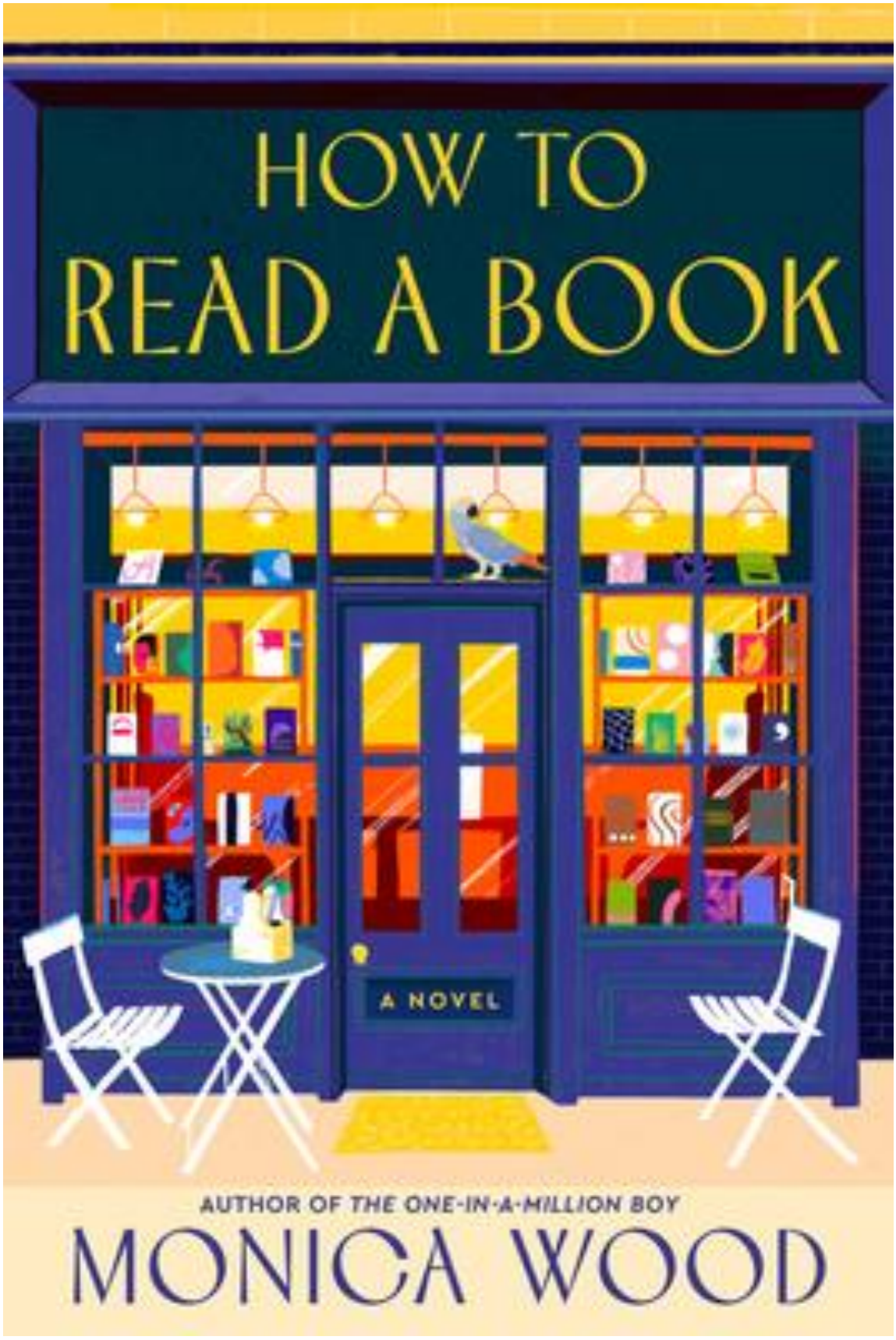
HOW TO
READ A BOOK
A NOVEL
AUTHOR OF THE ONE-IN-A-MILLION BOY
MONICA WOOD

Chapter 3

The First Level of Reading: Elementary Reading

Ours is a time of great interest in and concern about reading. Public officials have declared that the 1970's will be "the decade of reading." Best-selling books tell us why Johnny can or can't read. Research and experimentation in all fields of initial reading instruction proceed at an ever-increasing pace. Three historical trends or movements have converged upon our time to produce this ferment. The first is the continuing effort of the United States to educate all of its citizens, which means, of course, at a minimum, to make them all literate. This effort, which Americans have supported almost from the beginning of the national existence and which is one of the cornerstones of our democratic way of life, has had remarkable results. Near-universal literacy was obtained in the United States earlier than anywhere else, and this in tum has helped us to become the highly developed industrial society that we are at the present day. But there have been enormous problems, too. They can be summed up in the observation that teaching a small percentage of highly motivated children, most of them the children of literate parents, to read—as was the case a century ago—is a far cry from teaching every child to read, no matter how little motivated he may be, or how deprived his background. The

