

The background of the cover is a light yellow-green gradient. It is decorated with several stylized, light green leaf motifs scattered across the surface. The leaves are simple in design, with a central vein and a few smaller veins branching off.

# THE SECRET OF NATURAL READERS

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How Preschool Children Learn to Read

**Ada Anbar**

 *Greenwood*  
PUBLISHING GROUP

*The Secret of  
Natural Readers*

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Natural Readers*

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*How Preschool Children  
Learn to Read*

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*To Michael  
for a beautiful life*

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Until 6,000 years ago,  
Everybody was illiterate,  
Then reading was invented.

—The author

To write and read comes  
by nature.

—William Shakespeare,  
*Much Ado About Nothing*

Preschool children learn best through play.  
Natural reading development does not replace play,  
It is based on play!

—The author



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## *Preface*

I first stumbled on preschool reading capability many years ago when a friend asked me to teach her five-year-old son to read. We were living in Israel at the time, and my friend's family was planning a yearlong visit to the United States. Concerned that her son would be poorly prepared for first grade, she asked me to give him a leg up and teach him beginning reading. And so the boy came over to our home three times a week during that summer month to take his Hebrew reading lessons.

My own son, who was three years old at the time, asked to sit with us and listen to the sessions. I agreed. And then my friend's two-year-old daughter, who thought this sounded like fun, asked to join us too. I gave in to her request on the condition that she behaved well. She did. And so the three children and myself spent some pleasant hours during that summer month on our balcony, surrounded by pink, white, and red geraniums, helping the child learn to read. By the end of the summer, the five-year-old boy went to the United States, and I continued to help my son occasionally with his reading. To my surprise, by age four, Ran was able to read from all of his Hebrew picture books.

I was a teacher of emotionally disturbed children at the time, working at a rehabilitation hospital with children who had to be removed from their homes because of behavior problems.

A few years later, we moved to the United States, and when our younger son started nursery school—one of the best university nursery schools in the country—I fell in love with that place. I became fascinated with early childhood education, with the breadth and depth of development that occurs in the early years of life. And I decided to change my specialty to working with preschool children. Helping prevent problems from developing would be more rewarding, I thought, than trying to ameliorate problems in later years.

Meanwhile, my younger son was learning to read English and Hebrew (we spoke Hebrew at home and English outside the home). Intuitively supporting his literacy development, I was curious to see if he would become an early reader like his older brother. As it turned out, by age four Ariel was a fluent reader of English picture books. I admit that I had been neglecting his Hebrew reading development by then.

During the 1980s, America was changing its attitude toward early reading development. There was a growing acceptance of early readers and a burgeoning fascination with the topic. Working then toward my doctoral degree in early childhood education, I was challenged one day “to do something with those children”—a group of preschool readers my adviser had identified and videotaped. Reportedly, these children had learned to read by themselves and were regarded by my adviser and their parents to be unusually precocious. Having raised two early readers myself, bright kids, albeit not uncommonly gifted, I was interested in the topic and felt intellectually challenged. Curious to find out how these children had acquired their early reading ability, and what kind of developmental process they experienced, I made this question the focus of my doctoral study.

So how do three- and four-year-old children become capable readers without formal instruction? How *can* they do it? While many schoolchildren have difficulty with literacy, these preschoolers seemed to find it easy. Moreover, researchers found that hundreds of thousands of American youngsters enter first grade knowing how to read (for political reasons this finding has not received much publicity). While some children are formally taught, many are not. So what is the secret of their accomplishment; do they really have a unique innate talent for reading, as

some parents believe? *The Secret of Natural Readers* provides the answer to this important question.

Recounting the story of six preschool children, all capable readers before age four with no systematic instruction, this book illustrates how they acquired their early ability. Rich with anecdotes depicting daily life scenes, a chronicled step-by-step account of their learning process is presented. This account offers a new paradigm for early reading development, showing there is much more to it than formal instruction or an unusual talent. In today's literate environment, early reading ability can be achieved naturally, playfully, during routine daily activities, with little pressure and much fun.

