

**TURN THE
PAGE
AND YOU
DON'T
STOP!**

**Sharing Successful
Chapters in Our Lives
with Youth**

Edited by
Patrick M. Oliver

Foreword by Useni Eugene Perkins

Say It Loud! Readers and Writers Series • Chicago

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FOREWORD



Turn the Page and You Don't Stop is an impressive collection of essays, commentaries, stories and poems that celebrate the importance of reading as an indispensable tool and resource to enhance a person's cognitive development and knowledge of life. Indeed, even those skeptics who do not appreciate the power and compassion of the written word will be impressed by the writings in this literary gem. These writings are crafted by a wide and diverse range of successful writers who share with us how reading has contributed to their own careers and achievements. For example, Janis F. Kearney, the author of the best selling autobiography, *Cotton Field of Dreams: A Memoir*, and President William Jefferson Clinton's personal diarist, reveals how her sharecropper father and God-fearing mother made personal sacrifices to ensure that all of their children received a quality education. University professor, poet, memoirist, and critic, Dr. Sandra Y. Govan, tells with humor and passion the story of how she was driven to become a reader as she matched wits with a despotic grade school teacher. Dr. Julianne Malveaux, nationally recognized economist, syndicated columnist, and author, fondly recalls how her early passion for reading proved to be more than an enjoyable pastime.

These are just a few among the many often poignant stories told by contributors to this book who acknowledge reading as being the springboard for their personal and professional development. It is important to note that these writers come from various professions,

NOSE IN A BOOK

Dr. Julianne Malveaux

“**Y**ou have always got your nose in a book,” my mother yelled at me. As my siblings swirled around me doing chores, I read. A moody 13, I was more enthralled by the printed word than anything that was happening in my own life. I used to take the *World Book Encyclopedia* and line it up on our hallway floor, so that when, at the end of an entry, they directed you to see something else, I’d already have it ready for an uninterrupted read. I had read my way around the African continent nearly a decade before my toes hit African soil, and while the encyclopedic entries gave me just a scant idea of what to expect, there was something rich and sweet about the process of expecting. And so, I knew New York before I got there, thought I understood the Harlem Renaissance before I’d laid eyes on the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. I had “gone south” before getting there, inhaled the legislative process before coming to Washington, and had even fallen in and out of love with a brother who came to life through the printed world.

Maybe I take it just a bit to the extreme, but reading is one of life’s very special pleasures. Through the printed word, whole worlds can come to life, feelings can be transmitted, passions for social justice enflamed. All you have to do is read Martin Luther King’s *Why We Can’t Wait*, or W.E.B. DuBois’ *Souls of Black Folk* to understand the challenges that African American people have always faced. Check out Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* to get a sense of coming of age (or, for that matter, read her latest cookbook to understand the symbiotic connection between feelings and feeding). If you

ever think you are “losing it”, Sylvia Path’s *The Bell Jar* puts all of that in perspective. The matter of romantic compromise is deftly handled in Toni Cade Bambara’s short story “The Johnson Girls” from the short story collection, *Gorilla, My Love*.

Before *Beloved* became a movie, Toni Morrison brought the beauty shop to life, down to the smell of fresh-fried hair and the tang of Dixie Peach in her book, *The Bluest Eye*. Her tale of female friendship, in *Sula* reveals a secret sisterhood that many of us have experienced. Our poets, too, evoke, provoke and bring on the smiles. Where have you gone, wrote Mari Evans, with your confident walk your crooked smile? Can’t you see the loping swagger? My heart in one pocket, she writes, rent money in the other. Don’t you know the roguish charmer, the brother who talked you out of your last five cents, the one you might have paid for the performance if you, too, were not at the end of your rope. That’s good writing, evocative, and memorable, the stuff that makes you want to keep your nose in a book.

I am a fairly indiscriminate reader. I love reading both fiction and nonfiction by African American authors, but I have been accused of reading soup cans when I’m bored. I love to read history—both in fictional form and straight, with no chaser. When I read, I talk back. And in order to talk back, I sometimes have to tackle those dead white males that did black folks so wrong with their equivocating about issues like slavery. When I read David McCullough’s biography of John Adams, I appreciated Adams for the attention he gave his wife, Abigail, but also was utterly furious that he knew he was wrong on the slavery issue, but was content to be wrong. He said that future generations would have to deal with issues of race, and acknowledged that he sacrificed black folks to save the union. It still makes me want to holler.

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The progressive historian Howard Zinn writes about the histories we learn and those we do not. We know about President John Adams, but not about the slaves who cooked his breakfast, and those who cleaned his house. We know the famous Frederick Douglass story because he was educated enough to write it, but we only see his wife, Anna Murray, the woman who helped him escape but then sat at the sidelines of his success, through the eyes of others. Jewell Parker Rhodes (in her book *Douglass's Women: A Novel*) wrote of her in historical fiction, but imagine that we had her biography, in her own words.