second historical trend is in the teaching of reading itself. As late as 1870, reading instruction was little changed from what it had been in Greek and Roman schools. In America, at least, the so-called ABC method was dominant throughout most of the nineteenth century. Children were taught to sound out the letters of the alphabet individually—hence the name of this method—and to combine them in syllables, first two letters at a time and then three and four, whether the syllables so constructed were meaningful or not. Thus, syllables such as ab, ac, ad, ib, ic were practiced for the sake of mastery of the language. When a child could name all of a determined number of combinations, he was said to know his ABC's. This synthetic method of teaching reading came under heavy criticism around 17 CHAPTER 3. THE FIRST LEVEL OF READING: ELEMENTARY READING18 the middle of the last century, and two alternatives to it were proposed. One was a variant on the synthetic ABC method, known as the phonic method. Here the word was recognized by its sounds rather than by its letternames. Complicated and ingenious systems of printing were evolved for the purpose of representing the different sounds made by a single letter, especially the vowels. If you are fifty or over, it is probable that you learned to read using some variant of the phonic method. A wholly different approach, analytical rather than synthetic, originated in Germany and was advocated by Horace Mann and other educators after about 1840. This involved teaching the visual recognition of whole words before giving any attention to letter-names or letter-sounds. This so-

called sight method was later extended so that whole sentences, representing units of thought, were introduced first, with the pupils only later learning to recognize the constituent words and then, finally, the constituent letters. This method was especially popular during the 1920's and 30's, which period was also characterized by the shift in emphasis from oral reading to silent reading. It was found that ability to read orally did not necessarily mean ability to read silently and that instruction in oral reading was not always adequate if silent reading was the goal. Thus, an almost exclusive emphasis on rapid, comprehensive silent reading was a feature of the years from about 1920 to 1925. More recently, however, the pendulum has swung back again toward phonics, which indeed had never entirely left the curriculum. All of these different methods of teaching elementary reading were successful for some pupils, unsuccessful for others. In the last two or three decades, it has perhaps been the failures that have attracted the most attention. And here the third historical trend comes into play. It is traditional in America to criticize the schools; for more than a century, parents, self-styled experts, and educators themselves have attacked and indicted the educational system. No aspect of schooling has been more severely criticized than reading instruction. The current books have a long ancestry, and every innovation carries in its train a posse of suspicious and, one feels, onpersuadable observers. The critics may or may not be right, but in any event the problems have taken on a new urgency as the continuing effort

to educate all citizens has entered a new phase, resulting in ever-growing high school and college populations. A young man or woman who cannot read very well is hindered in his pursuit of the American dream, but that remains largely a personal matter if he is not in school. If he remains in school or goes to college, however, it is a matter of concern for his teachers as well, and for his fellow students. Hence, researchers are very active at the present time, and their work has resulted in numerous new approaches to reading instruction. Among the more important new programs are the so-called eclectic approach, the individualized reading approach, the language-experience approach, the various approaches based on linguistic principles, and others based more or less closely on some kind of programmed instruction. In addition, new mediums such as the Initial Teaching Alphabet (i.t.a.) have been employed, and sometimes these involve new methods as well. Still other devices and programs are the “total immersion CHAPTER 3. THE FIRST LEVEL OF READING: ELEMENTARY READING19 method,” the “foreign-language-school method,” and the method known variously as the “see-say,” “look-say,” “look-and-say,” or “word method.” Doubtless experiments are now being undertaken in methods and approaches that differ from all of these. It is perhaps too early to tell whether any of these is the long-sought panacea for all reading ills. Stages of Learning to Read One useful finding of recent research is the analysis of stages in learning to read. It is now widely accepted that there are at least four more or less clearly distinguishable

