

# Flashlight Memories

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Barbara B. Rollins

Silver Boomer Books

Abilene, Texas, USA

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## FLASHLIGHT MEMORIES

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To Dusty Richards

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*Intellectual Grandfather  
of Silver Boomer Books*

*October 21, 2006, Dusty Richards spoke  
for the Abilene Writers Guild Annual  
Workshop, inspiring all.*

*Silver Boomer Books took up the  
mantle. Now this, our sixteenth book,  
recognizes our debt to the first-ever  
writer to receive two Western Writers  
of American Spur Awards in a single  
year, winner of the National Cowboy  
& Western Heritage Museum 2010  
Western Heritage Award - Western  
Novel, and author of 65 books -  
and counting.*

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## Three Books — Three Lives

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*B.J. Yudelson*

The best of a book is not the thought which it contains, but the thought which it suggests... ~§~ Oliver Wendell Holmes

“Not another book report!” Larry complained. He loved to read, but writing was enough to take the joy out of any book.

“Tell me about the book,” I encouraged my nine-year-old son.

“Eliezer Ben-Yehuda was this amazing man. He moved to Israel from Russia when he was only twenty-something. And he decided that everyone there should speak Hebrew, the language of their past. Everybody else, at least all the Jews from Eastern Europe, spoke Yiddish.”

“Just like that” – I snapped my fingers – “he took Hebrew from the language of the Bible and the prophets to a modern tongue?” I had never heard of Ben-Yehuda and was intrigued.

“Actually, he had to make up lots of new words. He and his wife spoke only Hebrew with each other and their children, and at first, they were the only ones who used Hebrew all the time.”

“How did the other Jews react?”

“Well, they wouldn’t let their children play with the Ben-Yehuda kids, so the kids didn’t have any friends. And the grown-ups would cross the street to avoid having to say hello to

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Ben-Yehuda or his wife. They were real outcasts, the whole Ben-Yehuda family. The rabbis hated him.”

“Why were the rabbis so angry?” I hoped my questions would help him think through the dreaded book report.

“Because Hebrew was the holy language. They thought he made it dirty when he used it to talk about everyday things, like getting dressed or going to the bathroom.”

“What do you think of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda? Do you think the rabbis were right to shun him?”

“I think he was bold and brave. The book made me angry at the Orthodox. If they had their way, Israelis would speak Yiddish, not Hebrew, today.”

I have little doubt that Larry’s book report earned an A+. I also know that by the time I had read both the biography that had captured Larry’s imagination and an adult version, I shared Larry’s fascination with this tenacious creator of modern Hebrew.

\* \* \*

There is a wonder in reading Braille that the sighted will never know: to touch words and have them touch you back. ~§~ Jim Fiebig

“Mom, could you get me a Braille card?”

Ruth had read a biography of Helen Keller for a fourth-grade book report. Inspired by Keller’s achievements, she found a book about Annie Sullivan, Helen’s teacher and mentor. Soon Ruth had read every book in the library about Keller or Sullivan. Next came young adult novels with blind protagonists. It was no surprise that she wanted to learn Braille.

Not long after I called the Association for the Blind, the requested card arrived in the mail. Ruth reverently passed her fingers over the raised dots. Within days, she had memorized

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the alphabet. She practiced – or so she told me some years later – in her darkened bedroom at night.

Believing that Ruth's passion should be put to use, I suggested that she volunteer at ABVI. This call brought mixed results. "Unfortunately, she is too young to volunteer on premises," I was told. "However, I have a suggestion for something that she could do at home. I've asked others, but no one has ever completed the project."

After I explained the undertaking to Ruth, we set out to buy the materials for a book made of twenty-six felt pages, each with a sandpaper letter and buttons sewn in the that letter's Braille pattern. At the store, Ruth lingered indecisively over colored bolts of felt.

"Just choose something," I urged. "What difference will the color make?"

"Just because they're blind doesn't mean I shouldn't make them something pretty," she replied indignantly, settling at last on turquoise.

After Ruth cut the felt into 8½" x 11" panels, her dad taught her to use a straight-edge and box knife to draw and cut capital letters out of coarse sandpaper. One by one, she glued them to the felt and punched holes to fit the binder.

Next came the buttons. The one button for "A" went quickly. One page complete. Then two buttons each for "B" and "C." Ruth's progress slowed. I suggested she use my "Buttoneer," a gadget that attached buttons with thin plastic strips. Ruth mastered the process, but lost momentum halfway through the alphabet. To attach eighty-four buttons proved daunting as it was boring.

After a year of motherly nags, threats, and bribes, Ruth completed her Braille book. We delivered it to ABVI for use in the waiting room, where people whose vision was dimming

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could learn their new alphabet. Whether or not they could see the beautiful color, they could surely feel the love that bound the sandpaper letters and Braille buttons to the page.

\* \* \*

Books are the quietest and most constant of friends. ~§~ Charles W. Eliot

“Look! There’s ‘Madame Charpentier with Her Children’ by Renoir!” My ten-year-old daughter stood at the entrance to the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s impressionist gallery, her face aglow with excitement.

I walked over to check the label on the portrait of a woman sitting on a couch, one child next to her, the other perched nearby atop their dog. Miriam was right!

“Miriam, how on earth did you know that?”

Her reply was matter of fact. “It’s in my *Children in Art* book.”

Miriam and her older sister Ruth were on their first trip to the Big City. First stop: the Met. While Miriam and I sauntered from painting to luscious painting, Ruth raced around the room, then sought permission to go elsewhere in the museum. “Be back here in 30 minutes,” I instructed. Thirty minutes later, she checked in, then wandered off for another 30 minutes. Then another, and another.

In between those check-ins, Miriam and I were oblivious to time. We lingered over every water lily and haystack, each peaches-and-cream Renoir lady, every bold Van Gogh and Cezanne painting. Eventually, Miriam wormed her way to the front of a tour group. She seemed to absorb every word of the docent’s descriptions, even though they were directed to people decades older.

We ended our impressionist feast with Degas sculptures. Miriam was drawn immediately to “Little Dancer Aged

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Fourteen,” familiar from her youthful art book. Ruth joined us to admire the bronze ballerina in creamy-pink tulle tutu.

Reluctantly, we pulled ourselves away and stepped into the chill November air. We hailed a cab and headed toward the girls’ first Broadway show, *Annie*. Ruth had explored most of the Met; and even bumped into a camp friend. In those same few hours, Miriam had reveled in a personal reunion with children she knew from her art book. Many of the works she encountered that day became her lifelong friends.

\* \* \*

The worth of a book is to be measured by what you can carry away from it. ~§~ James Bryce

Today, more than three decades after Larry read *Rebirth: The Story of Eliezer Ben-Yehudah and the Modern Hebrew Language*, he is the force behind Ben Yehuda Press, a publisher of books of Jewish interest. This venture combines his experience as journalist and computer whiz, his intensive Jewish knowledge, and his love of books. Most people think he chose the name because it’s Hebrew for “Yudelson.” I know that it also pays tribute to Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. Larry hopes that someday Ben Yehuda Press will reprint the children’s biography that stirred his (and my) interest in the audacious man who reinvented the Hebrew language.

When Miriam announced that she would major in Art History, I reminded her that she didn’t *have* to. “It’s all right to change your mind,” I admonished her. “That’s what college is for – to discover fields you didn’t know existed.”

She followed through with her original passion, then earned a master’s degree in Museum Studies. Today, thirty years after her New York City “reunion” with art that she first met on the pages of a book, Miriam helps museums and private collectors manage their collections. Her career calls on her excellent visual

memory and organizational skills and surrounds her with beauty that nourishes her life.

At thirteen, Ruth's stated goal was to teach "handicapped children, because normal kids would be too boring." A drunk driver killed her dreams a few years after she completed the Braille book. The worn Braille card on her nightstand when she died confirmed the rightness of our decision to donate her corneas.

Years later, a new acquaintance revealed that his young son was going blind. In a tremulous voice, I described Ruth's Braille book.

"I know that book," he responded. "My son uses it when he's waiting for appointments. He says the big buttons make learning Braille easier."

I hope Ruth's book is still in the ABVI waiting room, fulfilling her vision, grounded in Helen Keller's inspirational biography, of helping people with disabilities.

A good book has no ending. ~§~ R.D. Cumming

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## Binge Reading

*Holly Helscher*

“I’m exhausted today,” I said, examining myself in my pocket mirror as Nikki walked into my office.

“Why?” she asked.

“I stayed up binge reading last night. It was 3:00 a.m. before I finally turned out the light.”

“Binge reading?”

I’d forgotten not everyone knew what binge reading was. I was once again eight years old.

“Mom, it’s still daylight!”

“Makes no difference to me. Children need sleep.”

“But kids are still outside! Can’t you hear them?”

“And if they all jumped off a cliff, would you do that?”

“Yes! I! Would!” I argued through clenched teeth. I planted my feet on the floor, glowered at her with my best squinty eyes, daring her to cross the line, all the while realizing that she owned the line. I stopped just short of sticking out my tongue, knowing full well it would earn me perpetual bedtime.

“You listen to me, young lady. I can still grab that book faster than you can run from me. It’s your choice.”

I slowly turned toward the stairs. Once I had triple-dog-dared her to do it, believing I could outrun her. Speeding down the

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hallway, braids flying out behind me, Dad intercepted me, taking my book for her. I sobbed all night.

This time I turned on my heel and headed toward the sanctuary of my room.

One night my grandfather was visiting when the nightly battle began. “Red,” he said gently, stroking my auburn hair and wiping a tear from my tanned freckles, “don’t fret. Now get on up to bed.”

Head hanging, I climbed the stairs, letting the top of each foot slowly scrape the edges, putting off the struggle to sleep as long as I could. That night a flash of eight-year-old brilliance overtook me. I quickly grabbed one of my hair ribbons and tied open the curtain. A conspiratorial beam of sunlight hit my pillow. Purple jammies dotted with winged fairies quickly replaced play clothes. Then, avoiding the monsters I knew lived under the bed, I leaped from mid-room, landing dead center on the mattress. Still on my feet, I walked to the foot of the bed to grab my book from the top of the dresser. Letting my limbs go loose, I dropped like a felled tree onto the comforter with my head hitting the pillow perfectly. Since my covers served as protection from all invisible nightly stalkers, I scrambled beneath them and resumed my book.

Eight-year-old brilliance is no match for parental eyesight and my trickery was discovered when Mom came up to check on me. The pink ribbon on the dark forest of green curtain practically waved to her. A single pull on the diagonal edge of the bright satin was all it took and the ribbon lay crumpled in her hand. It was a fallen soldier killed in the line of duty.

“But Moooooom!” I protested. “Trixie and Honey are stranded in the woods. I can’t just leave them there. They neeeeeeed me!” My bottom lip trembled while a single tear drifted down my cheek. But just like the triple-dog-dare night, I watched my soul disappear from the room tucked beneath my

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mother's arm. I flounced my body toward the wall and the single tear became a waterfall. I would never live until morning.

Then my grandfather soundlessly appeared. "Red?" I turned toward him, my lips in a tight line, one eyebrow raised. Right now, any grown-up was part of the enemy camp and couldn't be trusted. "I told you not to fret." With a bow and flourish, he produced my book, an apple, and a flashlight from midair. My jaw dropped with a quick intake of breath while my hazel eyes opened to quarter size. I jumped to snatch the book and, squeezing it between my arms like a boa constrictor, peered at the other items.

"Now this is just between you and me. Your mother isn't to know. Understand?"

Three quick nods.

"Your mom understands parties, tennis, and in her day, boys. But you? You're different. Anyone can see that, and so can she. Trouble is, sometimes she just doesn't know what to do about it.

"I never finished high school and though there's no shame in driving a laundry truck, it seems you're destined for a bit more. I won't stand by and watch you scream as a book is yanked from your hands. So here's a flashlight to go with your mystery there, and an apple for when you get hungry. But don't stay up too late. She's right about needing to sleep. Clean up the apple in the morning." He brushed the top of my forehead with his lips and disappeared as silently as he had arrived.

