



The Astounding Power of Reading!

Interview with Charles Prémont, journalist and author
By Julie Roberge, member of the editorial committee

Charles Prémont, a journalist, author, and ethnologist by training, has been interested in the importance of reading in Quebec for several years. He is actively involved in the *Lire pour réussir*¹ days [Read to Succeed, Ed.], whose mission is to increase the number of avid readers among Quebec teenagers and adults, knowing that reading helps prevent school dropout, strengthens the critical spirit of citizens, and encourages speaking out, exchange and dialogue.

Pédagogie collégiale met with him to understand the societal project he hopes to promote through the *Lire pour réussir* days, which is to deconstruct the myths and stereotypes surrounding the practice of reading.² The ethnologist's reflection on the importance of a reading culture in Quebec, while primarily aimed at society as a whole, will undoubtedly resonate with the college network.

¹ To learn more about this initiative, visit the website [read-success.org].

² Editor's note: According to the Union des écrivaines et des écrivains québécois (UNEQ), although Quebec has a very dynamic book industry, it cannot yet claim an authentic reading culture. Books remain associated with a school chore, or the preserve of an elite [uneq.qc.ca/evenement/journee-lire-pour-reussir-2019].

You say that reading culture must be promoted in Quebec. Why do you say this?

To value the act of reading, as we value sports for example, seems essential to me. This is what I mean by "reading culture." At a very young age, I was sensitized to reading. My father was a school principal and in charge of reading activities at the elementary level, and we had a lot of books at home. I found it strange as a child that the other boys in my class didn't read. It saddens me greatly that some people don't read, even as adults. I studied the humanities in college and I believe very seriously that they should be valued even more. My training in anthropology and then in ethnology led me to ask myself questions about the contribution of reading to society; it allows people to develop their ability to learn and to better understand social issues and citizenship. In fact, it allows them to better understand all kinds of information. That's why I was the instigator of *Lire pour réussir*. These days exist so that we can collectively reflect on the contribution of reading in the lives of all individuals.

The culture of reading is supported by family and school. What are the limits and importance of both?

Both are important and have their strengths and limitations. Studies have shown that the literacy rate of adults is higher when there were 100 or more books in their childhood home. This is especially true for English speakers. In contrast, homes with twenty or fewer books have lower literacy rates. In the home, books must be seen; book shelves must be seen. Books should not be seen as sacred objects. Because when you see books, you want to borrow them from your friends, whether it's a book by Albert Camus or a magazine you discovered in the bathroom!

I also think it's important to set an example for children and for parents to be seen as readers. To do that, we need to read paper books and not read on a tablet or a phone. On a tablet (or phone), it is not clear that the parent is reading; children

need to see their parents reading. Paper books allow for this easy recognition, even though in essence, all reading media are equal. When children are older and reading on their own, we need to be interested in what they are reading and discuss it with them.

We must cultivate the taste for reading, discuss it, everywhere and with everyone. The act of reading must also take an important place in society. How many times have we seen people reading in a TV show? Never! We see people jogging or going to the gym, but never reading! Yet, it would be so easy: a character could be reading while someone is talking to them. We don't have public examples. It's not in the collective imagination to see people reading.

Reading and literature, once in school, should not be associated with elitism. Fantasy, science fiction and comics, for example, are not necessarily literature with a capital L, but many readers can be hooked by this type of work. Only later do people look further, because we cannot always engage with intellectual literature. This type of literature is an acquired taste, like wine, beer or oysters. The first time, you don't really like it. You taste it again. And you end up going crazy for it. You detect the nuances, the dark fruit, the aromas the more you taste it. You could say that one must get into reading quietly—many short readings, novels, entertainment.

When I was young, as I said, I used to read a lot. I read a lot of comics. Once I was in college, I went out to bars, and I had a social life. I was reading the required books. Then, at the co-op, I saw *The Flowers of Evil* by Charles Baudelaire and *The Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas. These two books weren't required readings. I got into *The Three Musketeers* with great pleasure, and then I read *Twenty Years After* and *The Vicomte de Bragelonne* just because I liked the first book of the trilogy. I couldn't have read this kind of novel before; I wasn't at that point in the development of my love of reading. This is my story, but it may be the story of many readers.

Children discover books at home, but reading at school... What value is placed on reading, and more broadly on culture, in Quebec schools?

One can denounce the lack of room for the pleasure of reading in school. It is seen as a task, unlike sports, for example, which is often an extracurricular activity. Sports get and keep students in school, but so do the arts! Theatre, art, drawing—often, elective courses allow for the expression of originality. Where do we find the pleasure of reading? In book clubs? Often, the pleasure is squeezed into French class, between a reading test and an essay! Literature teachers are caught between their love of literature and the fact that many of their students don't want to read what they propose. Half of the students don't want to read the classics just because it looks good to be cultivated. They think it's boring! We've all had loved and hated reads. When you're a committed reader, those boring reads aren't boring, because you find a challenge or an interest in them.

I really like the 15-minute reading requirement for everyone in school: teachers, students, principals... No matter what the discipline, the whole school reads for 15 minutes at a specific time. It's a positive reading experience, which schools don't offer often enough. Students choose their books; they are allowed to read almost anything.

In high school, budgets are limited, which I find disastrous. And what's worse, the books are ugly! They are often old, crumbling editions with typography from another era. No one, even the most motivated student, wants to read books printed in 1950! The same observation holds for the course packs sold at the co-op. Some photocopies are so ugly, printed crooked, that they don't make you want to read! In elementary school, high school and college alike, the role of the school librarian must be revalued, I suppose. Unfortunately, this is intrinsically linked to the more general lack of resources. Schools, like governments, have to make choices. Why value sports teams over libraries?

