

Welby (p. 51), examine the connections each makes between the acts of reading and writing. Have your experiences with e-mail, Twitter, and other social media influenced this answer? If so, in what ways?

3. Write a paper, either individually or with a partner, on reading as a source of empowerment. Draw on your experiences as a reader, as well as those of Alexie and Welby.

RICHARD WRIGHT

From *Fighting Words*

Richard Wright, son of sharecroppers, was born in Mississippi in 1908. He grew up in a household impoverished in body, soul, and spirit and dominated by a fundamentalist grandmother who forbade reading anything but the Bible. His autobiography, Black Boy (1945), chronicles the discrimination, despair, and anger that impelled Wright to move to Chicago and, ultimately, to Paris, where he lived until his death in 1960. His internationally distinguished reputation puts him in the ranks of the celebrated authors he cites in paragraph 46 of "Fighting Words," an excerpt from Black Boy.

I stood at a counter [in the bank lobby] and picked up the Memphis *Commercial Appeal* and began my free reading of the press. I came finally to the editorial page and saw an article dealing with one H. L. Mencken. I knew by hearsay that he was the editor of the *American Mercury*, but aside from that I knew nothing about him. The article was a furious denunciation of Mencken, concluding with one, hot, short sentence: Mencken is a fool.

I wondered what on earth this Mencken had done to call down upon him the scorn of the South. . . . Undoubtedly he must be advocating ideas that the South did not like. Were there, then, people other than Negroes who criticized the South? . . . Now, how could I find out about this Mencken? There was a huge library near the riverfront, but I knew that Negroes were not allowed to patronize its shelves any more than they were the parks and playgrounds of the city. I had gone into the library several times to get books for the white men on the job. Which of them would now help me to get books? And how could I read them without causing concern to the white men with whom I worked? . . .

One morning I paused before the [desk of a] Catholic fellow [who was hated by white Southerners].

"I want to ask you a favor," I whispered to him.

"What is it?"

"I want to read. I can't get books from the library. I wonder if you'd let me use your card?"

He looked at me suspiciously.

"My card is full most of the time," he said.

"I see," I said and waited, posing my question silently.

"You're not trying to get me into trouble, are you, boy?" he asked, staring at me.

"Oh, no, sir."

"What book do you want?"

"A book by H. L. Mencken."

"Which one?"

"I don't know. Has he written more than one?"

"He has written several."

"I didn't know that."

"What makes you want to read Mencken?"

"Oh, I just saw his name in the newspaper," I said.

"It's good of you to want to read," he said. "But you ought to read the right things."

I said nothing. Would he want to supervise my reading?

"Let me think," he said. "I'll figure out something."

I turned from him and he called me back. He stared at me quizzically.

"Richard, don't mention this to the other white men," he said.

"I understand," I said. "I won't say a word."

A few days later he called me to him.

"I've got a card in my wife's name," he said. "Here's mine."

"Thank you, sir."

"Do you think you can manage it?"

"I'll manage fine," I said.

"If they suspect you, you'll get in trouble," he said.

"I'll write the same kind of notes to the library that you wrote when you sent me for books," I told him. "I'll sign your name."

He laughed.

"Go ahead. Let me see what you get," he said.

That afternoon I addressed myself to forging a note. Now, what were the names of books written by H. L. Mencken? I did not know any of them. I finally wrote what I thought would be a foolproof note: *Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy—I used the word "nigger" to make the librarian feel that I could not possibly be the author of the note—have some books by H. L. Mencken? I forged the white man's name.*

I entered the library as I had always done when on errands for whites, but I felt that I would somehow slip up and betray myself. I doffed my hat, stood a respectful distance from the desk, looked as unbookish as possible, and waited for the white patrons to be taken care of. When the desk was clear of people, I still waited. The white librarian looked at me.

"What do you want, boy?"

As though I did not possess the power of speech, I stepped forward and simply handed her the forged note, not parting my lips.

"What books by Mencken does he want?" she asked.

"I don't know, ma'am," I said, avoiding her eyes. . . .

"You're not using these books, are you?" she asked pointedly.

"Oh, no, ma'am. I can't read!" . . .

I said nothing. She stamped the card and handed me the books.

That night in my rented room . . . I opened *A Book of Prefaces* and began to read. I was jarred and shocked by the style, the clear, clean, sweeping sentences. . . .

Yes, this man was fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club. Could words be weapons? Well, yes, for here they were. Then, maybe, perhaps, I could use them as a weapon? No. It frightened me. I read on and what amazed me was not what he said, but how on earth anybody had the courage to say it.

