

## *My Path to Books*

*Nancy Julien Kopp*

My earliest memory of a book is a story about Mr. Flibbertyjibbet. Is it any wonder that tongue-twirling name is easily plucked from my memory bank over 65 years later?

My mother reads the Mr. Flibbertyjibbet book to me as we snuggle on the sofa. My father reads the book to me, too. I bring the book out whenever an adult is there, and I hand it to them. My grandmother, every one of my aunts and Mother's friends – they all read to me.

My kindergarten teacher reads to us, too. She sits on a small chair, and we all gather around her, sitting Indian-fashion on a green carpet. Every day Miss Horst reads a new story and shows us the pictures. Her hair is silver, her lips are cherry red, and her eyes sparkle as she reads. I want to read the book myself, but I don't know how. Mother makes a promise. "Next year you'll learn to read." And I trust her, for she's never been wrong.

I am six years old and in the first grade. Miss Curto passes out the books, one for each child. "Do not open the books," she says. My heart beats faster than normal. How can I wait any longer to see if I know how to read now? The teacher shows us the proper way to open a new book – first the front cover, then the back. Then we close it again and she instructs us to open to the first page. There are a few words, but I don't know what they say. I'm disappointed. I can't read. Was Mother wrong? But in only a matter of days, I am reading. I read stories about

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Dick and Jane and Baby Sally. I am one of the first to finish the book. And then there is a new book, and my happiness knows no bounds. This one has the same children in it, and their dog and cat, Spot and Puff, become my friends, and I read more and more books.

At home, I read Mr. Flibbertyjibbet to my mother. I read to my father, my grandmother and my aunts. I bring home books from school and I read them over and over.

One day my mother takes me to a new place. She explains we are going to the library, and by the time we have walked several blocks to the square brick building, I know that the library is full of books that I may borrow. I know that I must be very careful with the books because we must return them for other children to read.

“We would like a library card, please,” my mother tells the woman behind the big desk by the front door.

The woman has white hair that is pulled away from her face and fixed in a bun behind her head. Her cheeks look soft, and she has eyes that are as blue as the summer sky. Rimless glasses rest on her nose. She wears a navy blue dress with a white lace collar, and she is fat like one of my aunts. Her mouth is clamped tight like my grandmother’s when she is angry. Maybe I won’t like this place after all.

Then the lady slides a card across the desk, dips a pen in an inkwell, and hands it to me. “Write your name on this line, please.”

I print my first and last name as neatly as I can and slide the card back to her.

She comes around to the front of the desk. “I am Miss Maze,” she says. “and I will show you where the books for you are kept.” She smiles at me and holds out her hand.

Mother nods when I look at her for direction. I slip my hand into the one Miss Maze has offered. I look down and see she is

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## *Forest Freedom*

*J. Timothy Damiani*

Dad adored my three older sisters. He couldn't say no to them. I didn't know how he felt about me. We never spent much time together. Maybe if I had come sooner in the birth order things might have been different. I looked to mom to tip the scales my way, but depression kept her silent and hostaged. Our family lived this way for my first nine years. Then we moved from flat predictable Minnesota to the mysterious hills of Italy. The winding roads, delicious food and animated people assured me we had landed in a magic land-- a place where things could be different. Our apartment, perched atop a three thousand foot hill, overlooked Torino, Italy. On a clear day we could see past the city housing the Shroud of Turin and on to the confident Alps. We had no television to watch, not that I would have understood much if we had. Instead, during the day I spent my time running wild on the wooded trails. When the sun went down, books kept me company.

"Bambi" made my heart race. The ever present forest magic I had been breathing, exploded in me. Answers opened up. Bambi's mother, killed by hunters, was really my mom taken from me by depression. Thumper was my old friend Mikey, right down to the overbite. The woods really were my home. How did the author, Felix Salten, know my life and struggles? He disguised my shame and helped me to experience it in tolerable bits. He offered me a way to name my misery and once

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identified, the pain stopped growing into the monstrous beast denial and repression had been making it. Bambi's story even offered hope. Might I have someone like Bambi's father come into my life, a powerful figure, always watching from a distance and intervening when necessary? Just the idea that it was possible, invited the mending to begin and laid a path for God.

After I healed with Bambi, Robin Hood and I roamed the forest. My bow, made of a branch taut with vine, shot arrows all of three feet. Undaunted, I fashioned a sling shot from the perfect limb. I became an alloy of Robin Hood and King David. Appropriately armed and anointed, Robin, David and I restored balance to the inequities life could produce. Justice and dignity could be fought for, even against great odds. On my rough days, I still find my fingers lingering on the scar I received while making my weapon.

Next King Arthur helped me discover the possibility of excellence in leadership. He showed me people in authority wouldn't always disappear and attempts to lead could work, especially when everyone embraced the ultimate vision. Lastly and most importantly he showed me an unrooted boy could help create a loving family.

As I grew I graduated to the Hardy Boys and on to the classics with Huck and Tom. With them I uncovered different truths. But it was in the Italian hills where I first learned stories could function as healing parables, offering creative and loving solutions to life's knottiest problems. I got hooked on reading because the stories I read, gave me a feeling of acceptance and belonging, they even permitted hope for the future. They gave me a place, a purpose and even a sense of the mysterious holiness that exists all around us.