My early conclusion has been recently confirmed on a national level. Following three decades of research on early reading development, and new insight from brain research, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the International Reading Association (IRA) are now recognizing the critical importance of the early years for the development of literacy, and, moreover, the effect of this early development on the standards of children's achievements. These two national organizations are now calling on all parents and preschool teachers to encourage children's literacy development from an early age. And numerous programs are now being developed to offer guidance on how to do that.

*The Secret of Natural Readers* joins this effort. This book provides a documented model for action: an evidence-based approach that is grounded on the actual reading development of accomplished young readers who were never formally taught. This approach is based on play, and it is developmentally appropriate. It can be applied at home and/or in a preschool setting.

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## *Acknowledgments*

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The late Professor Edith Dowley, founder and director of Bing Nursery School at Stanford University, for introducing me to the field of early childhood education, and teaching me about the importance of play in young children's lives.

The late William Eller, professor of reading instruction at the University at Buffalo, and former president of the International Reading Association, who encouraged me to take on the fight for preschool reading while preparing me for the uphill struggle to change the public's attitude.

Special thanks are due to the parents and children who are profiled in this book (their names have been changed to protect their privacy). They are the true heroes of this work and made it all possible. Patiently sharing with me their experiences, I will always be indebted to them. The gracious invitations to their homes and cups of coffee that we shared will be fondly remembered.

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And last but not least, I would like to thank my family: my children, Ran, Hannah, Ariel, and Marni, for giving me insight into natural reading development at home; my grandchildren, Josh, Rebecca, Ellie, Yoni, Nathaniel, and Naomi, for further enhancing my insight; and, most importantly, my husband, Michael, for standing by me through the long gestation period of this book, patiently reading and editing the many drafts of the manuscript, and being my computer expert.

# *Part I*

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## *By Way of Introduction*

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# *Chapter One*

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## *Reading Has a History*

The acquisition of language is doubtless the greatest intellectual feat anyone of us is ever to perform.

—Leonard Bloomfield, Introduction  
to the *Study of Language*

Reading and writing are among the basic skills that children must acquire in their early years. Reading is a key to learning, a means to open doors to knowledge. Writing is the tool we use to record information, augment memory, and communicate our feelings and thoughts. These two skills—the written side of language—are so basic to contemporary life that any serious deficiency in either of them is a real handicap. Illiteracy involves the risk of being mentally underdeveloped and culturally disconnected; it also severely reduces the chance for a productive adulthood in contemporary society.

It was not always like this. The social value of reading and writing has changed over time. Throughout most of human existence, literacy was of little importance for the majority of people. It is a relatively recent concept that has gone through many transformations. And the story behind its proliferation from obscure embryonic beginnings to its current universal practice provides a fascinating account, involving culture, religion,

technology, commerce, politics, human ingenuity, and, more than anything else, human drive for growth and development.

In this chapter, I draw a brief outline of this evolutionary story. It will give the reader a perspective on literacy, an appreciation for the progress that has been achieved so far, and better insight into contemporary issues concerning literacy and its development. Understanding the transformations that literacy underwent in the past will enhance our ability to work through changes that may take place in the future. Parents, who have a strong impact on their children's education and development, especially in the early years, early childhood educators, and others who are interested in young children's development are likely to benefit from this panoramic view. It will increase their ability to make wise decisions regarding children's reading and writing development. So let us begin our tour and start from the beginning.

## IN THE BEGINNING

When was the written language invented? Why and where was it invented? And, how has this invention affected human life? During the approximately 3 million years of human evolution, until just a few thousand years ago, mankind did not know to read or write. Mostly occupied with the struggle for survival, the development of oral language, and beginning culture, prehistoric man—our hunter-gatherer ancestor—was absolutely illiterate. There was apparently neither the need nor the desire to develop and use a written language. The earliest evidence we have of recorded information on a physical surface are bones with tally marks scratched on them, dated from around thirty thousand years ago.