When he left the room, I revived my fallen comrade and retied it around the curtain and used the sunlight until darkness shrouded the room. Then I flicked on the flashlight and read some more. There was no chance she would climb the stairs again. Once she had said goodnight, she never came back up. I would read, fall asleep, wake and resume reading. This pattern continued until dawn. Binge reading. It's just the name that came to me.

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Through the years my grandfather kept me supplied with secret snacks. Sometimes he would give me marshmallows. Other times oranges. Apples were the most frequent. Occasionally he would give me nickels. The flashlight batteries kept coming, too.

I learned to hide the flashlight. Pockets, coats, gloves and my schoolbag became the stealth vehicles to sneak the snacks and their remains up and down the stairs. I hid the books in plain sight on my dresser. After all, if I hadn't done that, there would have been questions. Whining and sulking in just the right mix to be able to retain the book in my hands at bedtime took real talent. If I was too obnoxious, Mom would take the book. In that case there would be nothing I could do since there would be no way to retrieve it. If there was no scene at all, that would raise an eyebrow. With the prize so dear, it only took a few times for me to finely tune the dramatic elements needed to hit on the magic balance. Then I'd binge read away. Every third night I would sleep, too exhausted to turn a single page, although I tried.

When Grandpa visited, he always asked what I was reading, and we had a conversation as if he had read the book. In those days I thought he had. When I finished with one Trixie Belden book, another appeared from him. And when I completed that series, the Bobbsie Twins showed up and the pattern continued. Next came Ramona the Pest books, a completely different genre, but I adored her.

When I got into middle school I was able to help with the supply. Grandpa was surprised when I would come home on the last day of school with all the literature books for the following school year. Plus the school library had what seemed like thousands of books. The older I got, the harder it was for him to keep up his part of the conversation. Still, I loved him for trying and helped him out by putting on little plays for him about the

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various plots, or simply being so excited he couldn't get a word in, for which I think he was grateful.

Today bookshelves stand as sentries in every room of my house. Nestled on their shelves are fantasy, sci-fi, anthologies, mysteries, human interest, and textbooks. I was asked once if I'd read them all, to which I proclaimed, "Absolutely. Some more than once."

I still binge read today. Not every book I pick up commands this kind of attention from me. Some are more riveting than others. Not every character needs my emotional investment, nor does every character deserve it. But each entices me to enter into its kingdom and I willingly become captive to its cast of characters. Their world becomes mine and I am always slightly disappointed when I have to reorient myself to my own. "The End" always feels like I'm leaving the company of good friends.

Each time I pick up a book, I think of Grandpa. Opening a book to a new adventure, I lift my eyes and he's standing there offering me an apple and a flashlight.

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# The Club that Never Met

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*Liz Dolan*

On the manila-pocketed library card  
inside the book's back cover  
the boxy-shoed librarian marked date  
of return with a narrow rubber stamp  
attached to a #2 pencil.

Next to the box where I signed my name  
were the signatures of readers  
who had borrowed the books before me:

*Watch for a Tall White Sail*  
*Our Hearts Were Young and Gay*  
*Seventeenth Summer*

books

with watercolors, pen and ink sketches  
and titled chapters. I felt kin  
to those readers and wondered  
if they ever thought of me  
as under Araby-tented sheets  
flashlight aimed, head pillowed  
I caressed corrugated covers  
dog-eared pages I loved  
and read pencil-checked passages  
that bowled me over.

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Where There's One,

There's Bound To Be More

*Tammy L. Tillotson*

As a young child I seldom recall a night I didn't read, and I had a fierce determination to do so at any cost. More than once I got into trouble when the flashlight my dad kept alongside the upright freezer was discovered hidden under my bed covers. I was also one of the few people I knew who looked forward to spring because it meant a whole extra hour in which I could see to read by whatever fading light shone in through the bedroom window.

Ever so quietly, I would roll up the blind and for hours I'd try to read by sunlight, then moonlight, and even the faint exterior yard light. I was absolutely delighted the summer my dad became so frustrated with the mosquitoes that he installed a bug zapper. Coupled with the bug zapper, the yard light glowed even more brilliantly, so I easily overlooked the constant crackling sounds in the background.

I did, however, have to be mindful of my dad. Late at night he'd step out on the front porch to have a smoke. If my bedroom blind was up he immediately knew I was too. Once, when I believed it safe to roll up the blind, I was shocked to find him

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standing in front of my window. He tapped on the glass, smiled his smile that screamed he really meant business, and sternly advised, "I'd go to sleep if I was you." Scared out of my wits by a man unexpectedly appearing outside my window, I closed the blind and scrambled back into bed.

While I was shaking under the covers, I was reminded of my favorite Laura Ingalls Wilder books and a particular story Pa told to Laura and Mary. One night Pa thought he saw a big bear so he started jumping up and down to scare it away. When Pa got closer to the bear he realized it was a tree stump that in the shadows only looked like a real bear. As my heart slowly stopped racing, I started laughing. Though it was just my dad at the window, I certainly thought he did one mean impersonation of a mad grizzly bear! Yet, even that night, I simply waited for what seemed like an awfully long time, until I was sure my dad had gone inside. Then I quietly rolled up the blind and finished the chapter.

Whether it was *Little House on the Prairie*, Trixie Belden, Nancy Drew, Beverly Cleary, E.B. White, *The Babysitters Club*, Sweet Valley High, V.C. Andrews, or countless others, I devoured anything I could get my hands on. I somehow managed to find enough light to make out the words and necessity often mandated creativity. A glo-worm, light-up necklaces and earrings, a spinning flashlight souvenir from the Ringling Bros. Barnum and Bailey circus, and the red lighted base from my sister's bubblegum-machine-shaped aquarium all served as a way to read at various points throughout my childhood.

My mother swore I'd keep at it until I was blind, and she insisted my glasses were a clear indication I should stop straining to read at night. She finally relented and for my birthday I received a My Little Pony lamp for my nightstand. The lamp had a dimmer knob and though it was supposed to

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take a regular 40 watt bulb, I promptly switched it with a 60 watt from one of the lamps in our living room that was seldom if ever used. I had never been in such a rush to get to bed! I'd turn the dimmer knob way down, say good-night, and then be set to read for as long as I wanted. The lamp was so well loved that the plastic soon yellowed and my mother became concerned that the bulb was going to catch our house on fire while everyone was asleep! To prevent that from happening, she routinely started checking to make sure it was indeed only a 40 watt bulb.

As I grew older, I would sneak into the hall bathroom, shut the door, and turn the lights on. I thought this truly was an ingenious idea. If anyone woke up they would think I was either really going to the bathroom or that I was sick. Besides, I could quickly hide whatever book I was reading in between the folds of a nearby stack of towels if I needed to in a pinch. This plan worked surprisingly well and no one would have ever been the wiser if it hadn't been for the night a little mouse nearly ran across my toes! I screamed so loud that my mom came running. In all the commotion, I was standing on top of the toilet seat lid, screaming my fool head off, and still firmly holding my place in a book, when my mother flung the bathroom door open. She was more upset at my reading than with the mouse, because if I hadn't been reading then she would still be sleeping and would never have needed to know about the mouse! My mom seized my book for good that night and as I climbed into bed I seriously doubted I'd get to read the end of the story. Then I heard my mom tiptoe ever so quietly from the kitchen back into the bathroom. I imagined she was setting a couple mousetraps for good measure.

In the morning, not one, but two of the traps held mice – so I got my book back. I kindly pointed out that if it hadn't been for my reading, our house might have been overrun with mice

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before anyone noticed. My mom rather reluctantly admitted, “Where there’s one, there’s bound to be more.” What’s funny? I have that same philosophy about books.

## Friends and Family Members

*Gretchen Fletcher*

An only child, I grew up  
in large families – with all those  
Bobbseys and the five Peppers.  
But it was Nancy who drew me in  
to a world where heroines rode  
in roadsters or on horseback behind heroes.  
I read across moors as Lorna  
and across plains as Antonia.  
In my father’s Bullfinch (in between studying  
the mystery of males carved in marble)  
I met Diana and Minerva and dreamed of being  
both beautiful and wise while riding around  
solving crimes with sisters and brothers.

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## The Reading Place

*Dale Ogren*

Reading on the sofa, reading in bed, on the rug, up a tree, sneaking a peek at my novel surreptitiously in class when I wasn't supposed to, reading in church, reading to my children and grandchildren – reading has always had an important place in my life.

My reading adventures began by listening to books read to me long before I could read myself. During World War II, our home was blessed for a time by the presence of a lovely lady who read to me almost daily. Louise Harwood was a lawyer who worked at the Land Office of the State of Texas near the Capitol by day, and struggled at night with fears for her son, George, who was flying missions in the South Pacific. Louise had responded to the call from Uncle Sam to let her house out to a family and rent a room for herself because of the housing shortage. She became something of a mom to my orphaned mother and was like a grandmother to me.

Louise found a way to get some of George's books out of storage and read them seated beside me on the sofa after supper. Rudyard Kipling's "The Elephant's Child" was a favorite for both of us; and I'm sure, from this vantage point, I must have had certain similarities to that questioning, pestering pachyderm. Together we marveled as the leopard got his spots,

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and I always saw the Ethiopian's fingerprints when viewing a leopard in the zoo. We laughed as the rhinoceros got his bumpy hide and grumpy disposition from the Pharsee man's cake crumbs, reminding me not to eat crackers in bed. We shivered as Mowgli howled with the wolf pack, and Shere Khan pursued me through the jungles of my dreams. We applauded as Rikki-tikki-tavi defeated the deadly cobra. Louise read Kipling's poems, too.

George's books were deluxe quality. *Just So Stories* had all of Kipling's black-and-white wood cuts, but also had beautiful full-color reproductions on satiny smooth paper. *The Jungle Book* had mysterious gray-tone pictures, and *The Talking Totem Pole*, by Lurline Mayol, had a rich binding, colorful native designs of the Pacific Northwest for end sheets, full-color illustrations, and a tale for each animal on the totem pole. Louise gave us her set of 1927 *Compton's Encyclopedias* with colorful mythology and heroic tales for children mixed right in with the factual articles. We still treasure that set as a marvel from times past.

A lonely only child and a widow worried for her only son, we were an odd couple, like the bunny rabbit adopted by the deer, but as I listened to Louise's rich, cultured voice give proper inflection and emotion to Kipling's stories, O Best Beloved, I certainly felt and truly was loved. Reading began for me as an act of love and continues as one of the loves of my life.

I can't remember my mother reading to me, although I'm sure she must have, and I still have books she gave me. It occurs to me now that perhaps she felt her reading didn't compare favorably with Louise's. However, one of my favorite photos is a faded black-and-white of my father, seated in his arm chair, holding me on his lap and reading a book to me. I remember hopping into bed with him every Sunday morning, when he read the funny papers in his rather unvarying, emotionless voice.

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*Biff! Pow! and Bam!* were read in monotone, but when something tickled his funny bone, he would laugh until tears rolled down his cheeks.

On my tenth birthday my parents gave me *Hurlbut's Story of the Bible, selected stories for young and old*. At that point my father read to me nightly until I began to have nightmares. Joseph's brothers' throwing him in a pit is not safe bedtime reading for a child with imagination. But I was old enough to read the book for myself. I remember a luxurious white shag rug that my mother had made, where, lying full length on that softness in the light from an open door, I read *Hurlbut's*, not only that summer, but throughout the remainder of my childhood.

The Bible stories were so interesting in the children's version that I was drawn to read them in the original, and what a revelation that was! The Bible contains a wealth of life information for a child hungering to learn. Love, marriage, rivalry, childbirth, jealousy, beauty, lust, hatred, revenge, battles, death, insanity, poverty, virtue – in short, the whole spectrum of human experience stretched out before me like a vast church potluck dinner in that one marvelous book! Whatever I could reach, whatever I could understand was there for the taking, and the Bible has remained a source of strength and knowledge throughout my life.

It was through reading the Scriptures that I learned that Little Boy David, who had played his harp and tended his father's sheep before finding the courage to fight a giant, had an even more interesting life. In wanting more and reading more, I came at a young age upon a story so dark and tragic that I kept it a secret in a safe place for decades. Later, as an adult and a Bible teacher myself, I wondered why. Why had I never heard Tamar and Amnon's story from the pulpit? Mrs. Potiphar certainly had been paraded and criticized there. She had made her

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appearances in children's literature and classes, as well. Why the censorship of Amnon and Tamar? The knowledge I gained from reading Tamar's story gave me grit to say *No* and determination to avoid compromising situations, better than any of my parents' warnings could have provided. I was the kind of child who filed things away for later, even when I didn't fully understand them.

