
Volume 25
Number 2 *Oregon Libraries are for Everyone:
Equity, Diversity, & Inclusion*

10-28-2019

Read me a Story!

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Recommended Citation

Croft, J. (2019). Read me a Story!. *OLA Quarterly*, 25(2), 8-12. <https://doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1985>

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OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

Read me a Story!

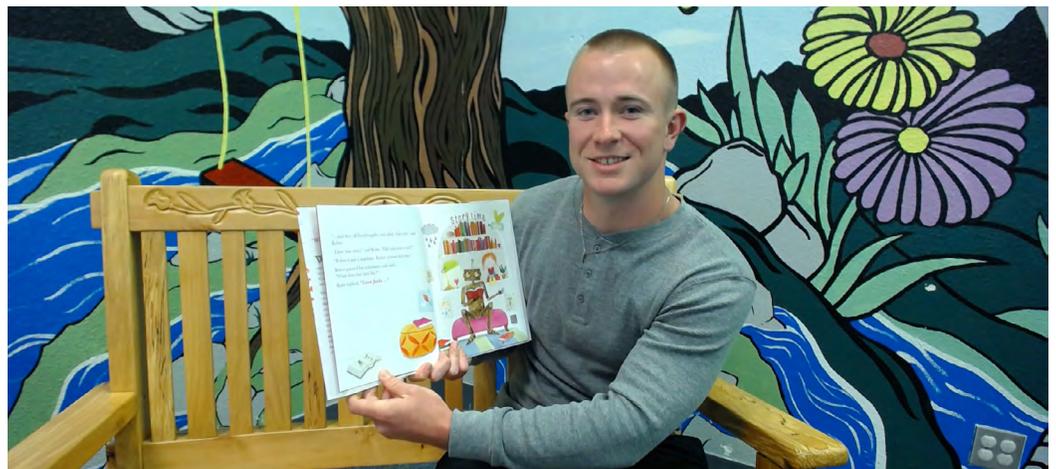
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JENNIFER CROFT is the Director of Extended Services Office (ESO), part of the Coos County Library Services District. ESO oversees the County's digital collection, its IT needs and its Outreach Library. She earned her MLIS from Kent State University, after obtaining her undergraduate degree in Sociology from Weber State University. Jennifer currently lives in Coos Bay with her husband and two pittie mixes. For fun she loves to take her Jeep out on the dunes, play her PS4, and of course, read.

Read me a Story! is an early literacy program partnership between the Coos County Library Service District's Extended Services Office (ESO) and the Shutter Creek Correctional Institute. The aim is to reach at-risk children and their caregivers in an unconventional way by building on existing relationships to encourage a love of reading. This gives the child their best opportunity for future educational success, and the prisoner an invaluable opportunity to be a positive influence in a child's life.

This program was conceived as a new way to use the State Library of Oregon's Ready to Read grant. The library I manage (the outreach library in Coos County) doesn't have any direct patrons who are children, so the Ready to Read grants we're awarded are traditionally used at our County Fair where we help promote our district's activities and reinforce their early literacy efforts. While we wanted to continue to have a presence at the fair, I thought there might be room in our budget for a second program that targeted outreach patrons directly. Members of my staff (Chad Brownson and Stacey Nix) and I were brainstorming over this notion, and I remembered an ALA presentation from 2017 where Anne Plazeak from the Medina County Library in Ohio had built a grant-funded program that inspired this one and *Read me a Story!* was born.



Read me a Story! helps spread childhood literacy to our society's most vulnerable at-risk population: the children of convicted, incarcerated felons. Our goal is to encourage a love of reading that will place them on a path leading toward future educational and economic success, and we do it by building on the preexisting close relationships between children and their incarcerated loved ones. Effectively, finding a silver lining in a difficult situation.