History is written, they say, by the winners. From that perspective, it makes sense that we elevate white men in leadership positions and ignore those black folks, women and other people of color whose contribution, though significant, is hidden because they weren't perceived as winners. When I read the stories from the perspective of the so-called victors, I am always wondering what the silent would say. We know that a brother made it to the North Pole before the so-called discoverer did! Did Shakespeare's sisters write his plays? Why won't August Wilson get the same play? Do James Baldwin, Paule Marshall and Nikki Giovanni belong in the "canon" of central literature because their stuff is as good as Herman Melville's, Edgar Allen Poe's and Ernest Hemingway's. For that matter, why are folks so agitated about the bad girl and bad boy behavior of the 21st century when many of the writers of a century ago absolutely enjoyed acting out? Come on —Hemingway courted death and eventually killed himself. Mary McCarthy was belligerently angry with many of her peers, and worked all of that drama out in public. The Algonquin room was yesterday's equivalent of today's downtown club. Back then, talented writers and

their bad behavior earned a wink and a nod from reviewers because of their talent and because of an old boy/girl network. Fast forward. Think about it.

I don't do much science fiction, because I think that being black in white America is too much like living science fiction, especially with the insanity and the stereotypes that shape our existence. I'm reacting, of course, to the bizarre confidence with which a former Secretary of Education would propose a "thought experiment" like aborting all of our nation's black babies. Of course, good science fiction would give me the imaginatory tools to abort his mouth, to, perhaps, place a trap on it, or to allow one of his incisors to grow sharp when he uttered ignorant and racist crap.

The kumbaya crowd will tell me that there has been a misunderstanding, that the Secretary didn't mean what he said and that he is not a racist. I say that I know what I heard and I condemn him, in the harshest terms, for it. We simply do not speak the same language or have the same sensibilities. Yet there are science fiction writers, phenomenal African American women, who write eloquently of cultural misunderstanding through science fiction. I love Octavia Butler's work (especially *Kindred*, and *The Parable of The Sower*) and also Tananarive Due's (notably *The Good House* and *The Living Blood*). They bring the strange to life in a contemporary context, and stimulate my imagination.

In my own field of economics, there is a rich and fascinating body of knowledge that has emerged absent the African American perspective. John Kenneth Galbraith, the wonderful and progressive economist, managed to mention us only in passing, but we make our appearance in Gunnar Myrdal's *The American Dilemma*, and also in

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Oliver Cromwell Cox's *Caste, Class, and Race* (Elliot Liebow's *Talley's Corner* is an ethnographic study that now reads like fatally focused fiction. Missing in economic writing are biographies of those early economists, especially of the women like Dr. Sadie Tanner Mosell Alexander (1898-1989) and Dr. Phyllis Ann Wallace (1921-1993). We need to know about their work, but also about their intellectual development and about the texture of their lives.

I so love the printed word that I'd love you, the readers of this essay, to share that love. To love the notion that print can make other worlds come alive for us. To love the fact that we can communicate thoughts and ideas to each other through print. To literally be tickled by words and that which they convey. To be transported out of a static present space and into an electric future, just through print.

Print has taken me through hard times. Three years ago, a bad mammogram introduced the possibility of breast cancer into my life. My friends laughed that the first place I went was to the Internet, to find a book, *A Year To Live* (by Stephen Levine) to reassure me. Yes, it was a little morbid, but the printed word said more to me than a counselor or friend could. I needed the love and support of my friends, but I also needed the printed reminder that others had gone through this, that everything would be okay.

Here is my mantra—when in doubt, read. Read when you are happy, read when you are sad. Read when you are lonely. Read when you are mad. Read when you need guidance, and when you need to smile. Read when you need to escape, even for a little while.

You have always got your nose in a book, my mama says to me now. As an adult, I can still think of no greater pleasure than sitting in her home, looking through her library, and grabbing something to

read. *The apple doesn't fall far from the tree; there is not a single room in her home where you won't find a book; in amazing symmetry, the same is true of my home, from the basement to the bathroom.* Yes, I always have my nose in a book, because books are my bridge to the world.

SOMETIMES I LOOK BACK

Victor Hill

I was a “country boy.” I have no idea when I came to see myself as such, but I don’t recall ever regarding myself any other way I was raised in a rural community that sat eight to ten miles south of Little Rock in central Arkansas. Eight to ten miles doesn’t seem like a long way now, but back in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it seemed like a considerable distance. Woods surrounded my family’s house. Many people in the community grew gardens and kept hog pens. On occasion we would make the trip from what we called “the county” to “town.” Everybody knew everybody and there was a sense of belonging and mutual responsibility, which is what I mean by community. I think those things are inherent in the term.