Going to the library was not part of my early childhood until I was able to walk in a long line with my class to the small room and modest collection of books that was the Wooldridge School library. I read my books over and over again, especially during the long summers, and tried to read many of my parents' books long before I was old enough to understand them. I even read the dictionary. Later, in my teens, I was allowed to take the bus downtown to the main library in Austin, a wondrous place I wished I had discovered sooner.

Reading in class got me in trouble throughout school. It began in elementary school when the story drew me swiftly past the point where little Mary struggled word by dreary word through her page. I kept a finger in both places and calculated when my turn to read aloud might come. Later on Mrs. Nolan, my 8<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher, caught on to me and scolded me numerous times. Even in church I read my Bible when the sermons were dull.

And, naughty girl that I was, I learned to climb up to a horizontal branch of an old live oak with my book and pretended sometimes not to hear my mother calling. (Usually I didn't hear anything anyway because I was *gone* – gone to Machu Picchu, to Crete, or perhaps to foggy Old England, whisked away by the printed page.)

But I also helped my mother by reading to my little sister. *The Poky Little Puppy* was without doubt her favorite, and I must have read it hundreds of times to her and, years later, to our

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five children. Even that came to an end with *The Hobbit*, to our youngest, Philip, when he was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade.

Soon grandchildren began arriving, and the thrill of reading to children, as Louise Harwood had read to me, began all over again. As I take this memory walk through the places where I used to read, I realize the important place reading has had in my life and delight to see my grandchildren curled up in their own favorite reading spots.

## For the Love of Reading

*Kate Powell Shine*

You're fumbling and stumbling through Suessian  
rhyme, words stick 'til they're stuck and you're riding  
your mind, not minding your time, it's fantastic.  
It's reading. Soon tome upon tome take over your home  
and it's knowledge and college and time to remind  
with the rhyme of mnemonics, and brick book by  
book brick you build up your brain box, words  
sticking and sticking, then parents good-lucking  
and biz-buzzing busy-ness, adults throwing hissy-fits,  
'til day's end you sigh, want to curl up  
and cry, but instead you unwind with some rhyme.

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# Lamp: Secondary Education

*Chicago, November, 1875*

*Laura Madeline Wiseman*

At my desk, my neck near the heat  
of the coal stove, I tried to make sense  
of arithmetic, tried to make it all add up.

*x (grades in class) ≥ y (his grasp of my arm when I slipped  
on ice)*

When it snowed, Mr. Fletcher walked with me  
home to carry a volume of grammar  
to my sick brother, Geo, eager to know

*l (his elocution) ± l (his stories of England) ≤ t (his lips as  
he spoke)*

what the new instructor might teach.

Mr. Fletcher stayed for supper, spoke soft  
with mother and shook father's hand.

*z (his eyes as we ate) + z (father's laugh) = z (mother's open  
invitation)<sup>n</sup>*

In class, the youngest failed penmanship.

Mr. Fletcher never scolded, never paddled  
with the board, never used the strap, never

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*1 (my self-consciousness) = 1 (his fingers on chalk) × 1 (his body before us)*

asked us to open our palms for the ruler.

He punished by oration. Some older girls  
and boys purposely forgot their lessons

*1 (his scent as we washed for lunch) ≠ 0 (a lack of hunger)*

to be required to recite while he watched  
and listened to the precision of their tongue  
in the center of the one-room schoolhouse.

*2 (his hands in his pockets) ÷ 2 (his pockets) = 1 (my full body blush)*

So was it no surprise that when he called on me  
I forgot my words and he asked me to learn  
*Winter Beauty* by Henry Ward Beecher.

*1842 (my birth year) - 1837 (his birth year) = 5 (years between us)*

I nodded, the sermon already in my mouth  
my head, my ears, my body even. I knew  
how to perform the minister's pulpit antics.

*w (the distance to the blackboard)<sup>n</sup> - 1 = w (the distance to the future)<sup>n</sup> + 1*

For years I purloined the Readers  
from our older siblings to learn by lamplight.  
He never knew I already knew those words.

*my (poems + lectures) = my (dreams and goals) = ∞*

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On a Bed of Moss

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*Patricia Wellingham-Jones*

The girl grabs an apple  
and her Nancy Drew mystery,  
slips out of the house  
before her mother thinks of a chore.

She runs down the hill  
to the woods behind the lake,  
finds her favorite spot.  
Dog-violets and orange tiger lilies  
grow next to the stream.

She drops down on the moss,  
rubs her face on its softness,  
trails fingers in the chill water,  
flops on her back.

She makes cloud-stories  
through the maple trees,  
picks up her book,  
loses time itself.

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# A Passion for Books

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*Philippa Roberts*

I have a vivid memory of my first birthday. I wanted books, but instead I was given a doll, called Mary, with beautiful curly hair. I remember standing there, holding her, looking at my parents' excited faces and being thoroughly disappointed. Somewhere before that birthday my life's love had begun and I will never know how or why.

My mother confirms that this memory is right, and it was indeed my first birthday. She told me that I'd been shown picture books before that. She remembers that I used to make animal noises at a farm book we had, and apparently I did a wonderful pig. I guess I still could.

I also asked an awful lot of questions. My parents were soon tired of hearing the question, "Sa sa?" (What's that?) With their incredible patience, and unstinting adoration, I quickly progressed and was speaking in full sentences at 18 months. The doll was a disaster. I wanted books and only books.

By the time I was three, I was desperate to learn to read. My mother had heard on the radio that it was bad to teach children before they went to school, but eventually my pleading wore her down. I remember her coming in from the kitchen as I sat at the dining room table with a book.

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“Okay,” she said, and very quickly told me what a few words were. I honestly think I worked most of it out from that. I recognised the sound correlation immediately, and if I had a problem I’d ask any adult who happened to be around. Very few people will say no to a child who is desperate to learn, whatever theories dictate.

I don’t know why I was born with this hunger. I did love stories. I remember my father putting me to bed and reading me stories. I always pleaded for more. One night he closed the book and laughed, and said, “No, you can’t have any MORE! You have to go to sleep now.”

That was before I could read myself. I can’t have been more than three. I remember lying there, thinking and thinking. How could I get more stories? Suddenly it hit me. I would make them up myself!

I sat bolt upright in bed, in my excitement. That must be a job! That was what I would do when I grew up.

I lay down... and began.

I never wavered in my sense of vocation. It was absolute, from that minute. I am now a professional writer and I know I could never have been anything else.

My love of books went on. Once I could read, I used to be absorbed in books until deep into the night. My mother was always furious if she caught me with the light on, so I used to read by the light of a streetlamp outside the window. Then my secret leaked out (perhaps my brother gave me away?) and my mother moved my entire bookcase into the hallway. She and my father used to sit in the sitting room, with the door open so they’d see me if I came down. Or so they believed. I became adept at sitting on a stair just outside their line of vision, and slipping silently down the stairs when they were absorbed in conversation. They never saw the quiet little shadow slip by and

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I think, in the end, when they did find out, they gave up in despair.

Some passions are too deep and important to be stopped. I am grateful to them that they learnt to live with their driven child. Later I learnt that both of my grandmothers had been gifted at writing, and later on they would read me things they had written.

I now own what is still a very small publishing company and I hope to publish more of other people's books in future years. In the meantime everything is on hold as I take a few years to go back to my first love and one true vocation.

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## Library Mouse

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*Marjorie Light*

Another town, a brand new school  
A quiet girl who follows rules.  
I wish for friends and pass the time  
By seeking a familiar sign...

This is always my home in every place  
An old friend awaits - a familiar face  
The Boxcar Children and Nancy Drew  
*My Side of the Mountain* and Hardy Boys, too.

I get a new card, stamped with the date  
I'm a library mouse in every state.

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## *In Miss Magillicutty's First Grade* *Suellen Wedmore*

Bobby is kicking my chair  
with his shiny brown shoes  
when Miss Magillicutty taps

the first page of her ginormous  
book with a wand  
and the squiggles there

slide into words.  
The stick with the foot  
and wheels and pointees

says LOOK.  
The pushed-in circle  
unlocks the boy's name: DICK.

Loops and tails line up  
to tell how the cat  
hid under an umbrella

and how the children  
found the dog who ran away.  
I like this bookplace

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where you can run, run, run,  
and nobody yells *Stop*,  
where boys don't hit girls

and mothers and fathers  
always smile.  
When teacher says *Please read*,

the snake at the beginning  
of little sister's name  
straightens up and sings

SALLY in a voice  
that could be my own.

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## Back Story

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*Wendy Vardaman*

Dad read us poems, little brother  
and me, from fat black  
books evenings when we asked  
and when we didn't. Gathered 'round the gleaming kitchen bar  
on high, orange vinyl stools we heard his favorites: Shakespeare,  
Kipling, Sandburg, Frost.  
His voice rose in fierce crescendos, then dropped  
to trembling pianissimos barely audible above the refrigerator

hum. Overdone, I thought, and begged a turn,  
but like a jealous lover, he clutched  
each word, pausing only to fill the stage with smoke, to check  
the mirror  
at his elbow, while we looked for a chance to run,  
if not recite, captive until he brought the pages together with  
one hand and crushed  
his dying cigarette with the other.

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## Reading Enid Blyton

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*Patricia Hopper*

When I think about reading at a young age growing up in Dublin, Ireland, I'm reminded of the movie *Julie & Julia* – with a bit of a twist. For one thing I don't share the same name as my favorite childhood British author, Enid Blyton. Another difference: Enid Blyton wrote books that I tried to act out, unlike Julie, an adult, who wanted to succeed at cooking Julia Child's recipes.

Before I discovered Enid Blyton I had been raised on books mostly by Hans Christian Andersen, influenced by my mother who loved fairy tales. Switching to Blyton may have had something to do with my father who loved to tell stories that by today's standards could be considered disturbing for children's minds. But my siblings and I loved the stories my father told about twisted demonic types who kidnapped children and took them to some dark dungeon to carry out unmerciful torture. Of course in these stories the father always discovered and conquered the bad guys, thus saving the children.

I quickly related to similarities between my father's stories and Blyton's books about the Secret Seven, Famous Five and Five Find-Outers, the latter with one distinct difference – it was always the group of friends who exposed the bad guys, only occasionally helped by a parent who came to the rescue at a

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pivotal moment. I even belonged to Blyton's Busy Bee fan club and developed pen-friendships with other Busy Bee-ers.

When I say I acted out Blyton's stories, I mean that I created my own secret club consisting only of girls, pledging them to report suspicious activities that required investigation. We were legions below what the Secret Seven encountered in Blyton's books, discovering just bullies in our neighborhood that tormented younger children or damaged neighbor's yards. We never came across smugglers or kidnapers or jewel thieves, or were ever in danger from a criminal determined to keep a secret from being discovered.

We also had smart intuitive policemen who patrolled our neighborhood shopping center, unlike Mr. Goon in the Five Find-Outer series who always showed up after the kids solved a mystery, leaving him scratching his head. I remember actually seeking advice from our local policeman once about a bully that stole blackberries from my friends and me after we spent ages picking them. The bully had a couple of other boys tagging along, all much bigger and tougher than us girls.

After handing over our nice plump blackberries to these bullies for the umpteenth time I was ready to take the problem to our neighborhood policeman. I had learned from the Five Find-Outer novels that policemen didn't take children seriously, only adults. So I tried to disguise my three-foot-eight, ten-year-old frame to look like a man. I borrowed my father's trousers and suspenders, stuffed them with a lumpy feather pillow that turned my stomach into ripples and bulges. Next I added a Hercules Poirot type mustache that I bought at Hector Gray's, a local catchall store, along with other disguises. I thought about adding some straw hair, but decided it made me look like a scarecrow, so I borrowed my father's cap instead. Ready now, I walked to the shopping center.

