

**Judith C. Isherwood,**  
*Educator, Ste. Anne de Bellevue, Quebec*

# They Give You Butterflies

## Abstract

*In an attempt to help potential drop-outs improve their reading skills, the author was hired, through a Special Projects grant, by a suburban Montreal school board. The two high schools involved in this year-long project determined their own formats for instruction. In School A, the author worked with a rotating group of about thirty students for one and a half hours per week. In School B, she met with two groups of four students each, for three hours per week per group. Pre- and posttest reading scores showed gains from 0 to 4 years, the highest scores occurring in School B. In the spirit of creative nonfiction, the author here summarizes the year – from the imagined viewpoint of one of her School B students, knowing full well that one thing these non-readers do not lack is the “gift of gab.”*

## Résumé

*Dans l'effort d'améliorer l'habilité de lecture des étudiants qui peut-être abandonneront leur études, on a loué les services de l'auteur par une allocation de Projets Spéciales, d'une commission scolaire suburbain de Montréal. Les deux écoles secondaires compromises dans ce projet d'un an, ont déterminé leur propre plan pédagogique. Dans l'Ecole A, l'auteur a travaillé avec un groupe d'à peu près (30) étudiants qui sont venus à tour de rôle 1.5 heures par semaine. Dans l'Ecole B, elle se recontrait avec un groupe de 8 étudiants 3 heures par semaine. Les marques d'habilité de lecture d'avant et d'après les examens ont indiqué un accroissement de 0 à 4 ans en compréhension et dans la méthode de déchiffrer le mot. Les meilleures marques ont eu lieu dans l'Ecole B. Dans l'esprit de la création littéraire non-fictif, l'auteur résume l'année du point de vue imaginaire d'un de ses étudiants de l'école B, sachant bien que ses illettrés ont la langue bien pendue.*

“Skidoos, motorcycles, hockey. . . .” Last September, our new reading teacher asked us what we liked. If she thought we were going to say “school,” she was really out in left field! School’s a place to meet our friends, look at girls, smoke, wrestle, look at girls, fight, set off stink bombs, and look at girls. All of us boys in the vocational program (grades ten and eleven) would have dropped out of school this year, but the guidance counsellors talked us into staying. We take metal or wood shop, computers, typing or food service. I take metal shop two hours a day – we even painted the phys ed teacher’s car.

This new teacher, Mrs. I., was to come three days a week to try and help us to read. We didn’t know why they’d bothered to hire her. For ten years, they’d been trying to teach us, and I’d say, we were probably reading like kids in the second or third grade. Nobody had managed to help us so far, and not because they hadn’t tried! Actually, we’d done all right to get this far without reading. I don’t mean we couldn’t read **anything**. But when any book was assigned, none of us bothered. Why set ourselves up so they could shoot us down? We “couldn’t read.” But of course we “couldn’t write” either, so we had two great excuses! We didn’t know what this new teacher thought she could do with us. But we did know we’d give her a hard time. We doubted if she’d last ‘til Thanksgiving!

We met in classes of four and did our darndest to bug her. We’d come rough-housing into the room and throw open the windows, even on the coldest days. Or we’d sit in her chair. Or we’d get into fights with rulers, or turn up our Walkman radios real loud. But she paid no attention, or else she’d just laugh, and after a while the fun sort of went out of it.

Some of us were taking drivers’ ed. and she asked us about that. I was going to get my license after Christmas. She knew someone who worked for the Quebec Ministry of Transport, and he sent a whole lot of stuff about safe driving. So we talked about that and there was a quiz to see how much we really knew. We took turns “reading” the questions. When we didn’t know a word, she’d just tell us, but she jotted it down to talk about later. Then we talked about the answers to the quiz.

But of course, talking about safe driving led to some wild stories. I mean, she just left herself wide open for that! We’ve all had family or friends in car accidents, and some of the stories were pretty gruesome. So she said for us to write them down. “Write? We never write anything!” But she said just do the best we could, and she’d type them for us that night. Well, we decided to show her! You never heard such a bunch of bloody, messy, horrible stories in your life! People’s heads were cut off and blood was everywhere and cars were smashed. And then she asked me to read mine to her, so she’d be sure she knew all the words to type. And do you know – she

didn't even bat an eyelash! Then the others read theirs and she wrote down words that she couldn't read. But she never said a word about our terrible spelling, only said that we'd all written very good stories!

The next day, she gave us each our stories, all typed. She said to look them over to make sure that she'd copied them correctly. Then she asked us to read them to each other and said we could draw pictures to go with them. Well, drawing is something I can really do, so I was happy. In fact, I felt pretty good about my story, come to think of it, and I think the others did, too.

One day Gary came in, sat down, pulled out a piece of paper and started to write. Well, this in itself was really far out, because Gary never lifted a pencil for anyone! What on earth was he writing? And why? He said to Mrs. I., "I have to write a letter and it's really important. Can you help me spell the words?" She wasn't even bugged that Gary wasn't going to be doing the lessons for the day. In fact, she seemed almost pleased. "Certainly," she said.