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## *Reading: Ports of Call*

*Dixon Hearne*

There is no frigate like a book  
To take us lands away. ~ Emily Dickinson

My very first trip to a library was the summer of 1953. At that time, our city library was someone's former home, a white clapboard one-story squatting between Darla's Beauty Shop and City Hall. To a five-year-old who'd never seen shelves and tabletops laden with literature, it was a mesmerizing sight. I'd no idea the wonderful places I'd soon be visiting.

Mother told my two older brothers and me to look around and pick out five books we'd like to read over the summer (five was the limit). As I could not yet read, I depended upon visual clues to measure a book's merits and interest. I shall never forget the first book that grabbed my fascination – a big handsome volume with a sleek passenger ship on the cover. This was also my first encounter with the unmistakable smell of a brand new book. I knew in that very moment that reading was an experience to enjoy – not a chore to be performed, as my oldest brother had said.

"No!" mother told me. "You need to find picture books...ones where the pictures tell the story."

"But I like this one," I argued. "It has lots of pictures. Look at the ship! And all the people dressed up and waving at the ones that have to stay behind."

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She would not budge. Like most kids, if one tack didn't work, I quickly plotted another – I asked the librarian to tell her it was okay and that she (my mother) could read the words to me. Of course this left the librarian with quite a dilemma: support the parent or encourage, “Reading at All Cost,” as the big poster on her wall said.

I don't remember if it was an eager smile or sullen disappointment, but something convinced her of my earnest commitment to this particular book. “The child will get more out of a book of pictures he likes than a book of pictures he doesn't,” she said to my mother. “He seems very bright to me. I think it might even make him want to work harder on learning to read what the people on that ship are saying.”

At length and quite reluctantly mother yielded. “You better take good care of that new book, young man,” she said, wagging a finger. With that, I clutched it proudly to my chest, relishing its heft, and charged off in search of another treasure. There was none.

I studied the book from cover to cover, making up my own conversations for the people aboard. There was shuffleboard (which I'd never seen), dancing, strolling, swimming – even skeet shooting, which I eventually came to appreciate (but only after I was eventually as old as the ship's passengers). I wondered for a time where that ship was sailing; the book never said. Perhaps it's best, however, because I got to imagine a different itinerary each time I opened it – which I continued to do for several summers afterward.

That librarian was a wise woman; I became obsessive in my quest to read. In elementary school, I had a brief fling with books about passenger trains and even air travel – read every one our bookmobile would bring me.

“You're going to disappear into one of those books someday,” the bookmobile driver used to tell me. “Maybe you

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ought to read the books to other kids. You know – take them along with you on your travels.”

I did just that. I read to friends and younger kids, my parents – anyone who showed the slightest interest in travel adventures. Sometimes I just told them stories about far off places and interesting people, places only I had visited.

When I reached high school, where reality threatened my rosy view of life out there, I was blessed once again with a school librarian who shared my passion for travel books. “The world is full of wonders you must see for yourself,” she told me. “Books are a sure way to get there.” She pointed to a poster on her wall, where a quote from Emily Dickinson extolled the magic of reading, how books can transport one to far away and exotic places. I guess all I really needed was a reminder. It was amazing once again how far I could venture in the comfort of an easy chair.

Even after all these years I’m still fascinated by the image of a handsome ocean liner outward bound to places unknown. And I can see myself on board now – clear as day – with a map in one hand and a great book about our next port of call in the other.

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## *Green Rocking Chair*

*Shawn Underwood*

My turn to get the mail  
A brown papered box addressed to me  
I grab it and quickly turn tail  
So excited what can it be

A cozy green chair  
Where I can rock to and fro  
And open my treasure  
They'll never know

Big letters jump from the cover  
GO-DOG-GO  
Thrilled as I devour and hover  
I read it with a thrill real SLOW

Reading new words come alive  
Not Dick Jane or Spot  
Big dogs little dogs all survive  
It's my first book and it means a lot

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## *Chronology of a Writer*

*Keri Mathews*

When I was four years old, I sat at my kitchen table and read my first full book to my mom – a Dr. Seuss classic, *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*. A fine first book, I think. My mom was thrilled, but my pride resonated through my little body with such force that it brought a sense of euphoria I had not yet experienced in my four long years on Earth. I could read.

When I was six, I would sit in my room for hours, lying on my bed with one of my dad's *Calvin & Hobbes* books sprawled open on my pillow. I was fascinated with Calvin (who happened to be 6 himself), his larger than life spirit, and the tiger with the elusive identity – real or stuffed? I could never be sure. I can remember trekking back and forth between my room and wherever my mom was to ask her what this or that big word meant, and her explanations, without the proper context, almost always left me confused.

When I was 7 or 8, I started reading the *Baby-Sitters' Little Sister* series. My mom would buy me the books, and she didn't believe that I read them as quickly as I did, so there was always a quiz, just a verbal question and answer session at the end of the book, which I would pass with flying colors. When I finished with the series, I moved up to the *Baby-Sitters' Club*, which was older, more intelligent territory with more pages and smaller text. The quizzes commenced as usual, and I was excited to be

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reading about 13 year olds. Teenagerhood seemed too far away to be real at that point.