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I watched the policeman patrol up and down in front of the shops. All the storefronts faced the street. Taking a deep breath I fell into stride beside him, although for every step he took I had to skip twice to keep up. Looking back I have to admire the policeman for not bursting out laughing; he must've had a good time telling about our encounter to his mates in the pub.

"Peaceful day?" I asked, in the best gruff voice I could muster.

He grinned. "Not too bad."

"Any major disruptions?"

"Not many. A woman complained that the butcher gyped her. His lamb chops were poor quality and underweight. Some boys tried to steal bubblegum when a shopkeeper's back was turned, but he caught them in the mirror, and a mother lost the wheel off her pram while crossing the street. I had to stop traffic to get her across."

I skipped beside him for a minute or two. "You didn't happen to have any complaints about bullies stealing smaller kids blackberries, did you?"

"No, nothing of that sort today."

"How would you treat a blackberry thief if you came across one?"

The cop looked thoughtful. "Well, since I'm confined here to the shopping center, I don't get to witness blackberry stealing that happens out in the fields or along roadside hedges. So I can't act on a crime I haven't observed."

I was disappointed. This policeman was beginning to seem like Mr. Goon in the Five Find-Outer books. He was no help at all.

"I can offer some advice on how to deal with a blackberry thief, however," the cop continued after a moment.

I perked up. "How?"

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“Well the blackberry picker could bring along someone bigger and older for protection.”

“To deal with him, you mean? Like an older brother?”

“A father or mother is better.”

“How about an older brother and his friends?”

“That might start a ruckus.”

“Right.”

“Or the picker could go to a different place away from where the blackberry thief might show up. Or go at a different time-like early in the morning.”

“Right.”

“That’s my advice.”

I thought about it. “Thanks very much.”

He saluted and I skipped away, pillow rolls bobbing up and down in my father’s pants.

The next time I wanted to go blackberry picking, my mother was busy taking care of my baby brother and my father was cutting grass, so no luck there. I looked for my older brother, but he was playing soccer with his mates. My club members were busy doing chores or babysitting younger brothers and sisters. I would have to take my chances alone.

As I was leaving the house to cross the nearby fields to my favorite blackberry picking spot near the railway, I saw a girl I went to school with and who lived further down on my road. Her name was Ann McGrane. She was my age, but very tall and very broad. She and her sister, who was younger but just as tall, were also going blackberry picking. I decided to join up with them. We spent the next couple of hours picking the nicest blackberries and had our pails full when the bully showed up on the way home – alone this time. My heart sank knowing he would take our pails, but Ann McGrane had other ideas. She handed me her pail and stepped up to the bully.

“Hand over the blackberries,” he ordered.

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“No,” Ann said, hands on her hips.

“If you don’t give them over, I’ll have to take them.”

“Go ahead and try.”

The bully moved eye to eye with Ann. “Give them over, you hear.”

“No,” she repeated. Before he could respond, she doubled her fist and hit him hard in the stomach. He groaned in pain.

She took her pail from my hand. “Run,” she said.

We ran all the way to our road. Our mothers were delighted with the blackberries and we had blackberry pie that evening. I asked Ann to become a member of our crime-fighting club. She gladly accepted. For ages afterwards we identified with our Secret Seven, Famous Five and Five Find-Outer counterparts scrutinizing suspicious-looking people we thought were secretly plotting crimes. These observations led nowhere. We were more successful watching out for bullies and helping younger kids stand up to them. During our summers we biked to the Wicklow Mountains in search of secret treasure in caves, or rode out to the shore to check on suspicious-looking boats that might belong to smugglers. At the same time we continued to read Enid Blyton books and soak up the mysteries.

So my connection with Enid Blyton wasn’t exactly like Julie and Julia, but her books took me into an exciting world that teased my imagination – not to mention the pleasure her stories gave me while eating cookies and drinking milk as I read. Her books set me on the path to seeking out writers whose work provided the same level of intrigue that I found in her writing.

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# What Dreams May Come

*Jennifer Schomburg Kanke*

Once upon a time  
this book, with its purple jam stains  
and jagged page tears, was read by a father  
to a sleepy eyed little girl  
with pony print pajamas and unicorns  
on her pillowcase.

His voice boomed as he played  
the ogre then softened  
to be the handsome prince.  
Villains and heroes all under one skin,  
sending her off to sleep.  
And if she would awaken in the night  
needing something,  
a glass of water, another story,  
she would find nothing  
but darkness and a book  
closed gently beside her.

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## Read Away Vacation

*Donna Duly Volkenannt*

Growing up, summer vacations were always a fun time, and there's one vacation I'll never forget. The year was 1959. It was the summer I turned 11, the summer I fell in love with books.

Earlier that year, in the middle of fifth grade, my family moved to a new neighborhood in North St. Louis, Missouri. Being the new kid at school was no fun, and being labeled the "smart" new kid made fifth grade almost unbearable. It took me a few months to figure out that getting perfect scores on spelling tests and acing arithmetic exams was not the best way to make friends.

As May nudged towards June, other soon-to-be-sixth-grade girls talked nonstop about day camps, sleepovers, and trips to the pool. I played hopscotch by myself and pretended not to care my name wasn't mentioned in their plans. Deep down, I wanted to trade being smart for being popular. The last few days of school I came home in tears and told Mom I never wanted to return to that school again.

Despite my empty social calendar, summer ended up being anything but dull. With two older sisters and two younger brothers, I had built-in playmates, which left little time for self pity and always something to do.

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Dad was a World War II infantry sergeant. Each Sunday as he wrote out our list of chores for the following week, he repeated, “Idle hands are the devil’s workshop.”

My stay-at-home mom carried out Dad’s orders. As she checked items off Dad’s list, she’d say, “Many hands make light work.”

After finishing our chores, we were allowed to play, but my parents also made sure we took time to read.

“And those don’t count,” Dad said, pointing to a stack of Superman and Archie comics my brother Jimmy had scavenged from a neighbor’s trash.

With a house full of kids and only one breadwinner, we didn’t have much money for books. The only ones I remember having were a dictionary, the family Bible, and a set of encyclopedias Mom bought every Saturday at the grocery store for ninety-nine cents per volume.

At the beginning of vacation, Mom signed up Glenda, Kathleen, Jimmy, and me for the library’s “Read Away Vacation” club. For each book checked out over the summer, the librarian placed a star next to our names.

Trips to the library became part of my summer routine. Once a week, usually on a Monday, after the wash was taken off the line and the clothes folded and put away, Mom put baby brother Timmy down for an afternoon nap. She handed us books to return from the previous week, along with our buff-colored library cards.

“Don’t lose those cards,” she said. “Costs a nickel to get a new one.”

Before we left, Mom dug a dime from her coin purse and gave it to Glenda, the oldest. “You can buy two pieces of penny candy each on your way home,” she said. “And don’t forget my change.”

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On hot afternoons the four of us marched out the front door and down the porch steps to begin the almost one-mile journey to the library. As we hiked past tidy houses and brick four-family flats, the sweet fragrance of honeysuckle vines, tangled roses, and fat snowball bushes wafted through the air. Block-by-block we tiptoed around wads of gum and bubbles of hot tar melting on the pavement.

On rainy days, we huddled under the awning of a corner tavern, where laughter, the clink of glasses, and the twang of country music on the jukebox serenaded us while we waited out the storms.

As we hustled by the packing house I breathed through my mouth. The strong odor of slaughtered animals made my stomach twist. One day a steer got loose. Men with rubber boots, bloody aprons, and angry eyes cursed and chased the runaway. I blinked back tears when the men caught the panic-stricken animal and dragged it back inside.

Not far from the library, I lagged behind to peek inside the confectionary window at the two pieces of penny candy I planned to buy on the trip home. Sweat trickled down my face and pooled around my neck when I finally spotted Divoll Branch Library, the stately building that sat atop a hill not far from the Mississippi River.

At the foot of the library I forgot about being hot and tired and raced up the tall concrete steps. Opening the bronze-handled door, I stepped inside and soaked in the cool air, the hum of fans, and the smell of ink and musty books.

After stopping at a water fountain for a long drink, Kathleen and I paired off and wandered through rows and shelves and stacks of beautiful books with multi-colored spines in assorted shapes and sizes. We picked out three books each – the weekly limit set by Mom – and depending on what books were available, we usually brought home something with Nancy

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Drew in the title. That way we could swap with each other and read six books a week before we had to return them.

As the months wore on, I helped solve mysteries with Nancy Drew and The Hardy Boys before moving on to other books. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, *Red Shoes for Nancy*, *The Little Match Girl*, and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* were among those I carried home.

My heart swelled with pride the first time I saw DONNA MARIE DULY printed in block letters on a huge board alongside of the librarian's desk. After each visit I counted the stars next to my name. By the end of summer I'd surpassed thirty. If I could've included the books my sister Kathleen checked out, which I also read, the number would've been double that amount.

The highlight of the Read Away Vacation Club occurred in late August, when the librarian presented our certificates. At the supper table Dad praised us. After dishes, Mom wrapped the certificates in tissue paper and stored them in the cedar chest along with baby books, Baptism and First Communion certificates, and yearly report cards.

At the end of the summer Mom had a surprise. When she told me she had enrolled us in a local parochial school, I cried for joy. My first day in sixth grade, I recognized a few of the girls from the library. At my new school I quickly made friends and had to work hard for good grades. I was surprised and happy to learn I wasn't the only smart kid in the class – or the only girl who loved to read.

While classmates from my old school may have bragged about trips to the pool and slumber parties, my summertime memories included adventures of places far away.

The summer of 1959, I fell in love with books. I traveled to Brooklyn with Francie Nolan, cried when I read about the little match girl, and had fun solving mysteries along with Nancy

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Drew, Ned Nickerson, and the Hardy Boys. That same summer I learned an important lesson. Like a summer tan, popularity fades, but the love of reading lasts a lifetime and shines brighter with each passing year.

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## Endless Love

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*Barbara B. Rollins*

*Poky Little Puppy,*  
*Fix it, Please,*  
*Little Engine That Could,*  
golden books, shiny moments.

*The Berenstain Bears Play Ball,*  
*Clifford, the Big Red Dog,*  
Lois Duncan and Star Wars Books:  
reading to sons became books shared.

*Roll Around Heaven,* Tess Gerritsen,  
*The Right to Write,* manuscripts of  
books from hopeful writers, and mine —  
endless books, savored, loved.

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## The Ghosts that Still Haunt Me

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Liz Dolan

When young, I was bedazzled by the lit book  
my sister subways home from high school,  
its leaves as salvific as the sheets under which  
I lay. Under black mushroom umbrellas  
in the rain-sopped cemetery of *Our Town*,  
I wept for Emily as she sued to relive  
one day. Cautioned by Mrs. Gibbs to cull  
an ordinary one, she chose in her red-sashed frock  
her twelfth birthday. *Oh earth, you're too  
wonderful...*, she cried. Dead sober,  
her choirmaster intoned, to be alive  
was *to move about in a cloud...*

Later, stumbling upon *Wuthering Heights*,  
I cradled besotted Heathcliff, my stable boy.  
Sold out by Cathy, a wanton, greedy child,  
for a milksop with silly buckles on his shoes,  
even though she knew Heathcliff was more herself  
than she. I shadowed him until he came to rest  
under a rock on a ledge near Peniston Crag  
united with her at last, no longer in this dark  
alone. In high school I yearned for Peter  
to pursue me until death. Like Cathy, when I knew  
I had him, I dumped him for a jock,  
dumped him for a handful of worldliness.

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# Forbidden Delight

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*Annemaria Cooper*

Up to the point where Chicken Licken shouted, “the sky is falling down,” my awareness of reading was fear. I was shy, the youngest of my class, and subjected to sniggering from my peers as I read. I was scared of mumbling, mixing up words, and in particular some words that ended with *-ly*. I still can’t pronounce adverbs without extending the word with my pathetic lingering *lily*. *Fam – ill – lil – arl – li – lay*. The pressure not to commit such crimes against spoken English consumed me as a child, and the written word *rar – ill – lil – ar – lil – lay* made sense until one sunny afternoon.

