

The Washington Post

Book Club

Reviews and recommendations from critic Ron Charles.



By [Ron Charles](#)

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Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden presents a citation to Maria Deskur, CEO of the Universal Reading Foundation, in Washington on Oct. 30, 2024. (Photo by Roswell Encina/The Library of Congress)

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. Since I wrote to you last Friday, [a quarter of a million people](#) have angrily canceled their subscriptions to The Washington Post — possibly the fastest evaporation of readers in the history of American journalism.

It's hard to express how distracting and depressing that continuing calamity feels. But earlier this week, I got a chance to walk away from it all and spend the day with a group of extraordinary people combating illiteracy around the world.

On Wednesday, two dozen winners and honorees of the Library of Congress Literacy Awards gathered in Washington for a symposium to accept their laurels and meet each other ([full list](#)).

Everywhere I turned, I heard people eagerly trading stories about what they're doing to empower new readers. The key, one gentleman said, is to keep it "simple, sustainable, scalable."

The honorees, chatting in a variety of languages, struck me as equally modest and tenacious: educators, activists, entrepreneurs, schemers and dreamers — earnest folks who looked squarely into the eyes of illiteracy and had the temerity to imagine they could do something about it. In a bland conference room in the Madison Building not far from the United States Capitol, stone-cold realism was fused with unstoppable optimism.

I wandered from table to table picking up pamphlets and hearing pitches. [Erie Neighborhood House](#) offers English classes to Latinx and immigrant communities in Chicago. Impact Network's [Read Smart Cinyanja program](#) uses phonetic charts to teach kids to read in Zambia. [School the World](#) supports education in the U.S. and Central America.

The following organizations received special awards:

- [LaundryCares Foundation](#) offers free books and educational programs for children in more than 150 laundromats.
- [We Need Diverse Books](#) supports diverse authors and illustrators and gets diverse books into the hands of children.
- [Te Rūnanga Nui o Ngā Kura Kaupapa Māori](#) (the Grand Council of New Zealand's Māori Schools) teaches Māori children in New Zealand to appreciate and utilize their native language.
- [Alsama Project](#) sets up classrooms for young people in refugee camps in Lebanon.

One particularly sweet element of this experience is that I attended the symposium not as a journalist but as a guest. Some of you may remember

that I've periodically written about a literacy advocate in Poland named Maria Deskur. She was a publisher who decided something had to be done to increase Poles' interest in reading. (For complex historical and economic reasons, fewer than 10 percent of Polish adults read regularly.)

Now, as CEO of the [Universal Reading Foundation](#), Maria works to get books into more people's hands earlier in life and to make governments, businesses and social organizations realize that literacy is crucial for economic and democratic health.

Maria and URF have also been providing books to hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian children displaced by Russia's invasion. In addition, URF has used its market power to support the imperiled publishing industry in Ukraine.

When she learned that she would be honored at this week's Library of Congress Literacy Awards symposium, she wrote and asked if I would accompany her. (Give me a minute; I've got something in my eye.)

The evening before the symposium, Maria and I met at the café in [Kramers bookstore](#). She had the crab cake sandwich — “Something local” — and I had an 87-pound slice of carrot cake. (“Everything in America is so big — the cars, the Halloween decorations, your cake!”)

She's currently working to get board books into doctors' offices to reach little kids who don't go to libraries or bookstores. She's also producing a collection of slightly condensed books for neurodivergent adults. Everything about these texts, which include “Pride and Prejudice,” is being rethought — the number of characters, the pacing of the plot, the margins, the line spacing, even the color of the paper — to make the books as accessible as possible.

In “The Superpower of Books,” a handbook Maria wrote to promote reading, she says, “Producing change that shapes a whole nation or country requires action on a large scale. But it need not be one big action organized by someone with a lot of money. When we work with people we know, on our own stomping ground, with precise planning, clarity and consistency, joining forces with others, we become a link in a network that may suddenly turn out to be much larger than we could ever imagine. ” Whoever said “Never meet your heroes” never met Maria.