Around 9 or 10, I started getting into the Hardy Boys series. Frank and Joe got into my head more than any fictional character had before, and in my mind, I became a participant in their adventures, feeling anxious and impatient when it looked like there was no way we were getting out alive, immensely relieved when we escaped whatever hairy situation we were in. Of course, we would always catch the bad guys and bring them to justice in the process.

I was 12 when I had my first date with Stephen King. I'm not sure how I came across my worn, paperback copy of *Cujo*, but I was thrilled when my mom gave me permission to read it, even more so when my grandma came for a visit and gave her disapproval of my reading choices. I sped through it, all thirst, hunger, and homework forgotten. When I finished, I was floored. It was my first experience with such a real, exposed version of life as Stephen King saw it, the vulnerable, fleshy underbelly of reality. An intense dose of fiction, minus the cookie-cutter plot and standard happy ending. I was hooked. I read every King novel I could get my hands on, and he quickly became my mentor.

I read constantly. I would be groggy for school most days because I would stay up for hours after my bedtime, reading in bed with a flashlight. One particular flashlight memory happened at a Girl Scout sleepover, when I accidentally shined the beam from my light onto the ceiling after the official Lights Out. I had been reading in my sleeping bag, and I only realized my mistake when a leader came over and took both my flashlight and my book. I was mortified, as most shy kids are when they're publicly caught doing something they shouldn't be.

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I read on the bus, under my desk, in line with my mother at the supermarket – anywhere, anytime I had a book and a free moment, or I was doing something that didn't actively require my attention, I was reading with vigor and without shame. I was so entranced, so dedicated to my various literary worlds, that I just didn't feel right unless I had a book in my hand. The short period between books felt like a dull purgatory.

Reading gave me a place to escape to, a sense of self that was above and beyond the shy, insecure girl with few friends or clues as to where I was going in life. A glimmer of hope, of excitement in an otherwise boring, predictable world. Literature gave me places I could go to and be with people I identified with, who had defined and limited problems that could be solved, all loose ends tied, all t's crossed and i's dotted, within a few hundred pages. And when they were solved, which they ultimately were, I felt a pure, uncomplicated sense of relief that was a high in its own right, like literary crack.

A single book could stretch my imagination, inspire me in countless ways, and fill my days (and nights) with joy. And as I got older, I realized that not only could I derive such happiness from the written word, I could use my own limitless imagination, life experience, and impeccable spelling and grammar skills to provide that kind of joy for other people.

And thus, my own life dreams were born. I had written stories here and there since I could form letters. As I got older, the stories I wrote were shallow and limited, mere reflections, an influx of creativity inspired by whatever I was reading at the time. But then – when my reading hit its peak, when I would devour a book in a day and fall into fictional worlds with such comfort and ease that I preferred it to my own life – I knew what I wanted to do with my life, who I wanted to be: a Writer. A writer with a capital W, because someone who can inspire that

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kind of magic in the minds of their readers, using only imagination and the written word, deserves an official title.

## *The Spell of Thaumaturgy* *James Penha*

“The moment the focus is reached the object is epiphanized.” --  
*Stephen Hero* by James Joyce

I can smell it  
the soft-bound primer with cubby-hole must about it  
pressed in fifties techniwatercolors  
thumbed and scumbled by boomers before me  
but regimented still within black outlines Alice and Jerry dare  
not cross  
even after Spot who runs and runs  
and runs in place.

I can see it and I can hear them,  
my teachers' big New York nasals . . . first  
Miss King's or second Mrs. Bell's or third  
Mrs. Tate's whose puckered lips sweep whitened cilia  
across my blush  
one birthday I want therefore to be my last . . .  
absent only religiously on their high and holy days--  
presently unseen and palpable  
as the best of my parents' 78s  
“God Bless the Child”

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this most high and most holy day of my young life:

The pupil's eyes  
gape only at the printed lines and curves vibrating  
    sympathetically  
finally and firstly

the beginning

like the Victrola speaker to his master's voice enunciating

was the word

the letters coruscating now the miraculously else:

tree

green

see

I

can

read

this leaf,

Mrs. Teacher

Miss Magus

One

Two

Three

who make me make as magicians

and gods do

by definition

out of nothing

something.

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## *On Reading*

*Anne Valente*

In recent weeks, a pigeon family chose my porch as the perfect spot to build a home. At first I tolerated them, assuming they needed a safe place to start a family as spring slowly arrives. But once their incessant prattling and shuffling began to keep me awake at night, I found myself locating material on pigeon mating habits and how to handle their nest-building. As I sat awake in bed, poring over the author's suggestions, it suddenly struck me how little things have changed. I behaved the same way as a child, only with a flashlight in hand.

Though my parents never knew it, the bedtime they enforced in elementary school was never as resolute as they might have imagined. My sister and I brushed our teeth together and allowed ourselves to be tucked in, feigning sleepiness as we rolled into the soft sheets. But once my parents left our bedrooms, we pulled flashlights from our nightstands and read huddled beneath the covers, our blankets concealing the fluorescent glow. We also quickly learned to drape a towel across the bottom of our closed doors – an extra measure to stop the light.

Though we assumed we had devised a brilliant scheme of utmost trickery, my parents later admitted that they always knew. Maybe they never shattered this delusion because, in my father's words, they couldn't find a decent reason to discipline two kids for reading, even past their allotted bedtime. Maybe

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they also recognized that our behavior was beyond punishment, because it mirrored their own.