My father was and is a natural farmer. He has a closeness to the land and to nature that I hope I have inherited, if only in the smallest quantity. He always talked of self-sufficiency and learning to “live off the land.” To this day, I live as simple and natural a life style as possible. I pick, wash and put up greens and peas from my father’s garden and have planned out my own.

My mother was and is a born teacher. Most people who know my family agree that I particularly take after my mother in personality and temperament. She loves learning and imparting knowledge to others. She was also in some sense a scientist, and her children were among her earliest guinea pigs. She taught us to read at a very early age. In fact, I have no recollection of not knowing how to read. I recall at the age of four writing and illustrating stories for my own amusement as I waited for my older brother to return home from school. I have

always loved being around books, paper, pencils and pens. I still do to this day. I have owned two homes in the last fifteen years. In each one I had a library built in one of the rooms. I can hardly imagine living in a house without a library and a gym in it. What would be the point?

Like most children, I wanted to be as much like everyone else as I could. But I had several qualities that marked me as different, the most notable of which was my eye condition. I have a condition called “convergent strabismus.” My right eye turns inward noticeably giving me the appearance of being “cross-eyed.” Such being the case, I was the butt of a great many jokes, a great amount of teasing, and maybe worst of all, pejorative assumptions about my intellectual capabilities. It was always a social handicap; when I was thirty and had graduated from law school, I learned that it was considered a physical handicap. To me, it was a huge inconvenience, and often an embarrassment. I still have a habit of looking down or away when I speak to people. Just the same, despite the opinions of the experts, I never regarded myself as being physically handicapped. Compared to truly handicapped people, my condition is nothing more than a minor annoyance.

When I was in elementary school, the schools had not yet become desegregated. We were separate but far from equal in the facilities and equipment at our disposal. The teachers, however, were first-rate. This was so, I think, because they cared about the children on a personal level. They had a first-hand understanding of the challenges that we would face and they were determined to prepare us to meet them to the best of their ability. There was one teacher who would exhort us on a regular basis to, “Read, colored people, read!” She said it with great urgency.

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I did read, and needed no prompting. In those days, something called the Bookmobile would make regular rounds down in “the country.” It was like a mini-library on wheels. It would stop at a certain location for a while to allow the children to browse and make selections from the shelves. A week or two later, it would return to retrieve the books and allow other selections to be made. I loved the Bookmobile.

From time to time, my mother would take us to the public library in Little Rock. I would never know where to start. I wanted to touch and smell and read every book in the building. Being surrounded by books was about the closest thing to Heaven I could imagine. For some reason, I developed a fascination for martial arts and mythology. I eventually read every book I could get my hands on in both categories. I seem to recall regarding mythology as being like comic books without the pictures. I would supply the pictures either by drawing them or by simply fashioning them in my imagination.

It was during these trips to the library that I decided that I wanted to earn a black belt in some martial art and a master’s degree in either philosophy or engineering. I met some remarkable teachers and accomplished both those goals while still in my early twenties.

I went on to go to law school and worked as a legal aid lawyer for about fourteen years. I was prevailed upon to run for circuit judge to replace the sole African-American circuit judge in this district, who had decided to retire. Being introverted and reclusive all my life, I initially resisted. Eventually, I agreed to run for the position and won the election. I am now in my sixth year on the bench. I am still “cross-eyed,” still introverted and reclusive. I still love to read everything in sight. With all the briefs, cases and other items that I have to read daily, that comes in handy.

I have learned a number of lessons over the years. Most of them are lessons taught to me by the challenges that I faced in life. They are:

- 1.** Don't go around feeling sorry for yourself. Look around; somebody's worse off than you are.
- 2.** Prepare yourself. Train physically as if you had a world title fight coming up; you never can tell. Study constantly. Hone your mind as if all humanity was relying on you to do great things; because it is. Look to your soul. Monitor your thoughts, words, motives and deeds as if a benevolent and omniscient God were watching your every thought; I believe this to be so.
- 3.** When it comes to personal accomplishment, it's good to have people around you who believe in you, but ultimately what you think of yourself far outweighs what anyone else thinks of you.
- 4.** Never accept less than the absolute best that you have to offer at whatever you do. Remember that mastery and mediocrity are both habits. The one that will prevail is the one that you decide to cultivate.
- 5.** Take your duties and responsibilities seriously but don't take yourself all that seriously. Laugh at yourself sometimes, everybody else probably is. You might as well join in the fun.
- 6.** Whatever you do, be guided by principle, and foremost among these should be honor and personal integrity.

POEM TO A YOUNG BLACK MIND
Allyson Horton

come now born
beautiful ones
be intrigued
to know learn
acquire truths
modify myths
discover your
authentic value
against an un/authentic landscape
come now born
beautiful ones
open a book
of reliable source
& encounter who u
supremely are...