³ Editor's note: According to the Fondation pour l'alphabétisation, 19% of Quebecers are illiterate (literacy levels -1 and 1) and 34.3% have great difficulty reading and are at literacy level 2. The latter are often referred to as functional illiterates [foundationalphabetisation.org].

Why is it important to talk about literacy, even in college?

I have consulted several research studies on reading and writing, not only for my work, but also because I am interested. The rate of functional illiteracy³ in Quebec society is problematic. At the end of high school, people generally reach literacy level 3: they manage to understand what they read. But if they stop reading, they will eventually fall back to level 2. And that will affect the rest of their lives. Illiteracy, even functional illiteracy, is also an economic tragedy; in our specialized economy, work changes. For example, an individual has had a job for a long time when all of a sudden, a new machine comes along. This individual has to read the instructions of the new machine; they have to adapt to this new work tool. If they can't read the documentation, they won't be able to adapt to their new job, with all the potential repercussions on their self-confidence, their entourage, and their livelihood.

People who work in the field of literacy say it: their students learn to read and write just enough to function in society. The problem comes later: reading is not just about being functional. Reading gives access to something else; it is *the* quintessential skill to be able to learn. Even if someone hates school, reading could allow them to continue learning. School is not for everyone! However, if that someone is a strong reader, they have one more tool in their toolbox to do well. But if they haven't developed their reading skills, they will most likely have a harder time. Watching videos on YouTube doesn't always allow for critical thinking.

Illiteracy also has a human aspect. The pandemic has shown us this clearly. Being able to read develops a critical mind. We have often heard: "Do your research!" But to do research, you have to read, and question what you read after three or four articles on the subject. You have to multiply your sources and assess them. That's what we call critical thinking.

It is also useful just to express your thoughts! Being able to read helps you express things better. Maybe some people have good ideas, but they can't express correctly what they have in mind. They could make a very good contribution to society, but they can't find the words to say what they think. It must be very frustrating!



I think school, at the elementary and secondary levels, is doing enough. We can't blame it all on the school system. However, it is clear that some subjects are better suited to talking about reading and literature than others.

Books on the history of mathematics? I don't think young people are interested in that, even in college. That wouldn't stop a teacher from talking about it, though. But maybe a physics teacher who has read a novel with a storyline involving a physics phenomenon could tell their students about it. Why not?

The love of reading and culture should not be the sole preserve of French and literature teachers. How can teachers of other disciplines contribute?

I think that CEGEPs—like all schools—need to put forward local initiatives. We need to find places to talk about reading and the pleasure of reading, and encourage young people to participate. It's not right that the sports team's jacket is more important than the book club! Besides, why does

reading always have to be associated with an evaluation? Discussing the works someone has read helps them grow. We discuss the last movie we've seen, why not the last novel we've read? Reading is a communication tool, not an obligation that necessarily comes with the pressure to succeed.

Society must also promote reading. I think that municipal libraries should be revalorized. There are great activities that should be promoted. The same goes for the media. CBC/Radio-Canada, in my opinion, should do even more, especially since it is public television. Why is it that most of the cultural columns, on TV or on the radio, deal with series on Netflix, but so few of them talk about books published in Quebec? Especially considering that about 2,000 books are published every year in our province. We don't talk enough about reading in general. Or we talk about the same books and the same authors over and over again. People don't always recognize themselves in what is promoted.

Audio books could also be another entry point to explore. But there's a parallel to be drawn with the ugly book that stinks: the sound production must be pleasant, and the reader must have a voice that makes you want to listen to the story—because, in general, we like to be told stories.

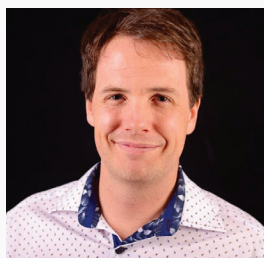
Reading is a social commitment. How can we set an example? How can the college network be an example?

We must give ourselves tools. We must make reading a societal project. We have to stop thinking that it will happen miraculously. School already has a lot of responsibilities; relying on parents also has its limits. We have to open up our horizons. You can't expect someone who doesn't like to read to pass along the pleasure of reading. That's only going to work to a certain extent.

Everyone has access to health care; everyone should have access to reading and the worlds it gives access to. Colleges must also open up these horizons. Bring students to develop their taste for reading so that they can continue to engage in reading once they have finished their studies.

In conclusion, I think that, as an adult, we must set an example, we must invade the social space! We must not hide to read! This is how we will be able to affirm that a reading culture has developed. Many people were surprised when Premier Legault shared the titles of the books he was reading. As if anyone should be surprised

that a prime minister reads! I'm happy to see that my prime minister reads! That is much more constructive, I think, than Yann Martel sending books to Prime Minister Stephen Harper for years, without the latter even acknowledging he read them. Our leaders need to read. We all need to read. For the good of all. —



Source: Lysanne Martin

Charles Prémont is an ethnologist, journalist, researcher and published author. Having worked in media for over 15 years, he is known for his versatility. He has practiced his profession in myriad manners, in the written media as well as in television documentaries, on the web, in magazines and on the radio. Today, he is a member of the board of directors of the Fonds d'investissement de la culture et des communications (FICC) and of the Fondation Lire pour réussir.

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