

Creating Room to Read; A Story of Hope in the Battle for Global Literacy

By John Wood

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Reviewed by:

Carrie J. Fishner (fishnecj@delhi.edu), Orientation and Liberal Arts and Sciences Department, State University of New York College at Delhi

“My goal is that children everywhere have access to literacy and books in their mother tongue from a young age” (p. 11). This is the goal that launches us on the journey told in this memoir written by John Wood, the co-founder of the organization Room to Read. The organization’s mission is to build libraries and to educate children (particularly girls) in developing countries, although they have also branched out to publishing children’s books in native tongues that are hard to find otherwise. Filled with anecdotes of specific events and children that have been influential in the development of this organization, the book is easy to read and keeps readers engaged. The journey Wood has taken to build Room to Read into a multi-million dollar organization has been just over 10 years; we follow Wood’s journey as he has his first epiphany about leaving the corporate technology world of Microsoft to pursue his passion for helping children to have access to books to the opening of the ten thousandth library funded through Room to Read.

In reading Wood’s thoughts, we learn many of the key factors which have made Room to Read so successful, including the organizational mantra of GSD, or “Get Shit Done,” and the promise that Room to Read will never purchase Range Rovers. While the majority of the stories that Wood shares are uplifting, such as that of Mulenga from Zambia, who volunteers as a library aid so that she can spend more time with the books, we also hear about others like Mr. X, a donor who reneges on a multi-million dollar pledge of funding. Throughout the book, we hear about the decisions that the organization has had to make, many times difficult, to work at achieving their ultimate goal—to provide all children of the world with an education and books to read. Often, there is reference made to poverty and illiteracy and how educating the children of today’s developing countries can lead to improved health, economies, and overall living in the future. An overarching theme of the book, as well as a strongly held belief of Wood’s, is that by educating women, Room to Read is educating the next generation.

The opening pages of the book start at that wonderful 10,000th library opening but quickly drift back to memories of Wood’s first visit to Nepal. This visit in 1998 was the catalyst for Wood to leave his position at Microsoft and to begin the organization that would later come to be known as Room to Read. The very first act of this fledgling idea was to deliver English-language children’s books to a small school in the Himalayas, which Wood learned of during a trek through the area in 1998. He returned in April of 1999 with his first donation of a few thousand books carried in on a yak. We also learn of Wood’s own upbringing as a middle-class child of educated parents—parents who not only encouraged Wood’s education, but made it a priority. While Wood had a love for reading, money was tight, so there was not a lot left over to spend on books for the home. Instead of letting this lack of access deter Wood’s love of books, his parents provided him with a bike to make getting to the library every week easier. Wood often comes back to this event in life, receiving his green bike, as one of the greatest acts of support that his parents gave him. In fact, his parents were one of the first supporters of Room to Read, and they made the trip with Wood for the opening of that historic library number 10,000.

Wood did not make Room to Read grow to what it is alone. As of May 2012, Room to Read has opened more than 10,000 libraries, supports 17,000 girls through its Girls' Education program, and has helped to make possible 1,600 school buildings or additions. Throughout the book, we learn of Wood's mentors, his co-founder, and his in-country employees who do the day-to-day groundwork to make all of this work possible. Wood often stresses that goal setting and contacts are key to his and the organization's success.

What makes this book so unique is that it really does not preach to the reader that they should be participating in giving to charity; as a matter of fact, Wood takes great pains to make sure that Room to Read is never referred to as a charity—they are not giving to communities, they are partnering with them to provide resources. Any community that wishes to benefit from a library, girls' education programs, or school rooms through Room to Read must first promise and deliver as part of a challenge grant. To get the resources from Room to Read, the community might build the building, paint the walls, or build the bookshelves; perhaps the community will even raise pigs that may be sold to earn money as one community in South Africa has done.

Goal setting is a key theme of this book—the act of taking a goal and making a plan to meet it. Wood would not have been able to grow Room to Read to its current form had he not had lofty goals and then strived to reach for them. This is a great discussion opportunity for students and instructors, particularly as students are embarking on their first years of college and looking towards future planning. What goals they set now are achievable, if they work hard and reach out for help when needed.

Another discussion topic for which this book is perfect is that of how the world differs from developed to developing countries in their treatment of education, particularly to girls and to those in poverty. This book gives relatable anecdotes that many students may identify with, as well as sharing stories of hardship and historical tragedy. Helping students to connect personally with the children's stories in this book may help to make understanding the hardships of developing nations more attainable. Helping students to see the differences in these student's lives—they have no technology, no food, and no housing that is comparable to ours—as compared to their own will help them to become more educated world citizens. Comparing their own life and education with that of an 11 year old who has “finished” school and is now married may help to provide the context for understanding the difference between cultural norms of different areas of the world.

As a book used within first-year experience programs, I feel that this may be a bit too long for the purposes of some courses, while the examples of goal setting and the cultural differences illustrated make for wonderful discussion topics. In other areas of new student programming, the idea of one person with an idea changing the world is a powerful concept that can spark a lot of discussion. With the emphasis that many schools now place on service learning and community service, this book shows how even small donations of time and energy can lead to great changes for communities around the world.

An area for concern with this book may be that some of the stories shared concerning cultural conflict might be difficult for some readers. While not graphic, they are disturbing. One such story is that of the schoolgirls in Bangladesh who had acid thrown in their faces for having the audacity to attend school; another is that of Sunita in Nepal, whose father, when drunk, would beat her if he found her studying or reading. For many readers, these may not cause any issue, but it is important to be aware that this may spark concerns or anxiety for students who may have experienced similar situations in their past.

This book lends itself well to working with faculty in the departments of history, world culture, international relations, and also business, as the organization follows a much more traditional business management rather than “charity” management model. Many parallels to concepts and topics in these courses could be made, as well as faculty offering unique background perspectives to

help explain some of the differences students will read about in this book.

This book could also make for a great student-led fundraising effort to help this organization. Room to Read can take as little as \$250 a year to sponsor a girl's education, so this is an easily attainable number that students can work toward. In an institution that has a culture of service, this is a great link to make, particularly if this book is included in a student reader program for all or all incoming students. Information is included at the conclusion of the book, which can help make contacting Room to Read and contributing easy.

Overall, I found this book to be very engaging. It relates not only the story of a not-for-profit organization that is literally changing the world, but it does so with humor and compassion. I think that students will find a lot to relate to in this book, and it may even inspire many of them to reach out and help themselves in some small way.