Naturally, we all wanted to know who the letter was for, and as it turned out, it was a girl! A blond, too – I've seen her in the halls. He wanted her to know that he liked her and thought she was cute. But he didn't want to sign the letter, and we all had to figure out how he could get it into her locker so she wouldn't know who sent it. We not only figured that out, but when Gary asked Mrs. I. how to spell the words, we all helped too. After the class, I overheard Mrs. I. telling the guidance counsellor – I'm not sure why – that this was the best class we'd ever had! (We never heard what happened when the girl found the letter.)

One day, Mrs. I. had us interview each other and write a report. I interviewed Mike and found out his parents used to raise dogs in the country when he was little, and that Mike wants to raise dogs, too. I never knew that about him. Also that his favourite fruit is the kiwi and that he wants to go to Australia some day. Mrs. I typed the interviews for us, after.

One thing was cool – we hardly ever read aloud. We read to ourselves, asking when we didn't know a word. And we read to find answers to our questions. If we read a story about an island, first we'd tell what we know about islands, what we'd like to know, what we thought the story might tell us. Then we'd read and make predictions about what would happen next, then read on to see how close we came. It was kind of like a game, or like predicting football scores, or trying to guess what your sister's giving you for your birthday. Like a riddle, really. And then you read to find the answer. I'd never thought of reading being like that. (More like a hard, boring job, where you didn't know what you were doing, were punished for not knowing, so you stopped trying.)

We read and read. Mrs. I. brought in newspaper clippings about a tornado she'd been near. She had an 1897 abridged copy of *Robinson Crusoe*. She brought in motorcycle and car magazines and comic books. The drama club was putting on *Grease*, so we read the words to some of the songs and listened to the music. She never gave us those "macho" easy-to-read stories. Instead, she bought five copies of the *Reader's Digest*.

We looked at the ads and the pictures, and then she asked us what we knew about Bill Cosby. After we talked, we read an article about him and found out all sorts of neat things. It was hard to predict, but we did. Kim thought that the children on TV were Cosby's own, and we found out about that. We looked for and found cool words and phrases, such as "big warm paw" and "electronic guignol." (We had to look that up in the dictionary. It means "puppet".) Then we had a contest to see who could find the most compound words in the story, and I won!

We learned the five word-attack rules: read to the end of the sentence to get the meaning; see if it's a compound word; take off the beginning and ending (prefix and suffix) so you can see the root word; see if it rhymes with a word you know (consonant substitution); ask someone or look it up. After a while, we didn't have to ask Mrs. I. so many words. For some reason, Kim had lots of trouble, more than the rest of us. But Mrs. I. always told him the words very matter-of-factly, as if the important thing was the meaning, not the way the letters were put together.

And we played games. Almost every class would end with anagrams, *Scrabble*, or *Hangman*. One day we were fooling around with Gary's shoe, tossing it around the room, and Mrs. I. wouldn't let us play anything at the end of class. We begged, but she said, "no!" That was the end of the shoe tossing! *Scrabble* was always the funniest game, because we're such terrible spellers. Mrs. I. laughed and laughed at some of our words. Suddenly, we realized we were laughing at our mistakes, too, instead of being punished for them!

Gary's favourite game was thinking up initials for us to guess. He's an awful speller, but he knows things like "F.B.I." Sometimes Mrs. I. would give us a list of cars, with each set of letters mixed up ("peje") and we had to figure them out. *Hangman* was more complicated because we always had to have our word, phrase, or sentence on a piece of paper for her to check the spelling first. But we came up with some good ones like "skidoo".

One day, Mrs. I. asked us how we felt about poetry. Well, you can imagine what kind of reaction that got! Mike fell off his chair, Kim turned up his Walkman, and we all groaned. She asked us, if we were to write a poem, what would we write about? Mike said, "girls!" Well, after we all stopped

whistling, she asked us to throw out some ideas about girls, whatever came to mind. Talk about fireworks! She asked for it, and the ideas exploded. But she never said anything, just wrote them all down on the blackboard. When we'd run out of ideas, and had stopped laughing and cat-calling, she asked us to pick out the phrases we liked best and to put them in some sort of order. Well, we did, and suddenly we had a poem! At least it looked like a poem, it was the right shape. And it sounded like one. I never knew a poem could be written by a bunch of people, but we did it, and here it is:

### Girls

Girls

(I like the wiggle)

Eating together, dancing, music,  
Talking, kissing, walking,  
Volleyball, bikinis, suntans –  
Happiness at the beach.  
(They make you drool)

Pina Coladas, parties  
(They make your speech slurry)

Flowers, presents, loving, caring,  
Playing tennis in miniskirts.  
(They put you in a daze)

Girls in tight jeans.  
(They give you butterflies)

We made some more poems and Mrs. I. typed them and made a book for each of us. She called the book *It's Not Poetry*, because that's what we'd told her, but she thought it really was!

