

The Origins of Townsend Press

by JOHN LANGAN

Every so often people ask how it happened that I, as a college teacher, started a publishing company. They also ask about why Townsend Press has a particular interest in helping students become better readers. There were two key moments.

The Sign on the Bus

Many people have personal stories of how they became regular readers. In my own case, I read mostly comic books up until my junior year in high school. But what gave me the most pleasure was watching television. I developed a routine after school: get my homework done, do any household chores, eat dinner, and then spend the evening watching the tube.



Fortunately, something happened in the summer before my junior year that changed my life. The country was in the middle of a recession, so I was not able to get a job. I felt too old to spend the summer playing back-alley baseball with neighborhood buddies, and there was thankfully not enough on daytime TV (this was before cable) to hold my interest. Except for a once-a-week job of cutting my aunt's grass, I had nothing to do and felt restless and bored.

Then, sitting on my front porch one day in early June, I saw a public service message on the side of a bus that was rumbling noisily up the street. I remember the exact words: "Open your mind—read a book." Such messages had always annoyed me. On general principle, I never liked being told what I should do. I also resented the implication that my mind was closed just because I didn't read books. I thought to myself, "For the heck of it, I'm going to read a book just so I know for sure it's a waste of time."

That afternoon I walked to the one bookstore in town, browsed around, and picked out a paperback book—*The Swiss Family Robinson*—about a family that had been shipwrecked on an island and had to find a way to survive until rescue came. I spent a couple of days reading the story. When I was done, I had to admit that I had enjoyed it and that I was proud of myself for having read an entire book.

However, in the perverse frame of mind that was typical of me at age 15, I thought to myself, "I just happened to pick out the one story in the world that is actually interesting. Chances are there aren't any more." But the more reasonable part of me wondered, "What if there are other books that wouldn't waste my time?"

I remembered that upstairs in my closet were some books that my aunt had once given me but I had never read. I selected one that I had heard of and that seemed to have some promise. It was *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, by Mark Twain, and it was a hardbound book so old that its binding cracked when I opened it up. I began reading, and while the activities of Tom were interesting enough, it was his girlfriend Becky Thatcher who soon captured my complete attention. My adolescent heart raced when I thought of her, and for a while I thought about her night and day. For the first time in my life, I had fallen in love—incredibly enough, with a character in a book! The character of Becky helped show me what power a book can have.

Tom had a friend named Huck Finn, about whom Mark Twain had written another book. So when I finished Tom's story, I went to the library, got a library card, and checked out *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. I figured this book might tell me more about Becky. As it turned out, it didn't, but by pure chance I ended up reading one of the great novels of American literature.

While Becky had made my blood race, the story of Huck Finn and the trip that he and his friend Jim took on a raft down the Mississippi River gripped me in a different but equally compelling way. Though I could not express what happened at the time, the book made me look at people in a new light. I saw a whole stage of characters who felt very human and whose stories seemed very real. Some of these characters were mean, stupid, cowardly, and hateful, others were loyal, courageous, dignified and loving, and a few were a blend of good and bad. By the time I finished Huck's story, I knew that books could be a source of pleasure, and I sensed also that they could be a source of power—that they could help me learn important things about the world and the people around me. I was now hooked on books. By the end of the summer, I had read over twenty novels, and I have been reading ever since.

A couple of months ago, as I was describing to my wife the reading contest I wanted to start for developmental college reading students, she said to me, "You know why you're so into this, John? You want to be the sign on the bus. You want to say to students what that sign said for you—'Open your mind. Read a book.'"

She was right.

A Student Named Walter

I decided to become a developmental teacher during my first semester at Atlantic Cape Community College, which is near Atlantic City, New Jersey. I was trying to finish my doctoral dissertation in literature and was teaching mostly freshman composition classes; I was also asked to teach a night class in developmental writing.

In my night class were mostly older students, who were especially motivated to learn compared to some of my younger day students. The student I remember most was Walter. Walter was a young Latino man who worked as a busboy at a restaurant near

Atlantic City, and his goal was to become a maitre d' some day. He always wore flowered polyester shirts, which were very much in fashion then, and he always had on a white cowboy hat, which he was able to bring off with style and dignity. A childhood fight had left him with just one eye, but that did not stop him from sitting in class and looking at me with complete attention. He was totally earnest and full of respect and good will and it was so clear he wanted to learn as much as he could; he was every teacher's dream of an ideal student. He was the kind of student that can make a teacher's job a real blessing.

I was stunned at the level of attention that Walter was giving me. I was still learning how to teach and I had been asked to use a book whose title I will never forget. It was called *Issues of Rhetoric and Usage*, and it was a pompous and condescending book written by a scholar who was a very poor writer and who for reasons unknown had been allowed to author a book about writing.

I remember standing there with that book one late September evening, struggling to make sense of it for my students. The college is set back in a forest known as the New Jersey Pine Barrens, and the windows were open and I could hear crickets in the woods outside, and there was a welcome cool air coming in after a warm day. I was very aware of Walter doing his best to follow every word that I was saying. I remember thinking to myself, "Walter, you deserve better." I was angry and embarrassed that I was not a better teacher with a better book, and at the same time I realized, in what was a defining moment in my life, that rather than complete my dissertation in literature, I wanted to help teach students like Walter the skills they needed to move up from their jobs as busboys to jobs as maitre d's. This was a real moment of truth for me—it had the clarity of church bells in a small town on a Sunday morning. I knew what I wanted to do with my life.

So, just briefly: I never finished my doctoral dissertation; I started working for an M.A. in reading instead, and I helped develop a reading program at the college and expand the developmental writing program. Then I began authoring books about writing and reading skills that were published by McGraw-Hill. The books were well received, and one day about ten years later, I said to my wife, "It would be really interesting to try to publish a book on my own." My McGraw editors, who were nice people with mixed feelings about what I was doing, cautioned me that I would have to learn a lot about editing, design, and production. I decided to look in the business section of the local yellow pages to see if there was any company that might be of initial help. As fate would have it, the first firm listed there was called "Editing, Design, and Production." I connected with them and was able to start my own publishing company, Townsend Press. Since then, I have continued to be involved in reading and writing skills education as both an author and publisher. If I had Walter as a student today, I would be ready to do him a bit of justice. I feel profoundly grateful to him for putting up with the limited teacher I was back then and for inspiring me in my career.