The program was set up so I could meet twice with the prisoners. The first meeting could probably be described as an orientational or instructional meeting. During this meeting, I model a storytime for the prisoners. When you picture this, picture me, the unconventional magenta-haired librarian sitting at a conference table with half a dozen prisoners reading them children's stories. *Green Pants* by Kenneth Kraegel was a particularly engaging choice. The inmates answered questions about the story when prompted, laughed at the jokes I made while reading, and diligently counted items and called out color names in the pictures where I indicated. It was hilarious fun! Fun with a purpose. Some of the men there had never read a book to their child at all. Still others, unless otherwise instructed, would have ended up only reading the words, then turning the page. They needed to know it was okay to go off-script, and that it would be even better still to be a little silly. Reading to your children can be deeply personal, so they also needed to trust me in order to show vulnerability to their children during their recordings. The best way I could think of to accomplish that was to do it first. This was hugely daunting to me. Did I mention that aside from reading to my own children, I have *never* done a storytime before? Letting them see my nervousness helped them quite a bit. Also during this first meeting, I distributed copies of the books they had chosen for their children, as well as age-based early literacy and reading aloud tips for them to live with overnight and practice until I came back the next day to do the recording.

The second visit is where I record the inmates reading. At Shutter Creek, we record in the children's visiting room. There are bright and colorful murals on the walls and hand-made wood furniture. It's perfect for our purposes because it comes across as less institutional in the recordings and the inmate and I can be alone to do the recording (so they feel less pressure from fellow inmates, etc.), but are still observed through glass windows in the wall to maintain security. Before we begin the recording, we chat a little to put them at ease and answer any additional questions that pop up. After the recording is finished, they return the book so I can send it to their child.



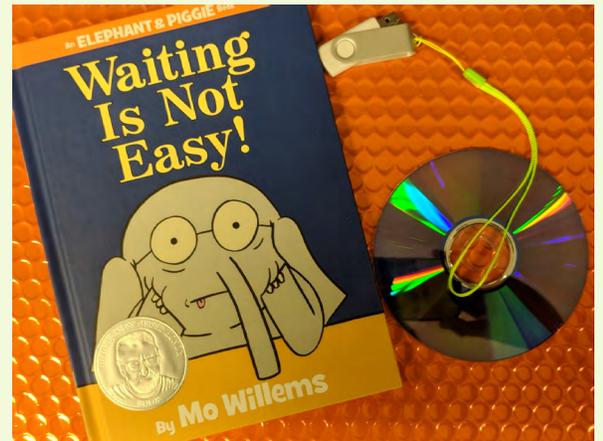
An exciting new early literacy program offered by the Coos County Library Service District's ESO Outreach library!
Made possible by the State Library of Oregon's Ready to Read grant 2019

Read me a story!

Even while apart, you can make a positive impact on your child's future by encouraging a love of reading.

Each care package contains:

- The book you chose for your child
- Video recordings of you reading the book on DVD & a flash drive
- Important information about early literacy for your child's caregiver



Available Books:

- **Demolition by Sally Sutton** - What's even more exciting to preschoolers than seeing big machines that build things? Watching the massive ones that tear them down!
- **Always by Emma Dodd** - One little elephant learns that a parent's love is unconditional.
- **Far Apart, Close in Heart by Becky Birtha** - Children can experience many emotions when a parent is in jail or prison. In this important book, young readers will learn that even when it feels like nothing can get better again, there are ways they can improve their circumstances.
- **Waiting Is Not Easy by Mo Willems** - Gerald is careful. Piggie is not. Piggie has a surprise for Gerald, but he is going to have to wait for it. And Wait. And wait some more...
- **Pearl by Molly Idle** - An original mermaid tale about how small, persistent actions can achieve great things.
- **A box of Butterflies by Jo Rooks** - When Ruby asks Robot if he loved the story as much as she did, he tells her that he doesn't know what love is. If it's not something he can see, then what could it be?
- **Goodnight, Goodnight, Construction Site by Sherri Duskey Rinker** - As the sun sets behind the big construction site, all the hardworking trucks get ready to say goodnight. One by one, Crane Truck, Cement Mixer, Dump Truck, Bulldozer, and Excavator finish their work and lie down to rest-so they'll be ready for another day of rough and tough construction play!
- **Last Stop on Market Street by Matt de la Pena** - Every Sunday after church, CJ and his grandma ride the bus across town.
- **How to be a Lion by Ed Vere** - In this timely and charming story about the importance of being true to yourself, mindfulness, and standing by your friends, we meet Leonard, a lion, and his best friend Marianne, a...duck.
- **Green Pants by Kenneth Kraegel** - For kids who march to their own drum or are especially attached to a comfort object here is a completely adorable character who wears his singularity in style.