It was the week after my fifth birthday, a bright spring day that warmed after the chill of the morning. In my satchel, a letter from my father permitting me to obtain a library ticket was all I could think about. Christine, a friend, was a member, and she had something I wanted, something I couldn’t have. A book, not a schoolbook, and the library was the only place I could get it.

Johnny King was first to stand and read aloud. I didn’t like boys. They were smelly, dirty, and put worms in my pockets. I looked at the picture of Chicken Licken and tried to finger the words Johnny spoke. He stumbled too, but no one dared to bully him. Next page, and Kathleen O’Brien’s turn to read. She read

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fast – it was hard to follow the words and look at the picture. Christine nudged my arm; it was my turn to read the next page.

I stood up and gulped. The words didn't make sense.

“Well,” said Miss Morrow, standing arms folded, in a shaft of sunlight and chalk dust. “Chicken Licken said...” She prompted.

I closed my eyes, opened them, took a deep breath, and read aloud, “Chicken Licken said...” Then it struck. The words were a story. Words could make sense. “Chicken Licken said, the sky is falling down.” That was my magic moment, and I was hooked. By the time my page was finished, and I was sitting back down, safe behind my desk, I flicked to the next page, and the next until Miss Morrow instructed us it was time to go home.

“Homework for tonight is to read pages seven to ten,” said Miss Morrow.

I didn't want to wait until tomorrow. I wanted to know about Cockey Lockey; Chicken Licken and he had just met.

Christine lived next door to the school. Her mum insisted she change out of her uniform before going out to play. No one would be at home for me. Mum worked until five, and I waited on the doorstep until my brothers came home with the door key. Some days, if it was raining or snowing, my neighbour Mrs. Keenan would spoil me with cups of tea and salmon sandwiches. Mrs. Keenan always removed the bones, but my mother insisted the small vertebrae were full of calcium. I preferred Mrs. Keenan's. I sat on Christine's doorstep and read all of Chicken Licken. A whole month's homework completed in a short space of time, and the knowledge that Foxy Loxy got his just rewards.

“Come on,” said Christine, “let's get you a library ticket.”

As I waited for the stern-looking librarian to read my letter, stamp and scribble behind her desk, words came to life with meaning. *Silence. No children past this point. This library was*

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opened... I smiled. The library opened on the same day I was born. This was my library.

“You may take out one book,” said the librarian, handing me a ticket. “And no talking.”

I didn’t know which book to choose. There were so many, but after I decided on Hergé’s *Adventures of Tintin*, the librarian escorted me back and pointed to the shelves. “You may take a book from those shelves. This is far too advanced for you.” I selected *Cinderella*. I knew the story, but to read the words by myself, who needed a fairy godmother? Books were magic by themselves. I eyed the forbidden shelves, and knew I wanted to read them – all of them.

After supper, I took out my new library book and showed it with pride to my mother.

“You’re not to take any more books from the library, you hear me,” she said. “And you’ll take that book back tomorrow.” There was little point explaining my father’s given permission. When my mother was angry - you obeyed.

Mum hated books. She said reading filled a woman’s head with dreams and the dreams turned her mad.

As the years passed, I took to reading in the library before going home, or on Saturday afternoons when my brothers watched the wrestling on the television. I loved Enid Blyton’s Famous Five, but sometimes someone would take out the books, and I would have to wait for their return before reading the next chapter. I longed to read the books in the main library - the forbidden ones. In school, I’d lose myself in the *Bible History*, the only consistent book in my possession throughout my primary school years. At home, I would read my father’s newspaper as I polished the family shoes. As soon as I finished buffing the leather, Mum would scrunch up the paper into twists for the fire.

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“Look what reading did to your Aunt Katie,” Mum said. I loved my Aunt Katie.

Small bookcases, tall bookcases, filled my aunt’s house, and a visit to her toilet revealed more forbidden books. Ones with words I didn’t know, and couldn’t understand the meaning in the dictionary. Those I could made me giggle. Most of her books ended up at Mum’s hospital after Aunt Katie tried to jump from the Jamaica Bridge in Glasgow. I think Aunt Katie bought more, or hid some. I saw some in her locker, thumbed and dog-eared, in the institution she was committed to. Most of the patients rocked back and forth, some took off their clothes, but mostly I remember how sad they all looked. They didn’t have books in their lockers.

“Is there anything I can bring you, Katie?” asked my Mother.

“Another book,” said my aunt, “and my spectacles.” She looked happy. She smiled at me and said, “You look like Heidi. Have you read the book?”

I shook my head, and whispered no. Glances exchanged between the sisters, and I sensed the shame the lack of knowledge brings.

Any book that was not a schoolbook, my mother parcelled up and took to the hospital where she worked. She never took any to my aunt. At Christmas, my father bought annuals for my brothers and me, but they too disappeared after a week.

Mrs. Keenan handed books to my mother on a regular basis. Her son worked for Collins Publishers and brought home seconds. Mum took them to the hospital too, but when I was ten, one book caught my eye. *Heidi*.

I took the book from my mother’s bag and hid it in my wardrobe. Later, I moved it to a gap in the stair cupboard. I read it every night after my mother thought I was sleeping. When I finished, I read it again. I felt guilty stealing it. The guilt grew, forcing me to confess to the parish priest. “Bless me,

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Father. I have sinned. I took a book my mother was giving to the poor children in hospital.” Heidi cost me many Hail Mary’s and Acts of Contrition, but she was worth it. Like my aunt, they sent Heidi away. I hoped she would help the sick people, like Heidi helped Clara, then she could come home. Aunt Katie never did.

When I was twelve, my father spotted a bargain in an old shop. Two old, green and gold books of Andersen’s *Fairy Tales*. My mother couldn’t object; my father bought them as an investment. I spent many nights reading the wonderful Victorian tales. I still have those books, *Heidi*, and Hans Christian Andersen, and they both contain the pleasure of having something forbidden about them. Something secret.

Every book I read feels – illicit – exciting – daring. I understand why my mother feared them, but she was wrong. She couldn’t understand the pleasure of entering someone’s world, of being, for a length of time, a character. Wasn’t Eve the one who tasted the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge? When I read, I enter my own paradise, and leave behind the world for a few hours. Without question, I feel *sin-gil-lar-lil-lily* indulgent. Just don’t ask me to read aloud.

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# My Flashlight Memories

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*Penny MacPherson*

When Mama and Daddy fell asleep  
in their bed in the northeastern part of  
New York state  
I fell asleep in the western part of  
New York state

Away at school  
Because I had to learn braille,  
Away at school  
Because I had to learn many things differently

Braille books, talking books  
Tucked me in at night  
Evidence of their forbidden presence  
Evidence of our secret trysts  
Lying by my bed on many mornings  
Tattling to housemothers about  
How I consorted with them the night before  
Enduring the predictable scolding as an  
Incurable Repeat Offender

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But the punishment was preferable to  
Ignoring *Charlotte's Web*  
The punishment was worth  
Not sacrificing the  
Little House series  
*Strawberry Girl* or  
*Love Story*  
And so many more...  
So many other companions  
So many more friends  
on the altar of strict obedience

Yes, story characters tiptoed in and out  
In and out of my mind  
Up and down the years  
And how we bonded... and  
How I loved each of them!

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# On Passing the Library

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*Gail Denham*

A feast's spread out before me.  
Mind juices gurgle with anticipation.  
Ponderous volumes, dripping  
with the gravy of age – rich, savory.

Dainty tidbits of nonsense to tickle  
the palate. Elaborate satires,  
liberally spread with tasty quips.  
How glibly they'd slide down.

Gripping works of fiction, poetry,  
and memoirs; deeply refreshing, choice.  
And for dessert – humor – deliciously  
spiced with life.

With rapture, I behold this  
bountiful table. Yet I'm far  
too busy, and can't take time  
to dine.

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S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*

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Jason Mullin

In the seventh grade, the boys at St. James Catholic School fought a turf war over a book: S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*. Although curious of the world, we had no sense of the power of books. For answers, we looked elsewhere. Billy Ruggeri routinely held private show-and-tell sessions in which he produced numchucks, brass knuckles, and knives of all sizes and ferocity borrowed from his father's collection. Chris Gallagher once produced three cans of warm beer, and seven of us gathered 'round at Webb Park, adopting the bitter, familiar smell of our fathers with each arduous sip. Todd Link often presented us with his mother's pornography, and Jeff Billings stole cigarettes from his grandmother's purse at will. These things changed us, and though frightening, they were not unexpected, nothing like our reaction to Hinton. That is, we knew we had to fight one another now and then, and if someone offered a lit cigarette or open beer, then we had to take a drag. Also was it necessary to slip our sweaty palms beneath our girlfriends' blouses when dared. This we accepted. But a book, a novel no less, rising to a level of importance, of necessity, of grace even, this surprised us wholly.

Before computers and the magic and mystery of the Internet fused with the library experience, we regarded the task of

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searching through card catalogs in order to locate a book equivalent to marching through our own backyards to collect a switch with which to be beaten. The stacks at St. James were impossibly dry, and we suspected wholesome Catholic teachings in every page, positive lessons on life buried deep in the prose. Who could withstand preaching while his body transformed in the grotesquerie of puberty? There was no Stephen King, no Sydney Sheldon (a very good read for a curious thirteen-year-old,) no J. D. Salinger, no H. P. Lovecraft. A few liked Poe but were dubious – he wrote poems as well. Was he one of them? The book, our book, had been there all along, we supposed, and now, upon discovering it, we suffered an awakening of sorts.

*The Outsiders* did not remain checked out for long, two days, maybe three at the most. Many held it a single day, stumbling to school with heavy eyes and the vague notion they were different types of boys than they had thought. One by one, Hinton startled us with the idea such intimacy was possible between us and anything else, let alone a novel. And for those of us not yet indoctrinated, we feared the school would discover the book before we could read it. Despite the recurrent images of handguns and switchblades, the incessant smoking, the coarse language, and the heavy sexual overtones, the book remained on the shelf. Had the nuns slipped? Had Sister Dolores, who had held onto the practice of corporal punishment in school long after its legality expired, allowed us access to this book on purpose? Had the same priests who promised hellfire over missed sermons and Friday cheeseburgers been won over by Hinton's hard-scrabble world? Unless a trap, an oversight this great could not last.

When we spoke of the book, we did not mention its emotional impact, though that was the draw. Instead, we professed love for the knifing by the fountain, for the gang fight

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in the abandoned lot, or for the way Dally refuses to surrender in the park, choosing a hail of bullets over conformity. We maintained our mantle of aloofness. (Young writers do that, too, disguise their lack of emotional investment with profanity, gore, and aggression.) Yet communal as our experience was, it remained secret. Like all our adolescent pains, we hid them from the only other people capable of empathy, each other. There is no more solitary creature than a seventh-grade boy. Connection was the change we wanted yet feared most. Alone, we confronted our own sensitivity, disapproving, therefore, even of ourselves.

We didn't know who read it first, who experienced that initial shock of self-discovery, but the fight for its possession gripped us in a kind of temporary psychosis. Eric Gelb wrote, "Bobby is an Aids-man" on the desk of Robert Skully, who insisted no one call him Bobby. And David McMichael punched Terry Burchak so hard in the groin he peed a little blood. Yet no one returned the book unfinished. Those of us who hadn't read it could scarcely bear the exclusion, the waiting. *It's been three days. Who's got it?* Those in the know teased the others, holding lofty conversations, retelling their favorite scenes, and shooing away the unread. The air in the library thickened, as if violence could erupt any moment. There was something too savage about it all, something awful and permanent about being last, as if placement at the bottom of seventh-grade society was at last confirmed. I would not be that boy.

Back then I was neither bookish nor athletic, neither lonely nor popular, neither bully nor victim. Amorphous in the way of all adolescents, I longed for knowledge of myself. The question *What do you want to be when you grow up?* implies that at present, you are nothing. Finally, when there was no one left tougher than me who hadn't read the book, the librarian stamped my card. The tattered plastic cover lay bedside while I read the

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story three times over four days. If I couldn't read it first, I would read it most, I reasoned. In the novel, Ponyboy suspects his identity is incomplete, that he is more, or at least different, than his greaser label, and sunken into my bed, the only child of a broken marriage, feeling like nothing much, I wondered whether I was something even less than that, perhaps lacking identity altogether, yet realizing on some base level I existed already, an unrealized self, hovering in the future, waiting.

