

Read about the magic of words

MAGIC, SHE CALLS IT. And it is, that moment when the squiggles on the page become letters and the shapes become words.

Most of us are too young when it happens to take much notice. Not this group. They've lived without the magic for so long that just walking into this classroom and saying so is a major act of bravery. There isn't one of them who will forget their moment.

Wayne had his on a bus. He heard the driver expounding on some issue and actually understood the point the guy was trying to make. Up until then, up until the teachers at the Victoria READ Society taught him how to find the subject in a sentence, even spoken words had just been gibberish.

A Closer Look



**JODY
PATERSON**

"I could recognize words here and there when people were talking to me, enough to let me get the gist of what they were saying. But when I listened to that bus driver, I realized I'd heard an essay," he recalls. "It was the first time I'd been able to pick out the topic."

More than a fifth of Canadians have serious problems understanding the written word. There are dozens of reasons why, from learning disorders that scramble the words to childhoods so traumatic that learning isn't possible. One READ student, born and raised in Canada, was in his 40s before he ever set foot in a classroom.

But every non-reader has this in common: Subterfuge and shame, lifetimes of secrets and sleights-of-hand needed to bluff your way through a world that assumes literacy.

Wayne opted for the star-employee route, distracting his bosses by working "five times as hard as the average person." Daryl became his own boss and made sure he had a cushion of literate employees between him and anything that needed to be read. Others fall away, to welfare or crime.

"I tried to go to college 12 or so years ago," says Randy. "But I couldn't understand anything that was going on. I left after two weeks. I tried a few times after that, stepped through a few doors. But I'd always just end up walking away."

Nothing is easy when reading is a struggle. The directions on the prescription bottle are a mystery. Job application forms are nightmares.

Reading a bedtime story to your children or helping with homework is impossible, and that much worse because you don't want them to know the reason.

"My kids would come home from school and ask me to help them, and I'd start going on about how that was the teacher's job and she ought to be doing it," says Kathy, one of 38 students currently taking READ adult literacy classes. "One day, I just realized I'd love to help my kids. I wanted to be there for them. So I started coming here."

READ's classes are run out of a weary-looking building on McKenzie Street, the least of the society's worries what with the program itself in constant jeopardy. Only the pleas of distraught students this summer stopped the B.C. government from cutting the budget by \$150,000, two-thirds of total funding.

Here, the magic is in the mundane details — tiny classes, one-to-one teacher time, unlimited patience. The average stay is 20 weeks, although some students will need double that or even longer.

But the real magic starts with just showing up, free at last to tell your terrible secrets to people who know exactly what you're talking about. "When I enter these doors," says Wayne, "the last thing I could think is that I'm the only one with this problem."

(Join READ students for a panel discussion on literacy issues, noon Thursday at Spectrum Community Theatre.)