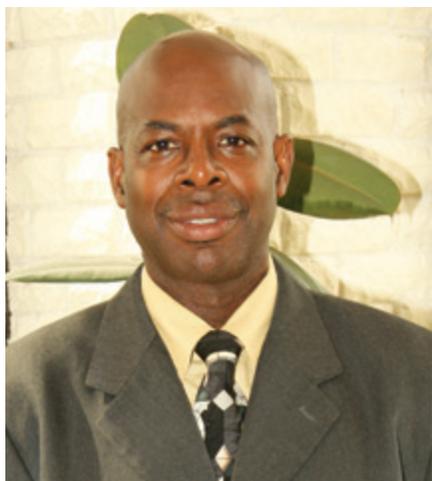


The Poet Who Couldn't Read



“Most people think that they don’t know anyone who can’t read, but the person who can’t read is your coworker, your next-door neighbor, or the person you just passed on the street. It’s the person sitting beside you in the church pew.”

EARL

Father-and-son team Anthony and Ben Holden have asked a revealing question to 100 remarkable women: “What poem has moved you to tears?” The answers to this question have been published in a new book, *Poems That Make Grown Women Cry*. The poems chosen range from the eighth century to today. Their themes range from love and loss to the beauty and variety of nature.

One of the poems in this unique collection was chosen by Dr. Azar Nafisi, the critically acclaimed author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, a long-running *New York Times* bestseller published in 32 languages, and *Things I’ve Been Silent About*, also a *New York Times* bestseller. A fellow at Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies, she has taught at Oxford University and several universities in Tehran. Nafisi chose a poem written by adult literacy student Earl Mills.

“I recently met Earl Mills at the ProLiteracy Conference on Adult Literacy,” Nafisi says. “Earl is an African-American man in his 60s who had been illiterate until the age of 48. Learning to read and write created in him this unimaginable urge to write poems. It is so amazing that writing poetry became his way of rediscovering both the world and himself, the self that until then had remained silenced, ashamed, hidden.”

Mills is all too familiar with the shame and embarrassment of being unable to read. At 45 years old, he was married with five children, owned his own home, and worked for 25 years at the same company. Yet he had a secret that few others knew: He could not read. His lack of reading skill was exposed when he was put on the spot at church one night when he was asked to read a Bible passage. Before then, no one knew except his wife. “When you can’t read, you keep it under a lock and a key and you let hardly anyone inside of that part of your life,” Mills says.

Mills sought the assistance of the Craven Literacy Council in New Bern, North Carolina. At the beginning, he was reading at a second-grade reading level. He had trouble spelling words like girl and bird. With sheer determination he embarked on a three-year process of learning how to read. In addition to improving his literacy skills, Mills developed his ability to capture the frustrations and triumphs through his poetry. Today, he has published several books of poetry, including *From Illiterate to Poet* and *From Illiterate to Author*.

“Will someone please pinch me? I am the son of an illiterate sharecropper,” Mills says. “Although I graduated high school, I was illiterate until the age of 48. My greatest ambition was to get through that day without being called on to read, hoping to repeat the cycle until I graduated. Now I have authored five books, and shared the stage with the former First Lady Barbara Bush, and have a forward written by Doro Bush Koch. And now this opportunity to have my poem ‘This Skin That Carry My Worth’ published in the book that could be a *New York Times* bestseller, is beyond my wildest dreams.” ●