

Profile

Current Occupation

Treasurer at Bain and Company

Favorite Book

My Father, Sun-Sun Johnson

Favorite Reading Quote

"Reading is the journey of those who cannot take the train."



Easton Dickson, Co-Founder and Treasurer, Reading Owls

Fast Facts

- In Jamaica, children account for 42% of the poor. One in every four children lives in poverty.
- **Many of the communities and schools in Jamaica still rely heavily on low technology, and physical books, yet 44 percent of children do not have a book or learning materials in the home.**
- The number of students at the primary (elementary) level who pass all sections of the Grade One profile - a required exam used to measure academic progress and social readiness - is just 27 percent.



MAKING A DIFFERENCE, ONE LIBRARY AT A TIME

AN INTERVIEW WITH EASTON DICKSON | FALL 2014

Easton, tell me about yourself?

At heart I am a simple, laid back person who loves to relax and do self-directed things. That is probably a function of genes and upbringing. My dad is a simple, uncomplicated man, and I grew up in a quiet, nature-filled community that lived life at a very unhurried pace.

My current reality is a far cry from that easy pace; I am a husband, a father, busy finance professional and a not-for-profit leader. I wish I had twice the hours in the day to give my best to these important callings, and still have enough time for some cherished hobbies such as soccer, writing and reading - lots of reading. However, I do enjoy my life a lot.

Between my wife and kids, I have an abundance of meaning and fun wrapped up in a loving bundle. The work with Reading Owls allows me to give back to society and share some of my many blessings. And I am intellectually and relationally stimulated and challenged on a daily basis in my role as Treasurer at Bain and Company.

WHERE DID YOU GET YOUR START ACADEMICALLY?

DEEP rural Jamaica, in a poor farming community. I was fortunate to have family members that believed in education and encouraged me to read and do my best in school. Also, I had a few teachers that took an interest in me during my formative years, to ensure that I kept my focus in primary (elementary) school. Students back then did not automatically move on to high school, but had to pass a demanding exam.

Those teachers prepared me well, including giving me free extra lessons when my family could not afford to pay.

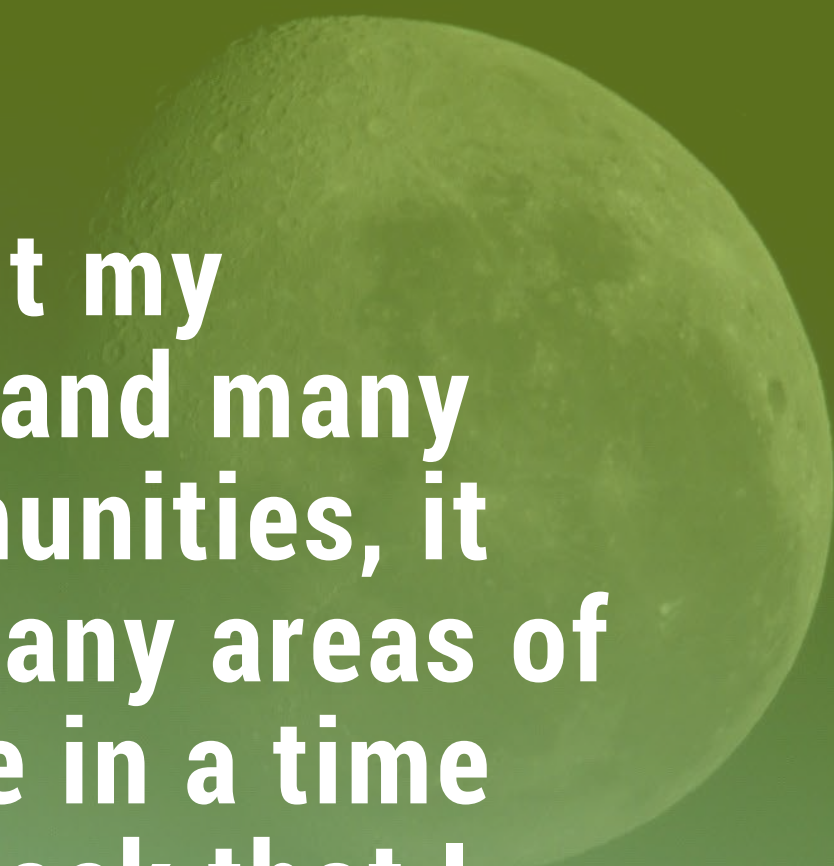
It is impossible to overstate the value of mentors and positive influencers during those impressionable years. High school was not an option for most people in my community, and going on to college was extremely rare.

