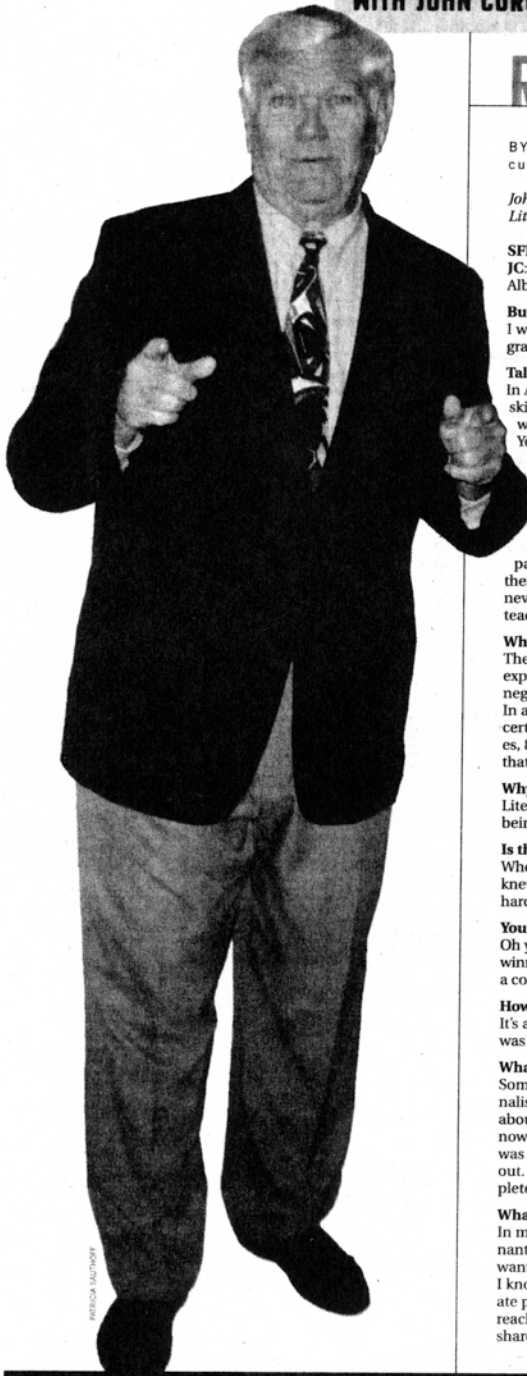


WITH JOHN CORCORAN



## READING RAINBOW

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*John Corcoran is the author of *The Teacher Who Couldn't Read*, a memoir, and is the keynote speaker at Literacy Day in New Mexico (10-11:30 am Monday, Sept. 8. Free. Roundhouse Rotunda, State Capitol).*

**SFR: You spent some time in Santa Fe as a kid right?**

JC: I was there from the second grade to the fifth grade. Then I went to Los Alamos and then Albuquerque. I spent much of my young years in New Mexico.

**But you didn't learn to read at those New Mexico schools?**

I was 48 years old when I went to a public library and got a volunteer tutor. She got me to about the sixth grade level, but I was guessing a lot. I couldn't write anything. Not a sentence, and I couldn't spell either.

**Talk about why reading is so important.**

In America today there's no equal opportunity for non-readers in the workplace. The demand for literacy skills has increased. When I was going to school, if you couldn't read by the eighth grade you went to work on a farm or in a factory, but today you need to be able to get on the Internet and things like that. You have to be able to read.

**When did not being able to read start to become a problem?**

I hit the wall in about third grade, which is pretty common with illiterate people. That's usually the age we give up.

**How do we not let kids hit that wall?**

Today, we know how to teach little girls and boys like me how to read. We've got the research. In the past we really didn't know, so we labeled them—in my case I was put in the dumb row—and separated them. Now we know about learning disabilities and how to work with them. The good news is that it's never too late to learn to read. The key is through proper instruction. In America we need to give our teachers the proper tools. Universities need to be held as accountable as the third-grade teachers.

**What's the biggest hurdle for adults who are learning how to read?**

The emotional, psychological ones. Some people who can't read haven't been exposed to it, but I was exposed to it for 35 years and I didn't get it. In America, child illiteracy is a form of child abuse and neglect, but it's the child that feels the shame. We keep the secret and that's part of it. We take the blame. In a way, adults who can't read are kind of suspended in the third grade emotionally, psychologically and, certainly, academically. If you look at California and the population of the juveniles who are facing judges, 85 percent of them have deficiencies in reading. Fifty percent of people who are in prisons can't read, that's a hint right there as to how people react to it.

**Why do you think literate people don't make those links?**

Literate society has underestimated the gift and the blessing that they have. For them, it's almost like being potty trained. You don't remember what it was like before.

**Is that why you want to share your story?**

When I was asked to speak in public, I first said, 'no way.' But I shared my shameful secret. I never really knew how I was going to get out of the dark room. I never did accept my illiteracy though, so that made it hard to talk about.

**You thought the ability to read was just going to come to you?**

Oh yeah. I prayed. You just hope that the next day you'll get it. For six years of my life I was told that I was a winner. It wasn't until the second grade that I learned that I was a loser. When I was 12, I thought there was a conspiracy, that there was some mean spirit keeping me from being able to comprehend those words.

**How long did it take you to learn how to read?**

It's a lifelong process to learn to read, but it probably took me seven years to catch up with my peers. I was full of joy when I learned. I wanted to tell the world and go back and find my third-grade teacher.

**What was it like to become a writer?**

Sometimes I think that if I'd learned to read earlier, I would have liked to become an investigative journalist. I've always been in love with language; it's like a beautiful woman. The first book I wrote was about my story, but I also wrote a lot of poetry. They say, 'write what you know.' I actually prefer to write now than to talk. It's such an art form. I'm sorry that it took so long to learn to read and write. A poem was the first thing I ever wrote. People think that we have all this pent-up emotion that we need to get it out. I tell people that the first thing we write is poems because I didn't have the know-how to form complete sentences yet.

**What advice do you have for people who know how to read?**

In my second book, *The Bridge*, I call on literate people. I write about the literate culture and the dominant language as the written word. People take the precious gift of knowing how to read for granted. I want people to remember that it's a gift that has strings attached to it. Share that gift with other people. I know that there are literate people who don't read enough. The literacy mission should also cause literate people to reflect on themselves and enjoy it, appreciate it, use it and share it. Literate people need to reach out and help the rest of us cross the bridge. We're all teachers. We get something and we want to share that with others. I want all literate people to be teachers.