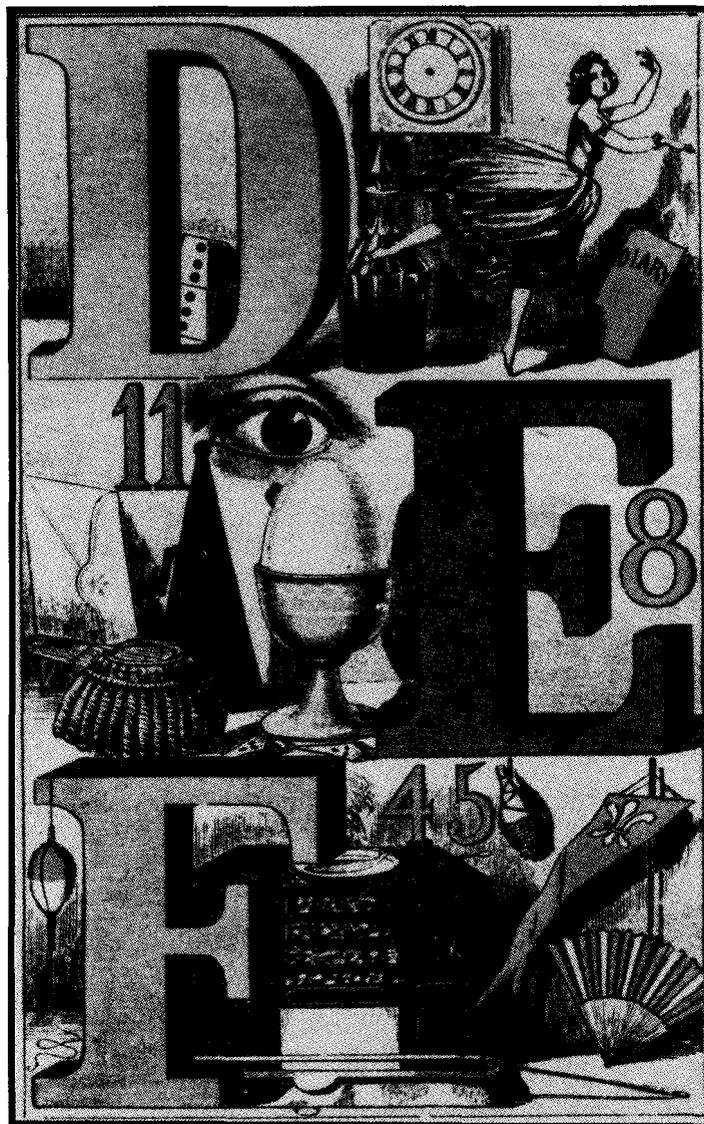


People Who Need to Learn

My conscious awareness of literacy began last year when, as a *Globe and Mail* feature writer, I did a story on Beat the Street. This Frontier College-assisted literacy program was founded by two ex-cons, Rick Parsons and Tracy LeOuvre. Tracy didn't learn to read until he was in his mid-30s, and had a record as long as both his arms. Rick had been brutalized by a stepfather and relegated to a home for "retards."

After the story appeared in the *Globe*, I volunteered as a tutor in Beat the Street, which was designed for street kids and other people who fall between the cracks. The day I phoned to make my services available, a woman who happened to be in the office at that moment looking for a tutor said she'd take me. Her name was Carole Boudrias. Her label: welfare mother of four.

A week later, I rode my bike over to Carole's lower-Riverdale, government-subsidized house, met her and her four kids, and set to work. She figured she had about a grade three or four literacy level. Her eldest son, Jay then 12, had taught her to read. We sat at her glass-topped dining room table, overlooking a giant TV screen that was always on, and opened her Ontario government correspondence course.



So began an experience that unfolded in the most unexpected, sometimes joyful, sometimes painful, ways. I began as a romantic, thinking how wonderful it was that she and I—though so different—could work together. We also had something in common: we both came from dysfunctional families, though my so-called “respectable, middle-class background” provided me with an economic security and a formal education that she had never known.