It was the norm to matriculate from primary school and go on to vocational work and farming. So it was a profound blessing for me to have individuals that saw my early promise and pushed me to study, read and dream big. Because of them I was successful in my high school exams, and went on to the University of the West Indies in Kingston. Also, I was smart enough to be chosen as a Scotia Bank academic scholarship recipient. Later, I completed my graduate studies when I moved to the US.

"Reading shaped me, just as much as I was shaped by my parents or friendships. It is a crucial glue to the entire education process. I am fortunate that I was exposed to, and gravitated to many high character heroes, from a wide range of settings, including the Caribbean and Africa."



READING OWLS INTERNATIONAL
Creating Readers... for Life



"When I visit my hometown, and many other communities, it feels like many areas of Jamaica are in a time warp. The lack that I experienced nearly 40 years ago is still a reality. Within that context it is difficult for kids to advance out of their current situation."

What was the inspiration and motivation behind co-founding ROI?

My wife and co-founder dragged me into it! Seriously, she was the catalyst for ROI, and by planting the seed she played easily to the latent motivation in me. That motivation was driven by a confluence of factors. Despite leaving Jamaica more than 20 years ago, I will always be Jamaican, and I am emotionally committed to the well-being of the country.

If you care about the country it is impossible to ignore the crippling lack of opportunity and resources. There is a desperate need for help, but too often the help is in the form of immediate gratification that does not create a path to self-sufficiency and independence. It is almost a cliché by now, but education is the best path to sustained, high value advancement for most.

So, putting it all together, the motivation for ROI was due to my love for Jamaica, an awareness of the pressing needs, and a belief in education as a key vehicle of success, with reading as its cohort.

What role did reading play, if any? Is it similar to the role it plays with your own children today?

I love how reading can be an essentially fun activity, yet a person is educating him or herself almost without sometimes knowing it. You read Louis L'Amour and develop a deep sense of physical geography at a subconscious level. When you read Sam Selvon, you are so captivated by the rich humor that you absorb history, and culture without the boring awareness that kids usually associate with those topics.

My kids love to read; they clearly inherited the genes from my wife and me! It is largely a fun pursuit, but they have started to exhibit some of the social consciousness that good reading should engender.

Here in the US, my kids have an embarrassment of riches with regards to books. We have a town library that is well stocked and also allow us to source books from other libraries, if it is not available locally.

They have a great library at school, and an overabundance of books at home. And they have electronic devices loaded with books. Reading material is not as commonplace in Jamaica as it is here in the USA. When I was growing up we had no libraries in most of the communities, and the little money we had was usually dedicated to food and clothing. It was a joyous day when the government rolled out a book mobile that would visit our community and open its doors to our eager eyes and hands. It became a ritual for us to count down the time to its arrival, when we could explore afresh and get new books. Yet the book mobile did not last because of budgetary constraints.

Now when I visit my hometown, and many other communities it feels like many areas of Jamaica are in a time warp. The lack that I experienced nearly 40 years ago is still a reality. Within that context it is difficult for kids to advance out of their current situation.

HOW DID BOOKS GET INTO THAT KIND OF ENVIRONMENT? DO YOU RECYCLE?

My core friends and I were voracious readers, but we were dirt poor as well.

Consequently we had precious few books of our own, and quickly learned to share. That practice was a sign of our creativity and love for reading, and also a key part of friendship; the desire to help each other, spend time together, and dissect a good book together.

Many communities still rely heavily on physical books. Low or no technology, unreliable electricity, and poverty dictates that this recycling from my childhood will be around for a very long time. And it is a large part of the reason why we are establishing lending libraries in remote communities across the island.

In retrospect, we were forming our own book clubs, drawn together by necessity, our love for each other and an abiding love for reading. Reading Owls is an organized and large scale version of what my friends and I started.

HOW DO YOU THINK BOOKS HELPED YOU, AND CAN HELP OTHERS?

There is no way I could be the Easton I am today without a love for reading at a very early age. Obviously, reading imparted knowledge. It made me smarter by the sheer accumulation of knowledge, as well as the discipline of organizing my thoughts.

But beyond the valuable knowledge I am most grateful for the sense of the possible that I got through reading. I read adventure stories and wanted to see the world, accomplish things, and make a mark in the world. Reading was both inspirational and aspirational; a push to transcend my humble origins and grow and explore, and it was also a guide to what I could become.

Having access to books is beneficial for everyone. And not just beneficial, but vitally important if you want to make something of yourself.

Social media and the video game culture has in some ways stunted the thirst for reading, but growth comes through reading, whether its code, a script, or biology.

And there is the sense of curiosity and creativity that comes from reading. To me it's a no-brainer; reading is the gateway to excitement, self-development and possibilities.