I have always known my parents as readers. When I visit my childhood home today, two stacks of books perpetually grace the living room – my father’s stack by the armchair, and my mother’s on the coffee table. It is no coincidence that I too have grown up with the indomitable urge to read, and that stacks of books have become an unintentional staple of home decor in my own apartment.

The urge came early, apparently before I was even born. In addition to serenading me with Mozart and Beethoven, my parents read to me while I was still in the womb. Whether this affected my literacy skills, I can’t say. But I do know that when I started to read sentences in fits and starts, just beyond kindergarten, we began to make regular trips to the library.

In the summertime, when the Craig Elementary School library was closed for the season, we drove to the local county branch where my sister and I often checked out 10 books at a time – the maximum limit our library cards would hold. Though I loved the county branch, with its immense card catalog and its bean bag chairs in the children’s section, I loved the bookmobile even more. The bookmobile regularly stationed itself in the Craig School parking lot, just two blocks from my home, and we often walked there on summer mornings before heading to the pool in the afternoons. The trailer’s musty smell and its endless rows of book spines comforted me, and the satisfying stamp of ink within each book’s back cover meant it was mine for at least two weeks.

One summer morning, as I was perusing the bookmobile’s non-fiction section for young readers, I pulled from the shelves a manual on caring for amphibious pets. As I flipped through its pages, noting the colorful pictures of frogs on lily pads and turtles in terrariums, I silently vowed to catch a frog by the end

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of the summer. I pushed the book onto the checkout counter and headed home.

After browsing through the book and deciding that I would make an excellent frog guardian, my father and I took an afternoon stroll down to the neighborhood pond. It was a meager, scummy pond that our neighborhood regally deemed a lake. But to me, it held the secrets of the aquatic world. My father and I approached the pond's banks and peered into the water, seeking movement beneath the glassy surface. In the shallow, muddy bottom, amid a few skittering minnows, lay tiny holes that released the smallest of air bubbles every so often. When I looked just beyond the holes and saw an entire colony of black tadpoles, resting languidly and flicking their tiny tails, I motioned to my father and he scooped the large, white bucket we'd brought into the water.

Our bucket of tadpoles sat on our front porch for a week, where I fed them as the manual instructed and watched them slowly sprout tiny legs and arms. But on one particularly hot afternoon when the temperature peaked above 100 degrees, I forgot to place the bucket in the shade and the tadpoles dried out in the summer sun. Though the book had promised it, I did not have a pet frog by summer's end.

I mourned the tadpoles briefly, but their loss was replaced by new adventures through the school library, once the bookmobile departed at the end of August. Throughout the school day, I often found myself among the Craig School library's metal shelving units, running my fingers over the book spines and scanning their titles. One day, when I found a book on ghosts and supernatural sightings, I squirreled it away to a secluded corner and camped out on the brick red carpet, captivated by the book's eerie photos. In one photo, an ethereal figure descended a staircase, completely translucent. In another, a ghostly-white orb flashed above a man's head as he lay in bed.

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I spent the next several days taking pictures with my dime-store camera and flash cube, hoping that the developed photos would betray an indistinct but undeniable specter somewhere within their three-by-five limits.

Though such behavior has grown less frequent in recent years, I still turn to books for answers. The pigeons are no exception. After learning that male and female pigeons switch off on nesting duty, I sometimes peek out onto the porch to see which one is on call. Though I pretend that their presence irritates me, I can't help but soften inside when I catch them in the act of rotating their posts and I briefly glimpse the two tiny eggs they are protecting.

As I sit awake reading about the pigeons, I understand that my reading habits no longer require a flashlight to sustain them, now long past illicit as bedside lamps replace what flashlights once did. But if the lack of light-stopping towels now speaks to my parents' absence, the piles of books that scatter my apartment speak to their enduring presence. Though our homes are separated by hundreds of miles of distance, my living room looks just like theirs.

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## Passages

Carol Ayer

Books have been a force of nature in my life--flooding my imagination, shaking my beliefs, and blowing away my fears. I cannot imagine a world without reading, nor would I wish to live in such a barren place. Books have been the best friends I've ever had, always there and always receptive to my needs. I have turned to them in moments of happiness and in moments of despair, and they have yet to fail me.

Whether small--like a member of *The Nutshell Library*--or large--like the Princess Di coffee table volumes I favored as a teen--a new book has always thrilled me. I'm forever enchanted by a book's possibilities, seduced by its whisper of secrets within. I am always acutely aware that a new book might change me, perhaps transform me into a better version of myself.

I've had my opinions solidified and challenged by books; I've been comforted more times than I can count. I've been frightened, not always pleasurable so. I've been surprised and humbled, touched and engaged. I've traveled to Europe and to Asia, to the past and to the future. I've laughed and cried with Bridget Jones, yearned along with Cathy and Heathcliff, gone on vacation with Stella and gotten my groove back, too.

And just like a favorite song or smell, the title of a particular book can evoke memories of the time in which I first encountered it. When I think of C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, I'm immediately transported back to

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the sixth grade. It was the early seventies; the Vietnam war still raged and Watergate had yet to take down Nixon.

