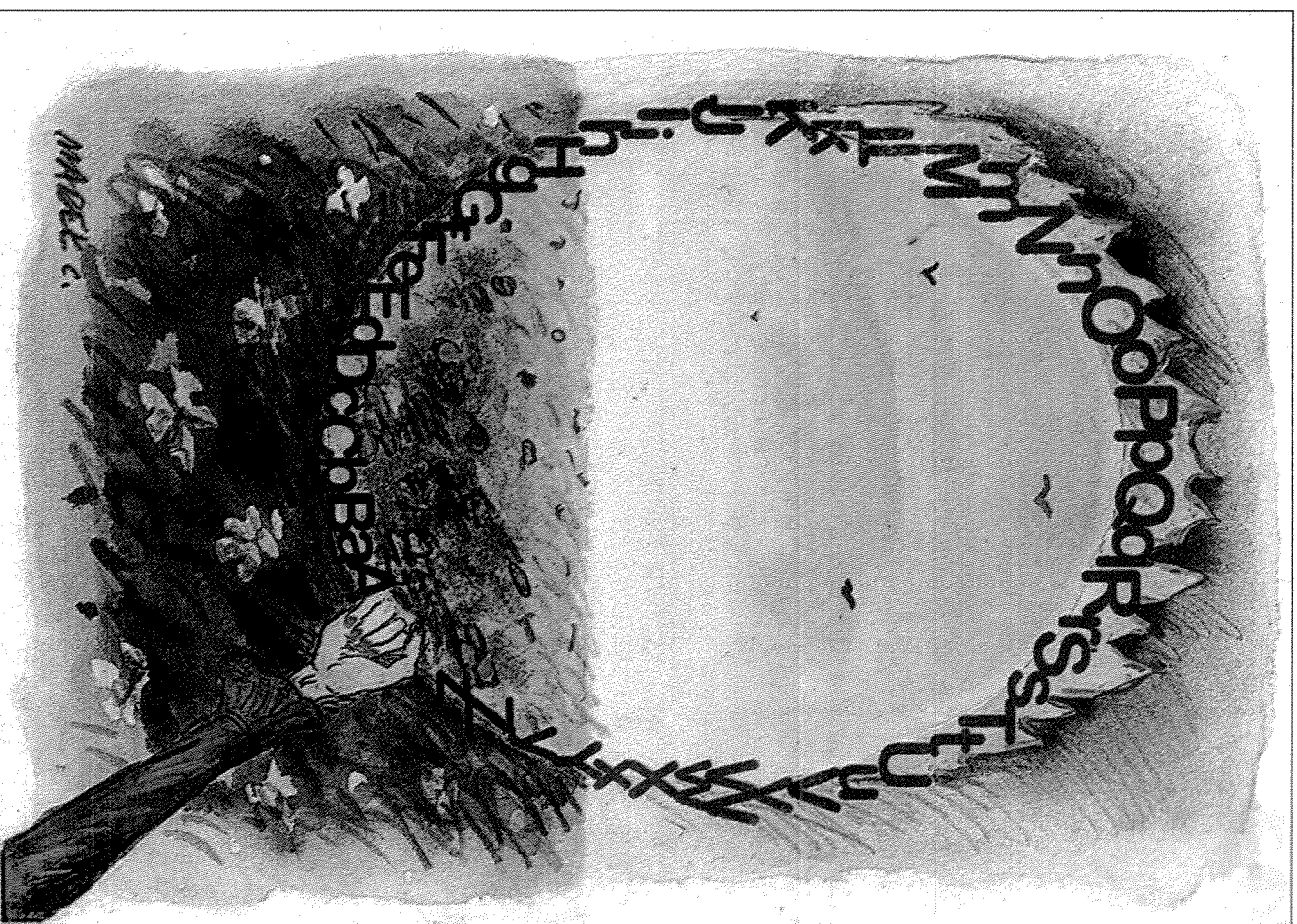
There are many reasons for their lack of skills. Some do come from another country, but many born Canadians have fallen through the cracks as well.

Perhaps there was a vision or hearing problem that was never picked up and the child therefore was not able to absorb what was being taught.

Perhaps the family moved a lot, involving several changes of school, and the teachers simply did not pay enough attention.

Perhaps the child just needed more time to absorb concepts. Teachers often taught to suit the average student and those above and below did not get the attention and challenges they needed.

Whatever their reasons for being there, as we work together they begin to open up, to see that they can do this. They develop achievable goals: to do their own banking



and shopping; to follow a recipe; to fill out a form; to understand work orders and memos; to read to a child; to write notes to the child's teacher; to pass a driver's test; to write a letter to a friend.

As we work toward their goals, I point out their progress.

"Look back at what you could do when you came, and look at what you can do now," I tell them. And I watch their self-esteem grow.

As it grows, they take charge of the process. "I want to learn this, and that. I want to learn and learn and learn." And learn they do.

I learn, too. I learn about myself: that I can do this, that I am a good teacher. I can tune in to my learners' needs and way of learning and connect with them, chal-

lenging them and presenting material in a way they can understand.

I also learn from my learners. They are interesting people. We have philosophical discussions, some triggered when I assign an opinion essay, others just part of the conversation. Some have let me into their lives, confiding, and in some cases writing about family problems. I appreciate and cherish this trust.

It's hard to believe 15 years have gone by since I started doing this. At a volunteer recognition event I was asked why I have continued in the program for such an extraordinarily long time.

"I've never lost interest," I replied. And I doubt that I ever will.

Irene Davis Lives in Toronto.