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In her voice

Nora Ephron dazzles at Long Wharf benefit

By Lisa Reisman
Special to the Times



At first, it was hard to reconcile Nora Ephron, queen of the sleek bon mot on romance, food, divorce, and aging, with the Read to Grow Foundation, an organization whose driving purpose is to put books in the hands of mothers as soon as their babies are born and kids who can't otherwise afford them.

After all, what would the Beverly Hills kid; the Wellesley graduate; the former intern for John F. Kennedy; the novelist of "Heartburn"; the Academy Award-nominated screenwriter of "Silkwood," "When Harry Met Sally," and "Sleepless in Seattle"; director of "Julie and Julia"; and essayist of "I Feel Bad About My Neck" know about the devastating effects of low literacy on a child?

Surprise. The petite, compact 69-year-old Ephron, who appeared before a packed house at Long Wharf Theatre this past Saturday at an event to benefit Read to Grow, knows.

"Failure, they say, is a growth experience," she writes in "I Remember Nothing," her most recent bestseller. "I wish that were true. It seems to me the main thing you learn from a failure is that it's entirely possible you

will have another failure."

She also knows about the importance of books in the world of a child. Every so often, Ephron recalled, her screenwriter mother would pop into her Studebaker and drive to the local bookstore. "Tell me what's happening," she would ask

Nora and her three

younger sisters, as they settled into their new books. At the Ephron dinner table, discussion would range from politics to the book each member of the family was reading, she writes in "I Remember Nothing," casting into doubt her alleged lack of memory.

"I read everything back then," Ephron told Roxanne Coady, owner of Madison's R.J. Julia Booksellers, who engaged the audience of 215 in lively conversation with the legendary humorist on

the main stage of the theater. "My parents read everything." Whereupon, in spite of

her claim to remember nothing, she ticked off an impressive list of her favorites, including "21 Balloons," "Homer Price," and "Anne of Green Gables." ("From page 140 on, I'm crying," she said.)

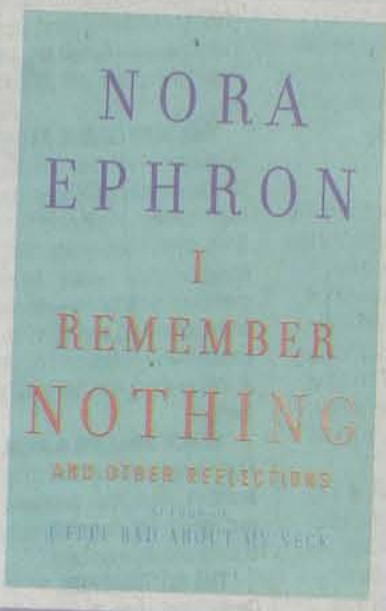
As it turns out, then, it was only fitting that Ephron, while keeping the audience in stitches defending Ryan O'Neal for inadvertently making a pass at a woman who turned out to be his

daughter Tatum and praising Charlie Rose for his "great makeup person," was also promoting an organization like Read to Grow.

For such an apparently well-heeled state, Connecticut has, astonishingly, the highest achievement gap in the nation, higher than Utah, higher than even Mississippi, according to Coady, who founded Read to Grow in 1998. The best way to close that gap: promoting literacy as early as possible. As Executive Director Susanne Santangelo has put it: "School is not where it starts: it really starts at birth."

Hence, the mission of Read to Grow: to connect with parents in the hospital when a baby is born and provide the tools they need—children's books and guidance—to take an active role in their baby's literacy development, and put their child in the best position to succeed in school and, ultimately, in life.

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Nora Ephron,
"I Remember Nothing"

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heard stories; they haven't been read to. Given that, as study after study has documented, the level of an individual's functional literacy is proportional to income level and risk of committing crime, that spells trouble down the line.

Reading, as Ephron's life and work have demonstrated, is the solution. Just listen to the words of Meg Ryan's Kathleen Kelly, a charming but beleaguered book shop owner in "You've Got Mail," one of Ephron's totemic romantic comedies, as she tries to explain to Tom Hanks' Joe

Fox, the "big box" retailer threatening to bring down her business, the pull exerted on her by books from an early age:

"I started helping my mother here after school when I was six years old," the Meg Ryan character says. "I used to watch her, and it wasn't that she was selling books, it was that she was helping people become whoever they were going to turn out to be. When you read a book as a child it becomes part of your identity in a way that no other reading in your life does."

And despite her no-nonsense take on the harsh reality of failure, it's Ephron's belief that

one shouldn't just give up when things don't work out. "My parents never said, 'Oh you poor thing,'" said Ephron. "It was work through it, get to the other side, turn it into something. And it worked with me."

Which, ironically, was not dissimilar to Coady's final exhortation to the crowd: Clean out your bookshelves. Donate books. Donate money. Start book drives. Volunteer at Read to Grow. Get involved. "This is something we can fix."

Read to Grow, Inc., 53 School Ground Rd. Unit #3; 203.483.6800; www.readtogrow.org.

12/17/10

There's more Nora Ephron...

Read the whole story. If you were reading our Life cover story last week, "In her voice: Nora Ephron dazzles at Long Wharf benefit," you might have noticed that something wasn't quite right.

We inadvertently omitted a substantial portion of the story due to a production error. You can read the complete story online at our website shorelinetimes.com. We apologize for any inconvenience.