Paintings are another form of early records. Magnificent paintings of large animals chased by hunting men, drawn more than twenty thousand years ago, can be found in different parts of the world. Some of the most exquisite examples are located in the cave of Lascaux in southwestern France, the cave of Altamira in northern Spain, and in the recently discovered Chauvet cave in southeastern France. A common explanation postulates that these paintings were used, through a form of sympathetic magic, to ensure success in the hunt.

But the move from a hunting-based to an agriculture-based economy brought about major changes in the lifestyle of the people. When civilization emerged, and small settlements grew into villages and towns, the mystical cave paintings were no longer useful in the daily organization of life in the new society. The growing complexity of town and city life, settled by strangers who often did not know one another, required a new system for the organization of social structure. It is commonly assumed that this new requirement was the impetus for the development of writing. There was no sudden leap, however, from cave paintings to script writing. For thousands of years in prehistoric time, entrepreneurs in the Middle East were recording their business deals with clay tokens modeled in sixteen distinctive shapes (at first “plain” then more “complex”) such as cones, spheres, disks, cylinders, or tetrahedrons, each representing a precise quantity of a product. These symbols developed in time into a pictographic script.<sup>1</sup>

Writing was probably developed to keep records of ownership, stored food, and astronomical events (to optimize sowing time), and to aid in tax collection. Writing also enhanced commercial transactions. But most importantly, writing was essential for the establishment and maintenance of law and order. This was particularly important in the new urban communities, among people who moved away from tribal life with its tight social structure. Once a law was put in writing and publicly displayed (on a large slab of stone or the wall of a monument, as was customary), it provided the necessary regulation for the new society. It also protected the weak from oppression by the strong, to repeat Hammurabi’s words, “The written laws protect everybody.”<sup>2</sup>

It appears that early writing was also associated with the concept of a deity. In many cultures, writing was at first revered as a gift from the gods. And priests were among the first to use script, perhaps as a means to control the population through the written words of the god. (Think of Moses coming down from the mountain holding the Ten Commandments carved in stone.) The priests used script also to praise their gods and kings and pray for their benevolence and protection. Prophylactic amulets with inscriptions were very common all over the ancient world.

Where was this innovation first developed, and how did it spread to the rest of the world? The earliest piece of writing

found so far, dated at about 3500 BC, has been uncovered in Uruk, an ancient Sumerian city in Mesopotamia (now Iraq) on a tablet of solid limestone. It is believed to be a tax account. Although different writing systems evolved independently in other regions of the world—India, the islands of the Aegean Sea, China, and pre-Columbian America, to name a few—the ancient Sumerians are credited with being the first-known literate people. The invention of writing was their gift to humanity. This invention not only helped in the organization of a new and more complex society, it revolutionized all human activity. Because writing begets reading, these activities engender each other. And the highly developed Mesopotemian cultures had much to write about. And so a new phase of human progression could begin.

## THE BRIDGE TO HISTORY

“Script was the last achievement of prehistoric man; with it, he crosses the bridge to history,” wrote Felix Reichmann of Cornell University.<sup>3</sup> Once writing was invented, humanity began to progress at a rapid pace, unparalleled in prehistoric times. Without writing, the sum total knowledge of each isolated region was limited by the memories of its oldest people and by what each generation could discover anew for itself. With writing, it was possible to begin to accumulate knowledge, and one generation after another could learn from the experience of the past.

Yet, as is often the case with new innovations, writing was not unanimously embraced at first. A famous Egyptian legend, for instance, tells that when the god Thoth revealed his discovery of writing to King Thamos, the king denounced it as an enemy of civilization: “Children and young people,” protested the monarch, “who had hitherto been forced to apply themselves diligently to learn and retain whatever was taught them, would cease to apply themselves, and would neglect to exercise their memories.”<sup>4</sup> Plato voiced a similar concern. And there was some truth to that apprehension. Fortunately, the advantages of writing surpassed its apparent disadvantages, and the pressure to progress prevailed.

While it is accepted that script had a polygenetic origin, its development in most regions followed a similar pattern. First