

## Introduction

The three women whose stories appear in this book have never met. They live in three different states: Florida, Missouri, and Wisconsin. They have made their livings in different ways: one as a farm laborer, one as a factory worker, and one as a police officer. They come from three different racial groups: Hispanic, white, and African-American.

But for all their differences, Maria Cárdenas, Daisy Russell, and Julia Burney share a very important characteristic. Each knows how painful it is to be a non-reader in today's world. Two of them know that pain from personal experience; the third knows it from observing the pain of those around her.

These three women share other qualities as well. For one thing, each of them has lived with violence, abuse, and poverty. The bad things that have happened to them are sometimes difficult to read about. In spite of the pain they have suffered, they have each, in their different ways, said, "This stops

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with me.” They have refused to do to others what was once done to them. They have taken hard, courageous steps to change their own lives for the better. And each of them has gone even further, reaching out to help improve the lives of those around them. All three of them have dedicated themselves to sharing the gift of reading.

Maria, Daisy, and Julia are just three of the hundreds of thousands of people in this country whose lives have been affected by poor reading skills. A surprisingly large number of Americans are what is often called “functionally illiterate.” That is, they cannot read or write well enough to get along, or function, very well in today’s society. They might not be able to figure out the right dosage to take from a bottle of medicine, or completely fill out a job application, or find an intersection on a map. Statistics about literacy in America reveal some sad facts. Three out of four people receiving food stamps have very poor reading skills. Forty-three percent of the adults considered functionally illiterate live below the poverty line. And seven out of ten prison inmates are functionally illiterate. These are

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the realities Julia Burney was thinking about when she said, “I knew from the time I was a little girl that reading was power. . . . You *cannot* thrive in this society without reading well. I arrest people who are unable to read their rights, and I think how hopeless life must look for them.”

The three women whose stories appear here once faced odds that must have seemed hopeless. But instead of giving up, they took responsibility for turning their lives around. Maria Cárdenas, Daisy Russell, and Julia Burney each recognized the power that reading provides, and each has claimed that power for her own.