This was, in essence, our last year of childhood, and our teacher, Miss Dillingham, knew it. She wanted to protect us as much as possible from what lay ahead; the losses, the changes, the inevitable disappointments. She sought to prolong our innocence just a while longer. To that end, she read to us every afternoon, as though we were still small children. Lethargic from a lunch filled with Fritos and Twinkies, we'd lay our heads down on our desks and submit to Miss D's dulcet tones. On one memorable afternoon, she began reading the story of the Pevensie children--and a magical land called Narnia. I was immediately drawn into the book, immediately at one with the world Lewis had created. Once Miss D. finished reading, I'd need several minutes to reorient myself to the concrete world of math and science.

*LWW* encapsulated everything I was attracted to in a book. Ordinary children--like myself--could experience adventure, magic, and a life of courage even if they came from the most mundane of places. The novel gave me hope that I could break out of my usual, dreary day-to-day existence and achieve greatness.

The religious undertones of the book were completely lost on me. In my mind, *LWW* was the height of escape--that and only that. I wanted to be Lucy; I wanted to travel to Narnia. I never thought of Aslan as God--I just wanted to meet him, listen to his wisdom, and touch his fur.

Unfortunately, my closet at home didn't have the same magical properties as the eponymous wardrobe (believe me, I tried). Happily, however, there were more books in the series. I read each book, and fell in love all over again each time.

Above all else, *LWW* represented for me a turning point, both in the books I read and in my life. The next year I would move

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on to weightier stories like *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Flowers for Algernon*. My real life would mirror the loss of innocence I was experiencing in my reading. My parents would soon split up; I would accept a stepfather into my heart. High school, college, and the real world couldn't be far behind.

So just as the Pevensie children were making the passage from the professor's house to Narnia, I would be making the journey from childhood to young adulthood. But if *LWW* represented for me that significant stage on the way to being a grown-up, it also would forever remain a reminder of a book's promise. No matter what you are facing in the real world, you can always turn to a book to take you out of yourself. And unlike life, a good story will always exist, will never change, and will never, ever disappoint.

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## Blueprint

Ann Marie Byrd

A floor plan shaped my reading habits. Our living room provided lunchtime adventure on school days. My mother sat on our sturdy slip covered sofa, Patrick melded into one side of her, I the other, amid the fabric's dusty roses. She must have begun the readings when Patrick, dressed in his Catholic school navy trousers and white shirt, entered kindergarten. I was a year younger. Soup, sandwich and milk in the kitchen, followed by a twenty-minute story time. We took turns choosing books. *Dick and Dolly's Adventures*, about children at the turn of the last century – and published around that time – charmed me. My brother, not so much. The Hardy Boys appealed to him. Frank and Joe led a life of intrigue far removed from the tree-lined street beyond our hedges.

By the time the teal Danish modern sofa appeared, we knew how to read. Story time consisted of my brother and me, forced to sit straight, engrossed in our own books at opposite ends of the sofa. I hated that piece of furniture. My mother hung shelves on the opposite wall for a series of geography books. One volume per continent. I poured over the words, color photos, and maps. The British Empire, always in pink: England, Scotland, Wales, Canada, Australia, India, and South Africa. I wanted to see these people in Peru with their llamas, the penguins of Antarctica, and the pygmies of the Congo. In fifth grade I presented the North America volume to Sister Doretta

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and pointed to the photo I planned to draw during afternoon art. She looked at the cows in a pasture backed by hills of red and gold leaves.

You can't draw that, can you?

Abashed, and unaware of my pathetic art ability, I mumbled, I can try. She liked my answer, but I suspect she already recognized my artistic talent.

A cherry bookshelf stood in the dining room, around the corner from the upright piano. *The Encyclopedia Britannica* volumes stretched across the bottom shelf and I spent hours sprawled on my stomach reading the world's knowledge. Useful information, like England's Tudor Reign lasted from 1485 to Elizabeth I's death in 1603. The next shelf up held book-length stories, poetry and the Bible covered in bumpy leather. I could grab a few books and sit in my own kingdom under the dining room table, reading or studying the pictures. Gallant Saint Sebastian, with all those arrows sticking out of him, but Jesus looked so gentle standing among the lambs. Whittier's "Barbara Fritchie" incited patriotism on a steamy summer afternoon – "*Shoot, if you must, this old gray head, But spare your country's flag,*" she said; and Longfellow's "Song of Hiawatha" beat like Indian drums:

*By the shores of Gitche Gumee,  
By the shining Big-Sea-Water,  
Stood the wigwam of Nokomis,  
Daughter of the Moon, Nokomis.*

Nokomis raised her grandson after his mother died in childbirth. No one I knew had a dead mother. How tragic for little Hiawatha. Sue Janis, a girl in my school, had polio but that wasn't the same. My Brownie troop visited her house and I handed her Dennis the Menace paperbacks so she'd laugh.

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“The Highwayman,” hands down my favorite, overflowed with romance, bravery and blood. I recited it aloud and felt the horse’s pounding hooves in my thumping heart.

*The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,  
And the highwayman came riding —*

*Riding – riding —*

*The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn-door.*

Would I ever be like Bess, the landlord’s black-eyed daughter, with a man desperate for my ruby-lipped kisses? Of course, Bess killed herself to warn her lover away from the king’s men. That’s not how I envisioned my life. Sure, I expected college – but not blasting my head off. It just seemed wrong.