Wonderfully and unexpectedly, I then found that after the inmates learned that they were in possession of the exact books going to their children, they began writing loving messages to them on the inside book covers and dust jackets. These touching written sentiments were often done with beautiful, artistic flourish and are certain to make these books even more prized by the children who receive them.

The books are then sent to the intended children in a cute care package they receive in the mail. Also in the package are two copies of the recorded reading, one on DVD, the other on a flash drive. Early literacy information and tips are also enclosed for the child's caregiver. Everything in the package is bright, colorful, and cheerful, and the child's name is printed on the DVD.

Even at this early stage of the program, the feedback I've received has been incredible. These are a few of the comments from the survey responses I've collected:

I feel that it helped me feel more comfortable to read to my child.

I learned that reading to my grandsons in an animated voice, and making the sounds of the equipment (construction) is entertaining to them and myself also.

I believe it to be a perfect use of resources for both the library and the DOC (Department of Corrections). Also, I think it should be instituted in all Oregon prisons.



It is important to show our young ones about libraries and showing them how to read so they can read early and enjoy it.

Since I sent my daughter the video and book, my daughter likes to grab books now and tells my siblings to read to her. Before it was just watching TV, so I see a bigger interest in reading and learning to sound out words.

I've learned that it is important for kids to start to read at an early age and also learned new skills on how to read to kids.

I learned that the library is more than just checking out books. I think it is great that they are reaching out to those of us incarcerated and be able to connect with our kids through library programs.

These are some of the comments on the Department of Corrections' Facebook post:

Awesome ... hope DRCI can start something like this. —Cindy Nye

What a great program ... and thank you State Library for funding this. —Bev Porter Moltzau

What a great program. Keep innovating Shutter Creek! —Randy Greer

Such a positive impact. Very important for not only the child but the AIC (Adult in Custody). —Melissa Faber

This is nothing but good. —Cedric Jackson

Despite my patience-trying, near-boundless, excited optimism, I could not do this program on my own. After I explained my idea to Corey Fhure, the superintendent of the Shutter Creek Correctional Institution, he referred me to Julie Martin, the Correctional Rehabilitation Manager. Ms. Martin has been a fantastic partner! She advertised the program in Shutter Creek's newsletter, selected participants, helped them choose their books, arranged for a good space to record the readings, and was even able to get authorization for the inmates to wear civilian clothes so the recordings don't feel quite so prison-y.

Also, vitally important were the Director, and Children's Librarian from the Coos Bay Public Library, Sami Pierson and Rebekah Westmark. I am not a children's librarian and have never been one. So, I reached out to Ms. Westmark for advice. She helped me build a selection of titles for the inmates to choose from, and she even let me observe her storytime program when my confidence waned.

Do you have a prison in your service area? Your outreach librarian might be hearing from me soon. Ms. Martin spread the word among her counterparts in other facilities and there has been considerable interest. I'd love to collaborate with other Oregon librarians to share this unique early literacy program. If you're interested in participating but haven't heard from the prison in your area yet, feel free to get in touch with me and we can approach them together. We have an opportunity to make a truly positive difference in the lives of these children and their incarcerated loved ones. 

