

Romance Writers Join Fight in  
Stamping out Illiteracy  
By Melinda Porter

Since 1991 Romance Writers of America has sponsored a “Readers for Life” Literacy Autographing at its National Conference each year. In 2006 more than \$60,000 was raised. This sum was divided between ProLiteracy Worldwide, an affiliate located in Atlanta, Georgia and Laubach Literacy Canada. The total donated to ProLiteracy Worldwide in the past 15 years by the RWA’s “Readers for Life” Literacy Autographing topped \$500,000 in 2006.

According to Robert Wedgeworth, President of ProLiteracy Worldwide, 771 million adults are illiterate throughout the world, two-thirds of them women. Being literate will help people overcome poverty, disease and dehumanizing living conditions. “In the U.S. nearly half the adult population struggles to perform daily literacy tasks such as using public transportation, filling out a job application and applying for health benefits,” says Wedgeworth.

A few examples of ProLiteracy Worldwide’s programs include:

- Culture For All, a job training and literacy lesson program for undereducated women in Baghdad. It develops economic opportunities for women.
- African Advocacy Project integrates reading, writing and math lessons into a range of community development projects such as digging clean water wells, starting health clinics and forming businesses.
- Cape Fear (U.S.) Literacy Council’s Learn to Earn class teaches students not only how to improve their reading skills, but job skills such as resume writing and how to prepare for an interview.
- Empower Women Nepal, teaches reading and writing and also trains women to be trek guides for Nepal’s thriving mountaineering and trekking industry, making them self-sufficient.
- Also in Nepal is the Prison Assistance Nepal. There is no foster system for incarcerated mothers and women are forced to bring their children to jail with them. With PAN’s help children are placed in safe, warm homes, given food, clothes and schooling. There is also a program to educate the women so they can support themselves when they are released.

With reading and writing skills comes self-sufficiency. Adults become better able to take part in their communities and to advocate for themselves. They gain self-confidence and leadership skills to confront problems that impede social and economic justice.

To help those who are illiterate learn, programs need workbooks, materials and books for reading pleasure. Carolyn Szucs of the adult literacy program at the Lake County Library System in

Tavares, Florida explains the benefits of having enough workbooks and materials. “Our adult learners were very grateful and surprised to be able to take materials home with them and felt a sense of ownership when the tutor was able to provide them with workbooks and learning tools.” She adds that material in different reading levels and varieties is also important. Receiving donations is very important to the continuation of their program.

In addition to the half million dollars romance writers and readers have raised to help stomp out illiteracy, the romance genre has drawn adult learners with the interesting plots, familiar messages and everyday language common in romance novels. Reading romance novels helped:

- Increase vocabularies
- Improve the everyday English comprehension abilities of non-native English speakers
- Increase the ELS learner’s confidence and self-assurance in their ability to read English, which encourages them to read more
- Adult learners understand that reading can be pleasurable
- Raise the adult learner’s awareness of gender issues and gender politics
- Women in Pakistan began to question, challenge, resist and renegotiate values and their own roles in society.

For more information about ProLiteracy Worldwide visit their website at [www.proliteracy.org](http://www.proliteracy.org) or email [info@proliteracy.org](mailto:info@proliteracy.org).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All facts, figures and information reprinted or adapted from *ProLiteracy Worldwide and Romance Writers of America – A compatible Couple* leaflet and the *Literacy Advocate*, a publication of ProLiteracy Worldwide, Fall 2006.