A true telling of my reading habits includes the bathroom. Facing the toilet sat an empty hamper, its surface covered with two neat piles of comic books. Patrick preferred heroes along the lines of Superman; Batman; Dick Tracy; and Turok, Son of Stone, while I leaned toward Archie, Katie Keene, Mickey Mouse, and Casper. Throw in a few Illustrated Classics like *The Three Musketeers*, and *Treasure Island* and I’d be set.

My grandmother lived in the upstairs apartment until her arthritic hands turned into claws. In the big shift, she relocated to a first floor bedroom and Patrick and I each received a bedroom upstairs, along with new bookracks to fill. In the hallway off the downstairs kitchen, seven steps led to the landing; seven after that to the upstairs door. I jumped the lower seven once – I could leap like a pony – but slammed my forehead onto the overhang and clattered down the rest of the steps on my back.

For my bedroom walls I chose lilac paint, oblivious about whether it matched the blue linoleum floor and its yellow flowers. My bed nestled into an alcove, surrounded by an old dresser, a cheap student desk, nightstand, and the radiator

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beneath the windows. On freezing nights, shivering in my tower, I gazed at the streetlamp's light just beyond the cherry tree to watch the falling snow. I'd drape my rose chenille bathrobe across the radiator to feel toasty in the morning. A pink metal wall lamp, hot to the touch, hung over my bed. I filled the black metal bookshelf at the foot of my bed. The very first book, upper left position, was *Little Women*, the perfect gift for a fourth-grader. Alcott's other books followed that one, along with *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, and the Trixie Belden mystery series. Nancy Drew, that titian haired super sleuth in her blue roadster, took up most of the next shelf. I snuggled down into the covers as winter blizzards raged. In summer, when thunderclaps woke us with ear-splitting cracks before the downpour started, we ran from window to window, slamming them down so the rain wouldn't soak the floor.

Wegman's Grocery offered specials a few times a year – dishes, silverware, paintings reproduced on cardboard, and books. In eighth grade I collected paperback volumes that, when amassed, created a dictionary and reference books. The special holder cost extra, but we got it. That monster, five inches thick, sat on a stand near my desk. I loved it. Perched on my hard wooden chair I studied the dictionary and read the plot summaries of great works of literature. I knew what happened to Anna Karenina, poor immoral woman, as well as I knew about Titania, the devious queen of the fairies. George shot Lennie to save him from the lynch mob in *Of Mice and Men*, and Eliza Doolittle learned how to be a lady, like my mother wished me to become, in *Pygmalion*. The plots by authors like Tennessee Williams made me wary of Southerners. They seemed odd, heading “the way to dusty death,” as Faulkner wrote. My cousin Nelson served as my sole model. He had moved to the South and married a “Southern girl” who didn't like the North because it was “too cold.”

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Even in the summer? I asked.

That's what she says. She won't let him come home even to visit his own family.

I nodded. This information verified what I already knew about Southern behavior. I'd read about Scarlett O'Hara and envisioned Nelson's wife flouncing about in a hoop skirt, calling orders to her slaves.

My parents couldn't keep up with my habit. I needed more and more books, and the library became my supplier. I devoured as many books as I could lug the four blocks home. Friday nights offered prime reading time because I could sleep in on Saturday mornings, which I couldn't do on Sundays.

I discovered the punch of Emily Dickinson and realized I had a choice. Emily retreated into her literary fortress in Amherst, Massachusetts.

I could stay in my literary fortress forever, like Emily, pure and noble.

*I cannot live with You –*

*It would be Life –*

*And Life is over there –*

*Behind the Shelf*

But I had to leave my tower, its lilac walls, the linoleum floor, the streetlamp. Down the steps to say goodbye to the dining room and living room, and face the world. To see if the truths I'd read about worked in real life.

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## *The Little Blue Book*

*Elizabeth Barton*

Even before I knew how to read, I liked the idea of books – their look, their smell, the crack of a new binding, their weight in my hands. The den in my childhood home had bookshelves built into the walls, not a vacant space among them. I would select books from the ones I was able to reach and simply page through them. I knew my ABCs and could recognize letters, but I was not yet able to decipher the words. Nevertheless, I knew there was something special and exciting about books, and I could hardly wait to be a part of it.

I listened intently when parents read to me from Dr. Seuss, Little Golden Books, Richard Scarry, and the like. I also had picture books that came with records. A gentle-voiced man would read the book's story to me, and a bell would sound when it was time to turn the page. Although I loved those books and their stories, I wanted more. Those thin, colorful books didn't satisfy my need for something I couldn't quite identify but associated with the more substantial volumes that graced my parents' shelves.

I fell in love with one book in particular. It was heftier than any of my picture books but still of manageable size for the four-year-old that I was. It was hard backed and covered with bright blue cloth. I loved to run my fingernails along the cover, feel the vibration, and hear the wick-wick noise that it made. I would sit with the book, pretending to read it, turning pages

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after whatever I deemed to be an appropriate amount of time had passed. I carried that book with me wherever I went and professed to whomever inquired about it that it was my favorite book. That declaration was usually met with a chuckle, although, at the time, I didn't understand why. I don't recall exactly when, but eventually the chuckles made sense when I realized that the little blue book I loved so much was *50,000 Words Divided and Spelled*. The book contained no great adventure story, no fable from which to draw a moral, no heroes living happily ever after, but that hardly mattered to me. I had already succumbed to the allure of books. And once I learned to read, things only got better.