stages in the child's progress toward what is called mature reading ability. The first stage is known by the term "reading readiness." This begins, it has been pointed out, at birth, and continues normally until the age of about six or seven. Reading readiness includes several different kinds of preparation for learning to read. Physical readiness involves good vision and hearing. Intellectual readiness involves a minimum level of visual perception such that the child can take in and remember an entire word and the letters that combine to form it. Language readiness involves the ability to speak clearly and to use several sentences in correct order. Personal readiness involves the ability to work with other children, to sustain attention, to follow directions, and the like. General reading readiness is assessed by tests and is also estimated by teachers who are often skillful at discerning just when a pupil is ready to learn to read. The important thing to remember is that jumping the gun is usually self-defeating. The child who is not yet ready to read is frustrated if attempts are made to teach him, and he may carry over his dislike for the experience into his later school career and even into adult life. Delaying the beginning of reading instruction beyond the reading readiness stage is not nearly so serious, despite the feelings of parents who may fear that their child is "backward" or is not "keeping up" with his peers. In the second stage, children learn to read very simple materials. They usually begin, at least in the United States, by learning a few sight words, and typically manage to master perhaps three hundred to four hundred words by the end of

the first year. Basic skills are introduced at this time, such as the use of context or meaning clues and the beginning sounds of words. By the end of this period pupils are expected to be reading simple books independently and with enthusiasm. It is incidentally worth observing that something quite mysterious, almost magical, occurs during this stage. At one moment in the course of his development the child, when faced with a series of symbols on a page, finds them quite meaningless. Not much later—perhaps only two or three weeks later—he has discovered meaning in them; he knows that they say “The cat sat on the hat.” How this happens no one really knows, despite the efforts of philosophers and psychologists over two and a half millennia to study the phenomenon. Where does meaning come from? How is it that a French child would find the same CHAPTER 3. THE FIRST LEVEL OF READING: ELEMENTARY READING20 meaning in the symbols “Le chat s’asseyait sur le chapeau”? Indeed, this discovery of meaning in symbols may be the most astounding intellectual feat that any human being ever performs—and most humans perform it before they are seven years old! The third stage is characterized by rapid progress in vocabulary building and by increasing skill in “unlocking” the meaning of unfamiliar words through context clues. In addition, children at this stage learn to read for different purposes and in different areas of content, such as science, social studies, language arts, and the like. They learn that reading, besides being something one does at school, is also something one can do on one’s own, for fun, to satisfy

curiosity, or even to “expand one’s horizons.” Finally, the fourth stage is characterized by the refinement and enhancement of the skills previously acquired. Above all, the student begins to be able to assimilate his reading experiences—that is, to carry over concepts from one piece of writing to another, and to compare the views of different writers on the same subject. This, the mature stage of reading, should be reached by young persons in their early teens. Ideally, they should continue to build on it for the rest of their lives. That they often do not even reach it is apparent to many parents and to most educators. The reasons for the failure are many, ranging all the way from various kinds of deprivations in the home environment—economic, social, and/or intellectual (including parental illiteracy)—to personal problems of all kinds (including total revolt against “the system”). But one cause of the failure is not often noted. The very emphasis on reading readiness and on the methods employed to teach children the rudiments of reading has meant that the other, the higher, levels of reading have tended to be slighted. This is quite understandable, considering the urgency and extent of the problems found on this first level. Nevertheless, effective remedies for the overall reading deficiencies of Americans cannot be found unless efforts are made on all levels of reading. Stages and Levels We have described four levels of reading, and we have also outlined four stages of learning to read in an elementary fashion. What is the relation between these stages and levels? It is of paramount importance to recognize that the four stages

outlined here are all stages of the first level of reading, as outlined in the previous chapter. They are stages, that is, of elementary reading, which thus can be usefully divided somewhat in the manner of the elementary school curriculum. The first stage of elementary reading—reading readiness—corresponds to pre-school and kindergarten experiences. The second stage—word mastery—corresponds to the first grade experience of the typical child (although many quite normal children are not "typical" in this sense), with the result that the child attains what we can call second-stage reading skills, or first grade ability in reading or first grade literacy. The third stage of elementary reading—vocabulary growth CHAPTER 3. THE FIRST LEVEL OF READING: ELEMENTARY READING21 and the utilization of context—is typically (but not universally, even for normal children) acquired at about the end of the fourth grade of elementary school, and results in what is variously called fourth grade, or functional, literacy—the ability, according to one common definition, to read traffic signs or picture captions fairly easily, to fill out the simpler government forms, and the like. The fourth and final stage of elementary reading is attained at about the time the pupil leaves or graduates from elementary school or junior high school. It is sometimes called eighth grade, ninth grade, or tenth grade literacy. The child is a "mature" reader in the sense that he is now capable of reading almost anything, but still in a relatively unsophisticated manner. In the simplest terms, he is mature enough to do high school work. However, he is not yet a