After we had read a few more stories from the *Reader's Digest*, Mrs. I. had an idea. How about asking the Canadian editor of the *Reader's Digest* to come and talk to us about the magazine? Well, we couldn't think of any reason why she shouldn't ask him, so she did and he came. He told us that each month, there's a different editor, and it takes three months to make one issue. He had some actual stories that people had written, and they were all marked up and corrected (edited). Then he showed us the same stories all printed in the *Digest*. It was pretty cool. After his talk, we had refreshments – cake, coffee, and cocoa. When I got up to get a cup of coffee, Gary put a piece of cake on my chair before I sat down again, and you can imagine what happened next!

Another time, Mrs. I. asked her son, an artist for *Marvel Comics*, to visit our class. We had read *G.I. Joe* and *Conan the Barbarian*, which her son had drawn, and he came and showed us how he did it. He had some pictures with empty balloons for words, and we had to make up what we thought the characters were saying. He said if we'd give him a snapshot, he'd draw us into a crowd scene! That'd really be far out!

We'd also read stories about the North, so one day, a woman who'd lived on Baffin Island came to tell us about the Inuit and showed us carvings, pictures, and tools which they'd made. She showed us the Inuktitut alphabet and explained how we could each write our name, and we did.

One story in the *Digest* led to a whole project near the end of the school year. The article was about Calvin, a blind boy who lives in Baltimore. Mrs. I. called the **Montreal Association for the Blind**, and they sent us Braille cards and pamphlets about how to be helpful to blind people. We all learned how to write our names in Braille, and talked about how it must feel, not to be able to see. We looked at a colour wheel and tried to imagine how colours must seem to a blind person. Then we wrote some more poems, this time about colours, trying to describe them to someone who can't see. Some of the lines that I like are:

Blue is Georgian Bay  
hiding sunken boats under the cool water.

Pink: loving and caring and saying I'm sorry.

Red is the colour you think of  
when you're looking for trouble,  
hanging around arcades, discos, bars.

Black;  
the smell of exhaust,  
the smooth feel of a '69 Charger,  
the sound of its roaring.

White.  
It reminds me of snow, lightly falling,  
gently onto my face.  
I can taste the tiny frozen flakes  
on my tongue.

At the beginning of the school year, Mrs. I. had given us a test to see what our reading levels were. At the end of the year she gave us another one. We'd all improved, but I'd gone up two grades! We'd put our work into

manila folders during the year, but were still surprised at the end, how much we had done. There were even copies of assignments from English and history which we'd written (yes, written) with her help.

On the last class day, she gave us a party. Some stayed after the refreshments to play *Hangman*, but Kim and I went to the gym to shoot baskets. Mrs. I. really had surprised us all. She'd actually lasted the whole year, and hadn't turned too gray! I think she liked us, and she certainly liked our writing. I'm not sure why our comprehension and word-attack scores did improve, because she was really very laid-back about reading, and never complained or scolded about wrong words. When we talked about things, she treated us like adults who were discussing something really important. I mean, she **listened** to us, and if we were putting her on, she could tell and would laugh. I guess we just learned in spite of ourselves!

On weekends, I work in my dad's auto-body shop, and I'm going to work there when I finish school. That'll be the best part – when I'm finished – and June is almost here! They say that school prepares you for life. I guess that's what Mrs. I. was trying to do. One day she read us a poem written by a girl from another school, a girl who had a lot of trouble with reading:

Climbing up, up, up  
to the top  
What is her destiny  
I don't know  
Reach the top  
Look around  
But there is nothing there  
So she sits down  
and takes out a ciggie  
and a diet soda

I know how the girl felt. To have “nothing there” after you've tried so hard to get there. I guess we all need help of some kind. But I like better the poem we wrote about ourselves:

### Life

Life,  
School, boring,  
(It's not that boring)  
Parties, girls, sex, music, TV;  
Heavy metal, light metal, new-wave rock;  
Hunting grizzly bears, rabbits;  
Fishing, dirt-bikes, boating, skidoos,  
(Fun, dangerous)

I'll need a job  
 Computers, spaceships,  
 Racing stock cars, mechanics,  
 (No homework)  
 A lot of money,  
 Family, wife, kids, dog, goldfish, birds.  
 Life is good to me.

On that last day of class, Mrs. I. asked us to write what we thought about the reading class. Gary wrote, "the room is too small." Mike wrote, "I like the great friends I made." I wrote, "I really liked learning about the colours." And Kim took a long time, as usual. He wrote, "I hope you would still be helping me get through next year. And you should be proud of what you are doing because you are helping a lot of people. Most people may not say this to you, but as long as you know you are helping kids, that's what counts."

Mrs. I. was quiet after she read that. Then she said, "You know what I think?" Well, we really didn't have a clue. She stood and walked to the window. Then she smiled and said, "I think that you all give me butterflies!" And maybe we did. You know, looking back, I think we really did!

*Judith C. Isherwood* is a graduate of Tufts University and the University of Delaware (M.Ed. in Reading). She has worked in the United States as a reading consultant, and in Quebec as a reading teacher and as a creative writing teacher in adult education.

*Judith C. Isherwood* est une graduee de Tufts University et de University of Delaware où elle a reçu sa maîtrise en lecture. Elle a travaillé aux Etats-Unis comme consultante de lecture, et au Québec comme professeur de lecture et comme professeur de rédaction littéraire créatif en éducation des adultes.