Occasionally I glanced up to reassure myself that I was alone in the room. Who were these men about whom Mencken was talking so passionately? Who was Anatole France? Joseph Conrad? Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, Dosztoevski, George Moore, Gustave Flaubert, Maupassant, Tolstoy, Frank Harris, Mark Twain, Thomas Hardy, Arnold Bennett, Stephen Crane, Zola, Norris, Gorky, Bergson, Ibsen, Balzac, Bernard Shaw, Dumas, Poe, Thomas Mann, O. Henry, Dreiser, H. G. Wells, Gogol, T. S. Eliot, Gide, Baudelaire, Edgar Lee Masters, Stendhal, Turgenyev, Huneker, Nietzsche, and scores of others? Were these men real? Did they exist or had they existed? . . . I concluded the book with the conviction that I had somehow overlooked something terribly important in life. I had once tried to write, had once reveled in feeling, had let my crude imagination roam, but the impulse to dream had been slowly beaten out of me by experience. Now it surged up again and I hungered for books, new ways of looking and seeing. It was not a matter of believing or disbelieving what I read, but of feeling something new, of being affected by something that made the look of the world different.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. Why did Wright have to lie to take out library books he wanted to read in the segregated South? He had to use a white man's library card (paragraphs 10–40), since none was available to him, and he lied to the librarian who asked, "You're not using those books, are you?" . . . "On, no, ma'am. I can't read" (paragraphs 42 and 43). Why were African Americans denied access to books at that time?
2. Judging from the experiences of Welby (p. 47), Alexie (p. 63), and Wright, why do you suppose that some people who love to read become writers, while many do not?
3. Many autobiographers and other authors write of their excitement at learning to read or of discovering particular authors with a wide range of possibilities, power, and perspective opening before them. As Wright explains in his concluding paragraph (paragraph 46), his encounters with the universe of major authors, ranging from Anatole France and Joseph Conrad to Turgenyev and Nietzsche, gave him "new ways of looking and seeing . . . of feeling something new, of being affected by something that made the look of the world different." Have you ever been excited, electrified by something you read in print or

online? At school or on your own? What was this reading? In what ways has it shaped your current thinking, expanded your understanding of the world? If nothing you've ever read has affected you in this dramatic way, make a list of the characteristics a piece would need to have in order to make an indelible impression on you.

4. Writing as an instrumental medium—producing, for instance, directions, operators' manuals, records of meetings, contracts and other legal documents—forms the foundation of many transactions and professions, including advertising, the law, and many aspects of engineering and computer programming. In contrast, Welby, Alexie, Wright, and other creative writers view writing as a means of exploring oneself, one's gender, and one's culture, and as a form of storytelling that provides insight as well as entertainment. Write a brief paper in two parts, perhaps defining a favorite topic (work, love, ethics) or explaining how to do something you enjoy doing. One part should reflect an instrumental approach to the subject; the other should be a narrative disclosing your passion for the subject and/or the process.

GEORGE SAUNDERS

Thank You, Esther Forbes

George Saunders (b. 1958) has an unusual background for a creative writer: His undergraduate degree is in geophysical engineering from Colorado School of Mines. He turned his skills in observation and technical procedures away from science and toward writing, and today is a professor of creative writing at Syracuse University, where he received his own master of arts degree in creative writing in 1988. He has regularly published in periodicals such as the *New Yorker*, *Q*, and *Harper's Magazine*. His fiction works are typically collections of short stories and novellas, including *CivilWarland in Bad Decline* (1996), *Pastoralia* (2000), *The Brief and Frighening Reign of Phil* (2005), and *Tenth of December: Stories* (2013). In an interview with *WAG*, an online magazine, he claimed short works are "the only thing I can do."

This essay comes from Saunders's collection of nonfiction essays, *The Braindead Megaphone* (2007). It is Saunders's first collection of nonfiction essays. In "Thank You, Esther Forbes," Saunders remembers fondly both an influential younger teacher and the book she led him to, Johnny Tremain. The young Saunders is drawn not merely to the content of the book, but to the language. Saunders explores how different uses of language—different sentences, different words—can be used to describe the same thing to different effect.

It began, like so many things in those days, with a nun. Unlike the other nuns at St. Darnian School, who, it seemed, had been born nuns, Sister Lynette seemed to have been born an adorable, sun-dappled Kansas girl with an Audrey Hepburn smile, who was then kidnapped by a band of older, plumper, meaner nuns who