## *Captured*

*Deb Hill*

Leaning over half on half off my bed  
I slowly reach the night light switch  
Sliding my magazine towards the tiny light  
I whisper the shimmering words "True Stories"  
My gaze stops on a girl who looks my age  
Her pupils wide with terror she's cradling something  
My eyes settle on the title its only one word  
"Captured" I shiver I totally am.

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## *The Library: It's a Family Thing* *Stephanie Vanderslice*

My mother knows libraries like some people know shopping malls. When I was young, she held cards to no less than five libraries within a forty-five mile radius of our upstate New York town. Most summers I belonged to at least three summer reading programs. I don't remember a time when the trunk of our little yellow Subaru didn't sag with books. My father was a lover of day trips and shopping (yes, my father, yes, shopping) and my mother's theory was that if she was never far from a library she belonged to, she was never far from home.

She grew up a voracious reader, a child of parents who were at times puzzled by such habits. To this day, my grandmother has been known to sigh, "She was such a *good* girl until she learned to read." What stores the Ridgewood Public library must have held for her, that cavernous old sandstone building with creaking floors and pendant lamps flickering warmly over *Black Beauty*, *Misty of the Chincoteague* and all of the other books she loved about horses that would never fit in the postage stamp backyard of her row house.

And so, away from home for the first time at nine, and desperately homesick, I made my way to the Camp Little Notch library, a musty old log cabin with just enough low-slung, book-filled shelves to tide me over. While other girls made leather wallets, I surrendered to the exploits of Nancy Drew, the

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Bobbsey Twins, and Cherry Ames, Student Nurse and for a little while, the world stopped churning.

My love for books comes from my mother, yes, but it also comes from libraries themselves. Whenever I step into one, whether it's the historic Atheneum on Nantucket, where we occasionally vacation, the old East Greenbush library in the town where I grew up, or the Little Rock Library thirty minutes up the highway, the presence of all those volumes gathered in one place enfolds me like an embrace. Here are the names of those I recognize as if they were family, Ludwig Bemelmans, Sydney Taylor, Laurie Colwin, Charles Baxter.

My mother lives on Long Island now, where one magnetic strip grants her access to every library from Great Neck to Montauk. The trunk of her Geo Prizm still fairly sags with books and when my sons visit her it is with the knowledge and anticipation that most days will involve a library visit of some kind.

As for me, I live around the corner from the county library now, a fact that was a major selling point for our current home. Well, that and the floor to ceiling bookshelves in the study.

Recently my son told me he'd been asked in school to write about his favorite place. I held my breath, hoping his next sentence would not include the words, "on the couch in front of Cartoon Network."

"So I wrote about the library," he told me nonchalantly, as only a ten year old can. My heart beat a little faster. "Because it has an X-box," he continued, "but mostly because of all those books."

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## Heidi and Me

Betty Thomason

I credit my elementary school teacher, Mrs. Ball, for my love of reading. As a result of her introducing good books to her pupils, I found a pastime filled with vicarious adventures through what others wrote. Not only did I acquire good reading habits by her examples, but I craved to write my own stories. The book, *Heidi*, started it all.

At the beginning of my third grade, Mrs. Ball began to read the children's classic, *Heidi*, aloud to the class right after lunch. The magical words of Heidi's story in the Swiss Alps floated throughout the room, whisking me off to a land that could only be in my dreams.

Much different images than the place I started school in 1937 (age 6) at Wilmeth, Texas. The four-room school building sat on an acre of land down a country road a half mile from my family's farmhouse. The west Texas landscape between my house and school looked flat with plowed fields that smelled of upturned dirt.

Except for when the cotton crops put out their green sprouts in spring or the wheat blanketed the brown earth in winter, I mostly saw a lot of barren ground. Little rain fell to settle the top soil. Outside when dust storms barreled down from the Texas plains, strong gusts blew grit that stung my eyes. I lived on the edge of what was called the dust bowl of the 1930s. In that time,

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before soil conservation became prevalent, Mrs. Ball's reading aloud gave me glimpses into other worlds.

As she read *Heidi*, I envisioned Switzerland's snow-capped mountains in the setting although I had only seen a limited amount of snow in west Texas. The goats described in the book frolicked in the beautiful Alpine meadows of the Swiss Alps. Visions of their antics captured my attention. I wondered about the people in that faraway place and how their lives differed from mine, since I lived in a dry place like Wilmeth. I could almost feel the crisp, crunchy snow under my feet. I imagined the scent of clean mountain air as Mrs. Ball read.

In that young and impressive period of my life the author, Johanna Spyri, became my favorite writer. The year ended with other author's works being read each day, but only the adventures of Heidi stuck with me all these years. The character, Heidi, became my new "best invisible friend." We shared secrets in my daydreams where I visited with Heidi at the cabin with her grandfather while she helped her friend, Peter, tend the goats. Often Heidi and Peter picnicked in the clearings of the snow. They ate bread, cheese and drank goat's milk. I could only imagine what goat milk tasted like. Would it taste like milk from our cow, Bessie, which Mama milked every evening? I even shared Heidi's feelings when relatives took her away to attend school in Frankfurt, Germany. Then, I rejoiced with her when she returned to her grandfather's cabin in the Swiss Alps.

