

BOOK REVIEW



Reviewed by

*Chris Dunagin
Miller*

*Georgia State
University*

Last Reader Standing: The Story of a Man Who Learned to Read at 54 By Archie Willard and Colleen Wiemerslage

2013; Bettie Youngs Book Publishers, San Diego, CA
137 pages, softcover, \$15.95

Despite not being able to read above the 5th grade level, Archie Willard managed to graduate from high school, attend college for a couple of years, work in manufacturing for 31 years, serve on his city council, and hide his limited literacy from everybody. It was not until Willard was laid off from his job at the age of 54 that he shared with his wife his limited literacy proficiency when he needed help completing applications and obtaining a commercial driver's license. When his wife read Bruce Jenner's account of his struggle with dyslexia and shared this with Willard, he began seeking answers about his own struggles. *Last Reader Standing* is Willard's account of his journey from a painful and frustrating schooling career as a child to his midlife transformation into a successful new reader and national advocate for other struggling adult readers. This book is written for other struggling adult readers, researchers, policy makers, and educators.

The book is organized in three distinct parts: Willard's childhood, his early and middle adulthood, and his later experiences as an advocate for other struggling adult readers. Part 1 includes four chapters where he recounts that his struggles with reading as a child were misunderstood by teachers, his family, and himself. Willard was treated cruelly by some teachers and fellow students who labeled him "stupid" or "lazy." He learned to hide his difficulties by compensating in other ways such as memorization, seeking help from peers on homework, and developing his athletic ability. During high school, Willard became a leader in student government, a member of the marching band, and an accomplished football player. Willard earned a football scholarship to a junior college

He recounts that his struggles with reading as a child were misunderstood by teachers, his family, and himself.

Willard shared his story, which allowed him to envision himself as an advocate for other people.

and managed to finish two years despite his struggles with literacy. Once Willard transferred to a four-year college, however, it became too difficult to get by using his strategies of memorizing and diligent work. Willard was ashamed to reveal his struggles and did not know of any resources for helping him at the school, so he dropped out.

Part 2 includes seven chapters that begin with Willard's young adulthood where his hopes and dreams are curtailed by his limited literacy then transition to his becoming a new reader and advocate for others. Willard found a job in a manufacturing plant working on the assembly line where he stayed for 31 years. Just as he did in his childhood, Willard managed to deflect attention from his literacy difficulties while becoming successful in other ways. Willard managed to get elected to city council and serve successfully. However, he also continued to struggle with literacy tasks, such as when his daughter was born and the hospital personnel needed him to complete various forms.

Years later, Willard's wife read an article about another struggling adult reader who was participating in reading classes. Willard sought an adult reading program at Iowa Central Community College, driving outside of his small town so that he could hide his struggles from his friends and neighbors. After two years of tutoring with a compassionate and able teacher, Willard was asked to address a group of elementary school children who were struggling readers. Fighting his own feelings of shame but remembering the pain of being a child who cannot read like the other children, Willard shared his story, which allowed him to envision himself as an advocate for other people. Willard began addressing a variety of groups including children with dyslexia, education students and faculty, and adults with disabilities.

Part 3 includes eight chapters and begins with Willard's growing awareness that struggling adult readers were often absent from the membership and meetings of the organizations formed to help them. Having served on the State Board of the Orton Society and on the Board of the Learning Disabilities Association of America, Willard was invited to attend the State of Iowa literacy meeting in 1990 and tell his story along with other adult new readers. This was an exciting time for Willard and marked the first time that he met with other struggling adult readers to share experiences while advocating together for a political voice. After this, Willard became a professional adult educator in Iowa. Willard's advocacy interests include social justice and health literacy. Willard has worked from the local to the national and international levels laboring on behalf of struggling adult readers. Willard formed VALUE USA (<http://www.valueusa.org/>), a national organization of new adult readers

working to improve educational systems and support the development of struggling adult readers.

This book is an articulate memoir. Willard vividly describes the challenges that struggling learners must endure, and many struggling adult readers will recognize themselves in Willard's difficulties as a child and as an adult. Willard points out several of the practices that particularly helped him, such as his teacher's use of stories about other learners who have had to struggle with challenges, completing authentic activities such as the forms he needed to fill out for his job, and attending lectures to help fill in cultural gaps left by not being well read. In his work as an advocate, Willard recounts his struggles and successes in finding a place at the table with professional researchers, educators, and policy makers. This book serves as a reminder that struggling adult learners should be encouraged to share their voices and ideas by being invited to join in on policy discussions and decision making. I recommend this book for adult basic education practitioners, researchers, and policy makers. It will broaden their understanding of the experiences of adult learners. It is important to see this population becoming agents in their own learning and advocacy. I also recommend this book for struggling readers who will relate to and be inspired by Willard's memoir.

This book serves as a reminder that struggling adult learners should be encouraged to share their voices and ideas by being invited to join in on policy discussions and decision making.

Christine Dunagin Miller is a doctoral student in Educational Psychology at Georgia State University. Her primary research interests include the literacy development of adolescents and adults who struggle with reading and writing. She is interested in motivational constructs, educational history, and perseverance.