“mature” reader in the sense in which we want to employ the term in this book. He has mastered the first level of reading, that is all; he can read on his own and is prepared to learn more about reading. But he does not yet know how to read beyond the elementary level. We mention all this because it is highly germane to the message of this book. We assume—we must assume—that you, our reader, have attained ninth grade literacy, that you have mastered the elementary level of reading, which means that you have passed successfully through the four stages described. If you think about it, you realize that we could not assume less. No one can learn from a how-to-do-it book until he can read it; and it is particularly true of a book purporting to teach one to read that its readers must be able to read in some sense of the term. The difference between aided and unaided discovery comes into play here. Typically, the four stages of elementary reading are attained with the help of living teachers. Children differ in their abilities, of course; some need more help than others. But a teacher is usually present to answer questions and smooth over difficulties that arise during the elementary school years. Only when he has mastered all of the four stages of elementary reading is the child prepared to move on to the higher levels of reading. Only then can he read independently and learn on his own. Only then can he begin to become a really good reader. Higher Levels of Reading and Higher Education Traditionally, the high schools of America have provided little reading instruction for their students, and the colleges have provided

none. That situation has changed in recent years. Two generations ago, when high school enrollments increased greatly within a relatively short period, educators began to realize that it could no longer be assumed that entering students could read effectively. Remedial reading instruction was therefore provided, sometimes for as many as 75% or more students. Within the last decade, the same situation has occurred at the college level. Thus, of approximately 40,000 freshmen entering the City University of New York in the fall of 1971, upwards of half, or more than 20,000 young people, had to be given some kind of remedial training in reading. That does not mean, however, that reading instruction beyond the elemen- CHAPTER 3. THE FIRST LEVEL OF READING: ELEMENTARY READING22 tary level is offered in many U.S. colleges to this day. In fact, it is offered in almost none of them. Remedial reading instruction is not instruction in the higher levels of reading. It serves only to bring students up to a level of maturity in reading that they should have attained by the time they graduated from elementary school. To this day, most institutions of higher learning either do not know how to instruct students in reading beyond the elementary level, or lack the facilities and personnel to do so. We say this despite the fact that a number of four-year and community colleges have recently instituted courses in speed reading, or in “effective” reading, or “competence” in reading. On the whole (though there are exceptions), these courses are remedial. They are designed to overcome various kinds of failures of the lower

schools. They are not designed to take the student beyond the first level or to introduce him to the kinds and levels of reading that are the main subject of this book. This, of course, should not be the case. A good liberal arts high school, if it does nothing else, ought to produce graduates who are competent analytical readers. A good college, if it does nothing else, ought to produce competent syntopical readers. A college degree ought to represent general competence in reading such that a graduate could read any kind of material for general readers and be able to undertake independent research on almost any subject (for that is what syntopical reading, among other things, enables you to do). Often, however, three or four years of graduate study are required before students attain this level of reading ability, and they do not always attain it even then. One should not have to spend four years in graduate school in order to learn how to read. Four years of graduate school, in addition to twelve years of preparatory education and four years of college—that adds up to twenty full years of schooling. It should not take that long to learn to read. Something is very wrong if it does. What is wrong can be corrected. Courses could be instituted in many high schools and colleges that are based on the program described in this book. There is nothing arcane or even really new about what we have to propose. It is largely common sense. Reading and the Democratic Ideal of Education We do not want to seem to be mere carping critics. We know that the thunder of thousands of freshmen feet upon the stairs makes it hard to hear, no matter how reasonable the message.

And as long as a large proportion, even a majority, of these new students cannot read effectively at the elementary level, we are aware that the first task to be faced must be to teach them to read in the lowest, the largest common-denominator, sense of the term. Nor, for the moment, would we want it any other way. We are on record as holding that unlimited educational opportunity—or, speaking practically, educational opportunity that is limited only by individual desire, ability, and need—is the most valuable service that society can provide for its members. CHAPTER 3. THE FIRST LEVEL OF READING: ELEMENTARY READING23 That we do not yet know how to provide that kind of opportunity is no reason to give up the attempt. But we must also realize—students, teachers, and laymen alike—that even when we have accomplished the task that lies before us, we will not have accomplished the whole task. We must be more than a nation of functional literates. We must become a nation of truly competent readers, recognizing all that the word competent implies. Nothing less will satisfy the needs of the world that is coming.