I had fantasies, I now realize, that Carole would be transformed, that she would become a regular member of society, with a job and an independent life that had so far eluded her. She has survived on welfare all her life, with the exception of two short stints on assembly line jobs, packing pickles and rolling Christmas paper. In contrast, I have worked all my life, in relatively privileged circumstances. I have a university degree, which my parents assumed I would get. I learned to read when I was four years old. I took it for granted. Reading is like walking or breathing for me, and one of

my major pleasures. I had never encountered people for whom the reading-writing world was an alien, threatening place. Carole never got read to as a child, and her children rarely get read to. Her

BY JUDY STEED & CAROLE BOUDRIAS

son Jay, I soon found out, could barely read a newspaper, felt great anxiety about reading, was in a "special" class, and was contemplating dropping out of school.

Carole is one of ten children in a French-Canadian family. Both parents were alcoholics. She was sexually abused by her grandfather, abused by her mother, and sent through a series of foster homes. She finally ran away at 15, lived as a street kid, survived as a prostitute, and went on to have four children. She is a remarkable survivor, a good mother, a warm, sensitive, intelligent woman — and now an author. When we started working together, she told me she had always wanted to write a book. So she began her autobiography, which became the focus of our work together. I then helped her apply for a Canada Council Exploration grant. She got it. The first thing she did, when she got the check, was to buy a basic computer. She was stunned that she could have such a thing. She set it up, and started typing.

Eight months later, she has completed a first draft of her book. She is thinking about returning to school. Along the way,

she and I have had our difficulties. Mostly the problems were of my making. I often expected too much. I would get mad when I would go to her place to work, and she would be too tired because she'd stayed up until four in the morning watching TV. I expected her to have work habits like mine. I was writing a biography of Ed Broadbent while she was doing her own autobiography, and I would sometimes feel she just wasn't serious. Then she would amaze me, producing an eloquent, devastating chapter on say, the grandfather who repeatedly raped her, and I would be overwhelmed at her courage and stamina.

Then I would give her a lecture on the evils of Kool-Aid, which she served her kids in place of juice, and nag her about turning in her TV off from time to time. She would humour me, and then withdraw. I began to see myself acting in less than charming ways. Sometimes, I felt overwhelmed by her plight, alternating between feeling sorry for her and angry at her for having so many kids. She would then tell me she was a good, loyal Catholic

and that she didn't believe in abortion. I would argue about "what kind of world did you bring your kids into, how can you have so many kids when you can't take care of yourself?" We would reach an impasse. On one thing we agreed: living on welfare is a rotten way to live. Carole told me: "It's so easy to get on welfare and almost impossible to get off."

Having gone through all these feelings, I'm hoping we can continue together this fall, and do the more mundane work involved in grade nine correspondence courses. I've come to treasure my friendship with Carole and hope we can make it through another year. I have finally realized that in her own way, she has achieved an enormous amount. And the bottom line for her is now clear: without an education, she's not going anywhere.

As for the straight world, there's lots to be done. If more people would team with more people who need to learn, we might get somewhere on a massive scale. We don't need more institutions. We need more attention to the people for whom this world is a nightmare.

Why Me

Carole Boudrais

I was labelled "retard" and put in a special class. My education stopped there. I was ten years old. In this special class they taught me "how to become a good wife." My lesson involved paint-by-numbers and cleaning house. What a joke!

For many years I didn't know how to read or write. I was illiterate. Being illiterate is the most frightening thing. It's like being in a prison of your own self. It's one of the deepest secrets that you keep hidden inside, out of shame. Not being able to read street names, medical instructions or menus pose a threat to survival.

I learned to read and write for the second time at the age of 28. My son was my teacher. He didn't know that. He was six years old. We both sat down and read his grade one book. That was the beginning.

In 1987 I enrolled in a literacy program called Beat the Street. With their help I got myself a good tutor named Judy Steed. Working with Judy she helped me build up my self-confidence and show that I could do it. Since then I have completed grade 9. I had to work very hard and now I am finally getting somewhere.

I am now writing a book to tell others that they should not be ashamed if they are illiterate, if they have fallen between the cracks of the education system. I am now writing a book about my experience so I can help open doors for others so they know there is help out there for them. The name of my book will be "Struggle for Survival."