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## Gothics

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*Wendy Vardaman*

Her grandmother stashed  
them in a walk-in pantry, where the dim  
bulb still threw enough light  
on books that lurked  
behind boxes of Lucky  
Charms and Vanilla Wafers,  
for a girl arriving on tip-toe to read at the dead  
center of an old woman's flat, to get lost

there on a sticky summer night,  
the only sound after the door creaked  
closed her own deep  
breath and the drone of a desperate  
air conditioner. Long past the hour

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that the ancient  
lady became unconscious,  
current paperback clasped

like a prayer,  
the bedside lamp burned,  
casting long shadows  
across an untouched  
Bible and a deceased  
husband's picture. One romance  
finished, another arrived off the rack  
at Safeway, each with the same cover:

mansion looming  
in the dark background, young woman with flowing  
dress and hair, running arms outstretched  
toward you, reader,  
as eager as both girl  
and grandmother to escape  
the horror of another,  
never-worthy hero's house.

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## First Mystery

*Lewis Gardner*

In *Robin Hood* by Howard Pyle,  
his mother dies giving birth to him.  
I'd never read about birth before. I knew  
it happened: I had seen my swollen aunts  
before my little cousins squirmed in their cribs.  
And I knew that my mother had somehow  
borne me. How then did she and her sisters  
escape that death? The mystery stayed with me  
many nights as I tried to sleep: my mother  
sacrificing her life to give me mine,  
yet coming back from death to care for me.

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# Dick, Jane and Miss Johnson

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*Marian M. Poe*

My storybook castle rose from a downtown street in Dallas, Texas. Long before spying this Andrew Carnegie-inspired public library, alphabet letters Mother cut from cardboard captivated me. We imagined the color of each letter before my chubby fingers attacked it with a crayon. The enchanted game blossomed into stories. “Reading to you doesn’t put you to sleep,” Mother observed, “it wakes you up.”

Miss Siddie Joe Johnson, a young librarian, scheduled a Story Hour. “Dallas children won’t come,” her superiors predicted in 1938. Mother and I rode the bus to town. We climbed the library’s countless outside steps. When the heavy door opened, I inhaled the scent of thick books and tried to waltz toward them in stiff oxfords. “Upstairs,” Mother whispered, gripping my five-year-old arm.

Shadowy gray-and-white marble stairs looked cracked. Step by step, we left the safety of the first floor. Elaborate wrought-iron risers offered frightening glimpses of unsupported space. Convinced we would be buried in stone rubble when this double staircase collapsed, I climbed toward death with the courage of Snow White.

The Children’s Department welcomed me with morning sunshine and shelves taller than giants. Books! Stories! Magic!

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Years later, Miss Johnson confided her fear the first Story Hour would fail. “But when I saw you on the edge of your front-row chair, I knew my idea was a success.”

The children’s room became a flying carpet after Story Hour because I was allowed to check out books. Like a duckling, I bonded with the thin yellow pencil Miss Johnson used to mark the due date on each card she tucked into a manila pocket pasted in the treasured book. This golden dream continued every week until I entered first grade. Then I met Dick and Jane.

Being almost seven by now, I’d read library books with longer words and more plot. Unable to resist any book, I drank Dick and Jane in one gulp. Alas. Torment arrived in the form of commands to sit still in class while less bewitched children struggled with two-syllable words.

My struggle continued each year. “Do not read ahead,” every teacher cautioned while passing out new readers. This proved impossible. I always read ahead. Each letter, word, sentence, paragraph and chapter held a rainbow I sailed over into the enchanted story.

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# The Upside Down Summer

*Lucile Barker*

My grandmother picked up the little suitcase and put it down immediately on the kitchen table. The snapping of the latches cut into the hot summer morning.

“The suitcase is for your clothes,” she said. “It’s going to be cool up north at the Woods’ cottage.”

She pulled the books from the suitcase and piled them on the gingham tablecloth.

“One a day,” Grandpa said. “We’re rationing you.”

We were going for nine days, ten if you counted the Friday night trip north up the highway, when I could read in the car until it got dark. I hated going up to the Woods’ cottage. It was on an island, there were no other children, it was buggy, and cold at night.

“They do have books there,” Grandpa said.

I looked at Grandma in desperation. She understood how crummy those books were. Condensed books that didn’t have the whole story, old textbooks from the 1930’s, and romance stories where the nurse always got the doctor by being outgoing and unselfish. Anything that was readable had been read.

“Why did I ever teach you to read?” Grandma said. “And Mrs. Wood won’t approve of a lot of these books.”

“That isn’t her call,” Grandpa said.

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It was fine for him, he would be out in the boat with Mr. Wood, but Mr. Wood said that was no place for a little girl. I wasn't little, I just wasn't as big as other ten-year olds. The reason I had learned to read before I went to school was that I had been sick so much. Once I could read, my grandparents got some of their freedom back.

Grandma sighed and got a department store shopping bag. If it was raining when we took the launch across to the island, it would dissolve and the books would be ruined.

"Tell you what, Dolly," Grandpa said, sitting down and putting me on his lap, "we need to slow you down. Can you cooperate with that idea?"

There was a snort from Grandma, but I nodded.

"This summer you read upside down," he said. "Every book in that bag has to be read that way. If you read the Woods' crummy books, you can read them right way up. Okay?"

I nodded again. This might work. I would read one book every day. I wouldn't even read on the way up.

The next morning on the dock Kay Wood grabbed *The Magician's Nephew* out of my hand and turned it right way up.

"I have to read it upside down," I protested.

"Don't be any stupider than you are," she snapped.

"Kay, she has to read the book upside down," Grandpa said. "There is a method to this."

She looked at me with contempt and slouched off into her lounge chair.

*Freddy and Simon the Dictator. Old Yeller.* A Nancy Drew book, but they were all alike to me. *The Golden Pine Cone. Henry Huggins. People of the Deer*, which was a grown-up book, but Miss Armitage, the library branch head, had let me have it. *The Fish Can Sing*, which I had swiped from my cousin Christopher, who was sixteen. *The Armourer's House.*

They were all in a neat pile beside my bed.

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Grandma was reading *On the Beach*, and once it had started to rain, Grandpa was into *The Guns of Navarone*.

Mostly the adults played cards, and complained about the rain.

“That upside down thing really looks dumb,” Russ Woods said, gesturing at me with his cigarette.

He grabbed *People of the Deer* out of my hands without asking. I was afraid the page would rip and Miss Armitage would take away my library card. Grandpa glared at him, but Grandma gave me a warning look.

“Hell, I wouldn’t read this crap right side up,” Russ said, handing the book back to me. “It’s just about animals and Eskimos.”

Thursday morning, and I had finished all the books.

“What was I thinking? I should have told you to memorize them,” Grandpa said sadly. “You’re out of luck.”

“Let’s get the launch and go ashore,” Grandma said. “We can go to the drugstore, get some paperbacks. I can’t play one more round of gin rummy. And the smoke is getting to me.”

We wore rubbery raincoats to the island dock and then to the mainland. The drugstore had westerns, more nurse stories, and not much else, unless Little Golden Books and The Happy Hollisters counted.

We sat watching the rain in the Dockside Inn. I was being treated to a consolation lunch.

“I’m sorry, honey,” Grandpa said. “I guess you’ll have to read doctor-and-nurse love stories.”

I pushed my fries around the plate and dipped my grilled cheese sandwich into the neat pool of ketchup on the side of the plate.

“No,” Grandma said, looking off at the channel. “I didn’t teach her to read to waste her time with that nonsense. How would you like to read about the end of the world?”

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I had thought I was living it.

“Lilly, you can’t let the kid read that! It’s depressing.”

By the end of the week I had read *On the Beach* and *Please Don’t Eat the Daisies*.

Russ had lung cancer the next summer so we never went back to the Woods’ cottage. Grandma let me read *Gone with the Wind* that summer, and got me an adult library card from Miss Armitage, who was dreaming of me following in her footsteps.

Later, when I was working, I had become the union president. We were in the middle of negotiations, my boss said I was the most dangerous person in the whole building.

“How did you learn to read upside down?” he demanded, covering up everything on his desk each time I walked into the room.

“It was a rainy summer the year I turned ten,” I told him, but he didn’t believe me at all.

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amanda memories

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*Carl Palmer*

she reads in midnight whispers  
to my now calmed infant sister  
mesmerized by mother’s voice

seated in the kitchen silhouetted  
by the glow of an open oven door  
reflected in her face as she scoots

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over slightly invites me to hop up  
huddle in closest to the heat as I  
listen to her story accompanied by

milk bubbled gulps rubber nipple  
noises sissy's slowing grunts and  
sighs as tired tiny eyes fall asleep

mom tilts the book so I can look  
follow her finger under lines of  
words I am far too young to read

from picture-less pages characters  
emerge each given unique speech  
scenes seen in a two-year-old mind

with magical skill mom interprets  
printed words to adventure worlds  
beyond my world safe at her side

I imagine how someday I'll read her  
books on the shelf all those in the  
city library every book in the world

translate letters to sounds to words  
skillfully decipher black and white  
to amaze listeners awed by my art

perfect pronunciation of six syllable  
words never slurred audiences cheer  
rise to their feet call out my name

I awaken to the morning light never  
remembering how I got to my bed  
or when her story became my dream.

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## Weekly Library Run

*Patricia Wellingham-Jones*

Grubby paw in long-fingered grasp  
we ambled downtown to the library every Thursday.  
Under sun shafts through Gothic arches in stone  
I hunched over picture books.  
Mother whispered stories at the desk.  
We carried treasure home in a string bag.

Then mine was the big hand  
clasping tiny starfish fingers.  
We'd choose the very best books,  
cuddle in an armchair shabby  
under a lamp, watch the rain  
and travel the world on musty pages.

Recently you carted my books back,  
consulted a list, searched for favorites.  
Caught in webs of sunlight,  
you hunched over picture books,  
brought them home. We whisper stories,  
spin around the globe in crisp new pages.

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# Reading To Escape

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*Carole Creekmore*

*“If I’m very still, she’ll leave me alone ... if I’m very quiet, she’ll leave me alone ...”*

Only when I was an adult did I admit to myself, let alone anyone else, that my mother was a secret abuser. It was then that I quit pretending that everyone must have lived like that, but I had stayed withdrawn from others just to make sure no one knew. As a child, I spent a lot of my time avoiding Mother and her mental problems. I stayed quiet, often hiding in my room to evade her attention. There, I took up reading nonstop, traveling to another world of adventure, fantasy, and knowledge. My escape route through reading became what glued – and still helps hold – my life together.

Mother was able to cope with her mental problems most of the time. Sometimes, though, her illness expressed itself in imagined ailments to get attention. I spent far too much of my childhood shuffling food and magazines to her while she held court in bed. Other times, she focused on me, the daughter she seemed to see as a threat to her youth. I grew up alternately being preened and praised by her for public achievements – such as being an excellent student – and being punished for existing, when Daddy was not around. The safest place for me was in a book – hidden behind larger texts on my desk in class at school,

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hidden under bedcovers and read with a flashlight, or hidden under my bed by day.

I learned to escape in books; there, I was not alone. There I also learned some social skills. I would never become an extrovert, but I learned to make a few friends. I learned about the world around me, that knowledge of almost anything was only a book away. I learned that I was not so bad as Mother sometimes made me think I was; I learned to start accepting myself. I even learned how to take pride in my accomplishments, whether it was reading the most books of anyone in my third grade class or reading self-help books as a young adult to find a way to take control of my own mind, decisions, and life.

Reading created not only a sense of safety and knowledge for me, but also a sense of curiosity and wanderlust. I was amazed at the world my imagination found. I started this extended adventure in the third grade when I read all of the blue, hardback biographies of famous people in my school library. My teacher, Mrs. Greene, perceptive as she was, let me go to the library after I finished my lessons. I moved on from the biographies during the summers to read every junior book in the weekly bookmobile coming to my country town. Then, I was allowed by the librarian who drove the bookmobile to check out even more complex books. Every week during the summer, she would greet me with a smile and pull out a stack of books for me. I never told her how much these books meant to me, but she had to know. None of the other children in the community even seemed to want to go to the bookmobile when it came; they whined when they had to interrupt their playing to find at least one book to take home to “read.”

