

Catching up on a little reading thanks to the TC book drive

Art Boudreau never made it past Grade 6. In truth, he says, he shouldn't have got that far.

An English kid in a largely French-speaking Nova Scotia school, and never an academic star, he was allowed to drift behind.

"If you were a bit slow in learning, you were stupid," he recalls. "Go work on the fishboats. That's what they'd tell you."

So he quit and went to work — commercial fishing, tree-planting, construction, always something physical. He had no choice. He couldn't read or write.

"I guess I could write 'Hi, how are you' and that's about it," he says.

Boudreau coped with illiteracy the same way you muddle through in a foreign country. Ask directions, and keep on asking until you arrive at your destination. Let the answering machine take the message for your wife, because you can't write it down.

From time to time he would have the urge to return to the classroom, but economics wouldn't allow it.

"If you can't afford to go to school, you don't go to school. You



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continue working."

Which he did, until one recent day when he hurt his leg while driving a Bobcat. No more physical work for you, said the doctor. For Boudreau, his long beard streaked with grey, the future looked grim. The bills were coming in, but not the paycheques.

That's when the Workers' Compensation Board sent him to the Victoria READ Society where, at age 47, he is finally learning to read.

"I'm amazed at where I've gone, from where I was to where I am now," he says. "My wife is amazed."

He doesn't read fluidly, not after just five months, but he's getting there. "Now, I find myself reading things on the sides of vehicles. I'll sound things out more."

And he writes, not with complicated language, but with imagination — stories about flying pink pigs and wandering Bic lighters. Right now he's 53 pages into a yarn about a prospector in the Kootenays.

Boudreau knows he has a way to go, knows his future remains uncertain. But his chances look brighter than they did last September.

Monday was open house day at the READ Society, a non-profit outfit where students of all ages learn basic academic skills. They come from a variety of backgrounds, with a variety of abilities.

Most stay for about a year; the goal

is to get them up to a Grade 8-10 level.

The READ Society is one of the beneficiaries of the annual *Times Colonist* book drive, which raises money for education- and literacy-related causes.

Readers are asked to donate good used books, which — after local schools have had first pick — are sold to the public a couple of weeks later. Last year, more than \$150,000 was divided among 78 organizations.

For the second consecutive year, the book drive will be held in the old Bay building at 1701 Douglas St., thanks to its new owners, Townline Group.

The main dropoff is this weekend, Feb. 19-20, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Books can be brought to the Herald Street entrance of the old Bay building, where they will be collected by volunteers.

Please, no magazines, encyclopedias, or *Reader's Digest* condensed books. (Sorry, but they're just too hard to sell. You might as well drop off a box of rocks.) Ditto for the *Introductory Psychology* text that has gathered dust for the past 20 years.

The sale itself will be March 5 and 6. It should, once again, be a success, as the prices are great, as are the causes it supports.

Just ask Art Boudreau.

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