Perhaps Mrs. Greene and the bookmobile librarian understood me more than I realized then. Whatever the reason or connection, I read and read. I made excellent grades in school, got college scholarships, excelled there, and developed

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a career based on reading and research. Along the way, I learned to understand my mother, to accept my past, to plan my future, and to look at the world with curiosity. Since then, I have learned to love traveling the world to see for myself the wonders I have read about.

Reading has been a key to achieving direction in my life. It has taught me how to understand and escape the shadows of my mother, how to make and meet my own goals, and how to approach my life. Reading has made me realize that the world is boundless, not just a way to escape to tight, hidden nooks. From the third grade on, I have felt that I could move out into the world through books.

Books have never lost their power for me – power to escape from pain and into joy, power to learn, understand, and question safely, power to grow as an individual. Our lives have many possible paths and directions. Reading has given me a guide for making more right than wrong choices, and it has given me the joys of the world's treasures. Reading has gone from being a refuge to a release; I have gone from escape to adventure. Reading is threaded throughout my life – and it is a golden thread.

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# Lies

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*Amanda C. Davis*

People in books talked to her  
Like real people didn't  
And spun her captivating lies  
That somehow turned out true.  
Books didn't look at her funny  
Or laugh if she dared look back.

At the reunion she found the cruelest girls  
And told them each gently,  
"You know, you made me a reader."  
They smiled and misunderstood.  
If only they read books they would know:  
Sometimes you lie in order to tell the truth.

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# Memories of Old Friends

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*Tammy A. Domeier*

I don't remember what specifically drew me to reading – only that it seemed so natural to me that it was always there – like an extra but essential appendage. I imagined that most kids thought about groups they would join or friends they would make. I always thought about how many books there are in the world that needed to be read. In the course of writing this, I realized that most of my significant memories, whether of people or events, are accompanied by a memory of a book.

One of my first memories was of copying my favorite Winnie the Pooh book. I had read it, of course, but at six years old, I aspired to loftier goals. I got out my horse stationery and set about carefully drawing the words, laying down that precious story in my own hand, no matter that it was “written” by someone else. There was something viscerally satisfying about writing down those words – as if I could capture their magic and make it my own by transcribing that book. When my mother grabbed the book from my hands and said with a derisive shrug, “You're only copying it,” I was heartbroken.

My next memory is of listening to Mrs. Gardner, my fourth-grade teacher, prepare the class for a trip to the library. I can still picture her to this day. She had downy hair, a large chest, and short legs. As she droned on interminably about how we

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should not check out reading materials that are “above” our grade level, I thought about how much she resembled Mother Goose, albeit one wearing a multi-colored scarf and platform shoes. Once inside the library, my eyes roamed the stacks of books greedily, like a horse waiting for its oats. I checked out *King of the Wind* by Marguerite Henry. It is a fictionalized story of the Godolphin Arabian and its role in the ancestry of the thoroughbred. Mrs. Gardner shoved her beak of a nose into my book, then grabbed it out of my hands, and waddled up to the front of the library with me in tow and said, “Now, this is an example of something that is above your reading level.” Thirty surprised faces stared back at me, and I remember how her fingertip turned purple as she held the book up for the class to see. “But I’ve read this book five times already, Mrs. Gardner. I’ve got it at home, only I think I lost it, but I really wanted to read it again...” And then I regaled the class and Mrs. Gardner with the history of the Godolphin Arabian. Now Mrs. Gardner had her mouth hanging open.

In fifth grade, I remember how my girlfriends passed around *Are you there God, It’s Me, Margaret* and I imagined my friends read it the same way I did, snuggled in bed with a flashlight, safe from the prying eyes of siblings and parents. That was some heavy stuff. Fifth grade was the year of reading books with titles like *Blubber*, *The Creep*, *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, although I was beginning to read everything in sight. I still read my *Highlights* magazine, but I was moving on to newspapers, magazines, advertisements, and both fiction and nonfiction books on horses.

I developed a fascination with true crime at an early age, about twelve or thirteen, which I owe to our curmudgeon of a neighbor, Jack. I still read true crime novels and they always make me think of Jack. On the morning of my twelfth birthday, I spied a pile of books by Jack’s garbage can. Of course, I was

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drawn to them like a narcissist to a mirror. No sooner had I picked one up and I heard, “Hey, kid, get outta my garbage.” I swear that gravelly voice alone could have shredded my skin. I shuddered and dropped the book. I expected him to have a hook for a hand and bludgeon me to death. The only time I ever saw him was early in the morning and late at night. He could walk normally in the mornings but would stumble at night. Mom said he would walk to Schell’s Brewery and drink samples of beer all day long. I looked back at the pile of books and found my voice. “Are you throwing all these away...because if you don’t want them, can I have them?” He stared at me, uncomprehending. “I could pay you for them,” I offered. “Take them all, kid,” he said and walked away. But his shoulders were shaking and I thought I heard him laugh. We didn’t see much more of Jack before he died a couple years later, except that every so often there would be a fresh pile of books on our doorstep.

I just reread *To Kill a Mockingbird* and I am even more impressed with it as an adult. It takes me back to ninth grade when I read it for the first time. As I sat in ninth-grade study hall reading the chapter about Scout’s classroom and the variety of kids and their diverse backgrounds, I looked around and analyzed my own class. Randy W., a lout in ripped pants with uncombed hair, is crumpling paper and shoving it in his mouth, ready to aim a spitball into the teacher’s coffee cup, while Dawn R. wastes no time in telling Randy that he is the ugliest, stupidest, smelliest, most worthless person she has ever seen in her whole life. Rumor has it that in 5<sup>th</sup> grade Randy deliberately jumped off his dad’s pole barn with the intent of breaking his arm, supposedly for the purpose of getting put in foster care. Throughout the years of going to school with him since kindergarten, it occurred to me that he often came to class with fresh bruises. As I reread the section about Burris Ewell, I looked over to Randy and started to think about what his life

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must be like. Like the Ewells, he often had dirt rings around his neck and I heard that his family had no running water. It was the first time I realized with amazement how difficult it must be to keep clean if you had no running water. (Although I read a lot, I was a bit slow with critical thinking skills!) I like to think I learned how to hate a little less that day.

On a lighter note, I still laugh when I think about my unprecedented upset in the Showmanship at Halter class in the 1983 Brown County 4-H Horse Show. Known as Miss Fancy Pants per my grandmother, Stacy L. was parading her quarter horse next to Daisy and me. Her horse had the muscled hindquarters and tight underbelly that only the finest breeding (and money, of course) can buy. I thought listlessly about how showmanship is supposed to be judged on how well one shows his/her horse, not on the horse's breeding or conformation. The judge pointed at Stacy, hawked her eyeballs at her and said, "Point out the cannon bone." Stacy fluttered around her horse then finally squeaked, "I don't know." How could Stacy miss it? Didn't she ever read? I thought smugly about how every horse book I ever read had a diagram of horse anatomy on page 1. The judge accosted me next. "Can you show me the cannon bone?" I pointed to the area between the "knee" and the fetlock. The judge smiled at me and said, "Well, good, at least someone knows how to do their homework." Yup, you guessed it, that day I placed first in that class. The one and only time I ever would.

I still remember the thrill of reading *Catcher in the Rye* for the first time in high school. I was astounded that anything this funny could be a "classic." I realized that the greatest thing about reading is that there is absolutely nothing else that ignites the intellect and the soul in such a personalized way. If ten people read the same passage, there will be ten different interpretations. As an adult, I no longer have horses in my life

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but have replaced that hobby with running. There is nothing better in the world than curling up with an old friend like *Runner's World*. I call up the stories when I am aggravated in the grocery store, when I am dying from a side stitch, or when I just want to feel more at peace with myself. I wish I had kept a log over the years of all the books I've read, for they are like old friends to me.

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## Fun with Dick & Jane, 1955

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*Susan Pirie Chiavelli*

Mrs. Melfresh calls the *Songbirds* to the front of the class.  
 Her long arms flutter like the wings of a swan.  
 We form our circle, round as a nest,  
 ready to sing the words  
 she feeds us.

*fff* fun *www* with

Look, *Songbirds*,  
 Oh, look.  
 Look and see.  
 Oh, see.

*Squirrels* are not supposed to chatter  
 while *Songbirds* read.  
 They wait.  
 They read silently in their heads.  
 Happy words tumble over sad.

Everyone knows *Songbirds* are better  
 than *Squirrels*.

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Look, *Squirrels*.

Oh, look.

Look and see.

Oh, see.

Jane gets *three* dolls for her birthday.

Not one, not two, but *three*.

She smiles her pastel smile.

We hold our books, templates  
of happiness stamped into our hearts,  
like the inscription on a Valentine.

Oh, Perfect Family, Be Mine!

Look, *Happiness*,

Oh, look.

Look and see.

Oh, see.

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It is 1953

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*Dale M. Tushman*

Little girl,  
you are as American as anyone else  
in Boston, Massachusetts.  
It is 1953, Yiddish and Russian will only get you to the top  
of the pile of bones that Senator Joe McCarthy  
has brought to the American table,  
so do not be Un-American —  
learn all the right words, little girl.  
Read, little girl: read the lease, read to your brother,  
read the newspaper  
and tell us what happened to the Rosenbergs.  
Read all the books in the library. Read  
until you can say any word you see,  
think your way out of tunnels that will entice you  
and ditches you will fall into.  
Read to know when to disagree.  
We can do that. We live in America.  
Read; it's in there.

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Oh, Jo!

*Carol Folsom*

In 1956 I began first grade at the Alexander IV School in Macon, Georgia. I adored my young curly-haired teacher, Mrs. Weaver. One day she asked me to come with her to the principal's office. She didn't explain why, and I didn't have the nerve to ask, but I had no reason to think I was in trouble. Our principal, Mr. Julius Gholson, looked like Franklin Roosevelt and had a voice as low and terrifying as the giant on top of the beanstalk. While Mrs. Weaver and I waited in the reception area, she handed me a third-grade reading text, picked out a page, and told me to look it over. I quickly spotted one word I didn't know.

"What's that?" I whispered and pointed.

"Queer," she said. "Means odd."

Mr. Gholson's door flew open and Mrs. Weaver stood. "Morning, Mr. G," she said. "I want you to see how this child reads."

Mr. Gholson nodded and we followed him into his office. He sat at his desk and lit his pipe. "Okay, shoot," he said, between puffs.

I read the page without a stumble though my heart was flitting like a lightning bug. When I finished, Mrs. Weaver smiled at me and said, "That's fine, honey," and took the book.

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She looked at Mr. Gholson like he was supposed to answer a question. He tapped his pipe against an orange ashtray on the corner of his desk.

“Well, how ‘bout that?” He grabbed his hat from behind the desk. “Excuse me, I have a meeting.”

“Sure. Well, then,” Mrs. Weaver said, and we went back to the classroom. And that, unfortunately, was that.

Mr. Gholson probably thought I’d make a fine high-school teacher, secretary, or nurse, if I chose to work outside the home, that is. Such were the expectations for little girls in those days.

My mother loved books and read to my little sister and me with endless patience. She’d graduated from high school – the first in her family to get that far – and then went on to nurse’s training. She did not take reading for granted. Both of her parents had quit school before seventh grade to help their families pick cotton and tobacco. Though we didn’t have much money to spare, Mama indulged us with every Little Golden Book we begged for during our weekly trips to the A&P, and took us to the library every Saturday, where we carried out armloads of books the librarian, Miss Peaches, recommended.

I remember sitting with my grandmother as she struggled to read the issues of *Reader’s Digest* my mother regularly supplied her. Grandma pointed to each word with her arthritic, work-worn fingers, and I sometimes corrected her pronunciation and sometimes read in her place, impatient with her slowness.

My favorite of the many books I read as a child was *Little Women*. I dreamed myself into that story. I was as shy as fragile Beth, dull and responsible as the oldest, Meg. I never identified with Amy – she was the blonde pretty one – but how I wanted to be Jo! Jo was daring. Jo cut her hair and sold it, got herself a job as a writer back in the days when both acts were scandalous for young ladies. Jo lost her temper, competed with the boys, made mistakes and kept on going.

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Though I lacked Jo's boldness, at least I shared her interest in writing. It did bother me some that the March family was on the wrong side of the Civil War, but I generously forgave them for that.

My sister became a nurse like Mama, but I went to the University of Georgia and graduated with a degree in journalism. After a few months of scrounging for a newspaper job, I discovered that in the real world my ability to type was the most marketable skill my journalism degree had provided. I typed my way through job after job, finally applied to law school and three years later, passed the Bar. Then I did something truly worthy of Jo March. I joined the Navy and became a criminal defense lawyer. Picture shy, scared Beth defending sailors at courts-martial, picking juries from seen-it-all military officers, objecting to questions by cocky prosecutors, making closing arguments (oh, God) from memory. Yes, I would always be a Beth, but with just enough Jo in my heart to draw on her courage whenever I needed it, and I needed it daily. And for that gift I credit my book-loving Mama and the brilliant Louisa May Alcott, who was without doubt the real Jo March.

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# My Back Pages

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*Tim Tomlinson*

*Bye Bye Birdie, A Hard Day's Night*  
"Like a Rolling Stone"  
*The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*  
"Howl" and On the Road

*Tropic of Cancer, Lenny Bruce*  
The Rolling Stones' Let It Bleed  
*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*  
*Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*

*Taxi Driver, The 400 Blows*  
Sinatra's *She Shot Me Down*  
Ulysses, Proust, *Les fleurs du mal*  
*Where I'm Calling From*

Bud Malt Liquor, Apple wine  
Lysergic acid, auld lang syne

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## A Pickle for a Nickel

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*Cathy C. Hall*

If you visit Arlington, Texas, today, you'll find a bustling, vibrant community, full of big-city amenities. But when we moved there, in the 1950's, the city-building had a hard time keeping up with the city-growth. Which would explain why there wasn't a nearby public library for a little girl like me who was just falling in love with reading. Maybe that's why my mom ordered the Golden "Read It Yourself" Books.

Or maybe my mother saw something in me that she hadn't seen in my two older brothers. The boys were only a year or so apart, and they were always outside. They ran from one yard to the next in our little cul-de-sac, chasing, jumping, rolling, and romping. There were lots of boys in our neighborhood for them to do all that chasing, rolling, jumping and romping with. But there weren't that many little girls for their little sister.

And honestly, even if there had been a ton of girls, I'm not so sure I would have joined in the neighborhood fun and games. I was the classic, painfully shy girl. Why, other than my family, only a few people had ever heard my voice!

But if you happened by my house, you might have heard me singing to myself. I had one of those record players with the handle and built in speakers and perhaps a dozen records that had belonged to my parents. I sang along to songs that weren't

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exactly kid-friendly, but if I ever go on *Jeopardy*, I'll rack up on the music category!

Reading was a bit more problematic. After all, I was only five-years-old. I certainly couldn't read my mother's collection of books. And coloring books and paper dolls can only challenge a reader so much. So my mom took matters in hand and ordered books through a children's reading club. It would have been quite an extravagance for our family budget, but somehow, I'm sure, my mother convinced my dad that these books were necessary.

She was so right. I learned a lot, sitting in a corner, tearing into each book the postman delivered. I learned to love poetry from *A Child's Garden of Verses*. I learned lovely lessons about sharing and service from the *Just So Stories*. I learned colors, shapes, sequences, rhyme, cause and effect, and all those other wonderful standards that are cleverly embedded in wonderful stories. But as super as all that learning was, it couldn't top Lilian Moore's *A Pickle for a Nickel*.

*A Pickle for a Nickel* is the story about a very shy little boy who moves next door to a man who likes everything quiet. His doorbell doesn't go "DING, DONG." It goes "ping." His car doesn't go "CHUGGA, CHUGGA, CHUGGA." It goes "purr." And his parrot is very, very quiet. Until the little boy teaches the bird to say, "A pickle for a nickel."

Well, I hate to ruin the story for you. Let's just say when the man comes home to find his parrot squawking "A pickle for a nickel!" the plot really takes off. It's truly a hilarious story, if you're a five-year-old. And it's a great story for reading aloud. Even a beginning reader can tell that the capital letter words should be shouted, while the words in small, lowercase letters should be whispered. At least, that's the way I read it. But that wasn't the best part. Oh, no.

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For a painfully shy little girl, the best part was finding a story about a shy little boy. A shy little boy who turns out to save the day. *A Pickle for a Nickel* called to me. And what it said was simple. It was okay to be shy. Because even shy kids could be heroes.

I guess there must have been a dozen of those Golden Read-it-Yourself books that zipped to my house that hot, Arlington summer. A dozen books that led to thousands of books I've read and loved since then. But none will ever match the joy I found in *A Pickle for a Nickel*. That's the way it is, when you fall in love for the very first time.

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## Secret Place

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*Gail Denham*

Only a silver flash on the world  
atlas, I feel vacant most of the time,  
and on rainy days, my spirit  
yodels in rebellion.

One day, the break will be total.  
I'll clamor to the roof, raise such a tantrum  
someone will finally notice. Whether I  
jump or not is another story.

After all, I have my pillow and my Secret  
Garden spot under the stairs where dreams  
gambol, climb out of books by flashlight,  
keeping one sane and all-of-a-piece.

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## A Wealth of Books

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*Mary Potter Kenyon*

*Only rich people own books.* Growing up in poverty in the 60's, that is what I believed to be true. My parents had a difficult enough time feeding and clothing their ten children without worrying about providing us with a luxury like books. Back then, to own a shelf of books would have been the epitome of riches.

We may not have owned many books but some of my best memories of childhood still involve reading. As a little girl I watched each of my older sisters cart half a dozen books home from the library each week. They had an insatiable appetite for reading, and like everything else my sisters possessed that I didn't, I coveted that ability, and the pile of books next to their beds that went along with it. They plucked book after book from the stack, then went to the library to get more.

The summer I was five, my sister Sharon brought home a Dick and Jane primer that had been discarded by the school. I took every opportunity to sneak a peek in that cute book illustrated with pictures of happy children and their pets, and pestered my sister to teach me to read it. Instead, lording her ability over me, she read it aloud so many times I memorized it.

"I know how to read," I announced triumphantly one day when she sat down to read to me again.

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“No you don’t,” she scoffed.

“Yes I do,” I asserted, then proceeded to recite the words from the first pages, “See Dick. See Dick run. Run, Dick, run.”

“You’re not reading,” Sharon said derisively as she pulled the book away from me. Then she stalked away, taking the precious book with her. And that was the end of my reading lessons.

Deflated, I gave up the attempt to read, only to discover when I entered first grade and began the strenuous work of learning the sounds of letters that I’d somehow managed to learn despite Sharon’s questionable teaching methods.

I suffered through, and excelled in, the endless stream of phonics worksheets while my fingers itched to get at the dozens of real books on the shelves. Fortuitously, when the seating arrangement was changed, my desk moved next to those shelves. I quickly learned the stealth maneuver of sliding a book from the shelf to my lap, where I read page after page instead of giving the teacher the rapt attention she desired. I’d read all the books within my reach before the class finally got to our first reader, the same one I’d memorized the summer before. As the other students struggled to master the book, I continued my concealed reading, reaching farther and farther away on the shelf. Only once did I get in trouble, when the nun who was my teacher suddenly appeared at my side and pinched the back of my neck with her gnarled fingers.

“What are you hiding beneath your desk?” she hissed through clenched teeth.

Sheepishly I lifted the book out from underneath the desk and showed it to her.

Evidently surprised, she blurted out, “You can’t read that yet.” When I assured her that I could because my sister had already taught me to read, she jerked the book out of my hands and countered with, “Well, you learned to read wrong.”

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I was confused. Of course, now as an adult, I realize she meant I'd learned to read without the holy grail of phonics, but at the time I couldn't comprehend how anyone who read as quickly and avidly as I did while my peers were struggling to read a Dick and Jane primer could be reading "wrong."

I entered a new world after first grade when I got my own library card, a rite of passage in our family bestowed upon those who could print both their first and last name. I labored over that task for hours, the tip of my tongue poking out the side of my mouth in a concentrated effort. As soon as I had the coveted card I became a fixture at the local library. I quickly worked my way through picture books like *Snipp, Snapp, Snurr* and *Flicka, Ricka, Dicka*, then dived into chapter books. By the time I was reading from the Junior Fiction section my two younger sisters had joined the library fray. During summer vacation and winter breaks, we would check out five or six books on one Saturday, only to finish our own selections and begin trading with each other before the next. We were drawn to books about poor families by authors like Margaret Sidney, Louisa May Alcott and Lois Lenski. We spoke of the five little Peppers, the sisters in *Little Women* and the poverty stricken characters in Lenski's regional stories as if they were our best friends. Only by the farthest stretch of our collective imaginations could we identify with the children portrayed in the Laura Sachs, Frieda Friedman, and Carolyn Haywood books, where shiny new bicycles, store-bought clothing and summer camps were part and parcel of childhood.

We read at the table while we ate breakfast, outside on blankets in the hot sun's glare, and even propped books up on the faucet to read while we did dishes. We devoured books as ravenously as we'd eat the chips out of a Pringles can.

As soon as I started earning babysitting money in junior high, I began the systematic quest to own my own books. Each

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time a Scholastic catalog was distributed, I'd search by price, not subject, basing my orders on the cheaper bargains featured on the cover page. The goal was to own as many books as possible. By the time I'd graduated, I'd amassed a small collection of paperback books I kept on a homemade shelf near my bed. Working at a library for most of my teen years only served to feed my addiction to books. In the quiet summer days when I was left alone to tend the desk, I'd head to the adult fiction section, where I was working my way through the authors alphabetically. I learned the delicacies of innocent teen dating in Maureen Daly's young adult books, and the mechanics of sex from the questionable source of Harold Robbins. Not yet a discerning reader, I was intent on reading every book in the library that looked even remotely interesting. In a small-town library with a limited budget, the odds of attaining this goal were actually very good, and it wasn't long before the librarian began referring patrons to me for suggestions and reviews of current books. By the time I graduated and left that small town in 1978, I could honestly say that other than the westerns and romances, I had indeed read the majority of that library's books.

Now I am the mother of eight children and I've been homeschooling for 18 years. I no longer think of books as a luxury, but as a necessity since I have several bookworms to consider and a reference shelf to keep stocked. To feed our reading frenzy we attend any book sale within a 60-mile radius, filling boxes and bags with books that we tote home and attempt to find room for. I was ecstatic when my childhood library held a book sale. I found several books that still had the cards in the pockets with names I recognized from years ago, including my own and those of my sisters. An excited shiver went up my spine as I gazed at my own juvenile scrawl. Some of the books hadn't been checked out since 1970, which explained their being culled from the stacks. I was able to tell my daughter Emily that the

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very book I held in my hand, *Look Through My Window* by Jean Little, was responsible for me wanting to name one of my children Emily. Not only that, but it was the exact same copy I had read! That book resides on my bookshelf now, nestled in among the Lois Lenski and Carolyn Haywood titles.

From the child who imagined only the wealthy own books, I have become the adult whose home is bursting at the seams with them. Not only do we have six bookshelves filled with volumes, but books spill out onto end tables and headboards, in the bathroom and on the kitchen table.

I can gaze contentedly around my home and see past the worn carpeting and child-battered furniture to my packed shelves and be in awe of this realization: I am truly rich.

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## A Book Before Bedtime

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*Kerín Riley-Bishop*

Little bundled boy-child  
snuggles in close  
climbs on my lap  
leans against my chest  
brown curls spill over his face  
and fill my nose with shampoo-scent

stack of books waits patiently  
on the couch cushion next to us

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hugs first  
kisses  
now reading time

*The Giving Tree, Love You Forever, The Legend of Sleepy  
Hollow, The Hobbit*

Time passes...  
this once small boy  
now young man  
teen years bring stories of  
mythology and vampires  
read alone in his room with lamp and kitten  
guiding him across the page

Mama still steals snuggles when she can  
but now  
when “baby” boy sits on my lap  
my legs fall asleep

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