Other books come and go to become my favorites, but the book, *Heidi*, written in 1880 still lives on today. It is a rare book. Sequels have been written by other authors, but I have never read them. I treasure the original written by Spyri.

In my early education, the story of Heidi furnished me with escape, stimulated my imagination, and influenced my future quest for good reading material. The time Mrs. Ball spent reading to our class presented me the respite I needed after lunch

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each school session. The school day did s–eem long – 9 AM when first bell started classes to the dismissal at 4:00 p.m.

When the principal rang the hand bell for school’s day to end, I scurried out the door with all the other students. As I walked home, I sometimes dodged a little whirlwind. Sometimes I spat out moist dirt caught in my mouth from the loose gravel I kicked up running along the road. One thing for certain, I always carried a mental picture home with me of the chapter Mrs. Ball read each day. What I considered entertainment back then, turned out to be a good teaching tool on Mrs. Ball’s part and a learning experience for me. Even today, reading reaps many rewards for me and brings back memories of Heidi and me.

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## *Pages to Parties*

*Anthony J. Mohr*

They called them make out parties. Someone said that the popular kids got invited to six make outs a month during that year, 1960. This factoid pricked like a thumbtack, and so did the city council's decision not to hold any more dances at the Roxbury Park Recreation Center, because there were "enough private parties in the city of Beverly Hills." That may have been true, but I never got invited to them. Sports vaulted a boy into seventh grade society at the Beverly Vista School, and I couldn't catch, throw, run, or dribble.

I watched television most Saturday nights until my parents ordered me to do my homework. They could see from the bookmark that I had waded through maybe forty pages of the quicksand that passed for Nathaniel Hawthorne's prose. For the rest of the night, I lay prone on my bed, reading the same paragraph ten times while envisioning Trudy, Nancy, and Penny, just blocks away at Karen's party, snuggled on long sectional sofas with Mike, Ron, and Mark.

Then Rosemary Byers became my literature teacher.

She replaced Frieda Nielsen, a 21-year-old Tournament of Roses princess who had been horribly injured in a car accident. Miss Byers was much older than Miss Nielsen. Her angular face featured a prosecutor's stare, and her teaching style included a crack-the-whip voice and a no-nonsense attitude. She scared us. But Miss Byers knew what would make her class read: parties

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in the plot. She ordered Beth Jackson and me to prepare a joint book report on John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*.

Steinbeck's novel centered on efforts by Mack and the boys to throw a party for their friend, Doc. When their first attempt goes sideways, they try again. I knew Beth was planning a party. Inspired by Steinbeck, I decided to fish for an invitation.

"And the book has a great *party* scene," I told Beth over the phone, making sure to stress the word "party."

Beth replied that Steinbeck was a good writer.

"Steinbeck describes their second *party* so well," I said.

Beth said, "Oh."

"Just listen to his final passage about the second *party*." And before she could say anything, I read to Beth: "'You could hear the roar of the *party* from end to end of Cannery Row. The *party* had all the best qualities of a riot and a night on the barricades. The crew from the San Pedro tuna boat...'"

Beth said her father wanted her. She asked if we could talk a couple of days before the report was due. The report was due two weeks after her party.

Beth had her party, and all I had was Steinbeck, but *Cannery Row*'s party scenes made me feel as though I were there, at a bash that Beth couldn't hope to emulate. Suddenly reading became fun. Fun? I never had connected that word to books. The Rose Princess had assigned *The House of the Seven Gables*, and there had been nothing enjoyable about Hepzibah Pyncheon, Nathaniel Hawthorn's spinster with an eel-like moniker. But Mack and the boys resonated with me. When Miss Byers said that Steinbeck had written a sequel, *Sweet Thursday*, I ran to get it. Then she assigned F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose Dick Diver articulated my frustrated pre-pubescent goal: "I want to give a really bad party. I mean it. I want to give a party where there's a brawl and seductions and people going home with their

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feelings hurt and women passed out in the cabinet de toilette. You wait and see.”

I gave a party, all right, and the record player broke -- proof of Steinbeck's theorem that “a party hardly ever goes the way it is planned or intended.” Like the social wannabe Bernard Marx in Miss Byers' next assignment, *Brave New World*, the “tight balloon” of my “self-confidence was leaking from a thousand wounds. Pale, distraught, abject and agitated, he (and now I) moved among his guests, stammering incoherent apologies...” Fortunately, my friends took the broken phonograph in stride and turned on the radio. The dancing and the din continued, and I finished the night the way Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby had ended his: “looking from one group to another with approving eyes.”

I kept reading – me, a kid who couldn't score an invitation, trying to become an expert on parties ranging from collegiate benders (Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*) to barn dances (Frank Norris' *The Octopus*) to The Now and Then Club's Winter Dinner Dance (Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*). If books could teach math and history, they could show me how to party down. I was avid, and my parents – delighted at my new pastime and confident that my future would indeed include a party or two – encouraged me with fervor. Dad even slipped me the *Satyricon* of Petronius, because every thirteen-year-old should learn about Roman orgies. Assuming Mom and Dad were right and the invitation spigot would open one day, I had a lot of catching up to do. I had to hit the ground – or at least the dance floor -- running, not just at make outs in some kid's den, but at the kind of events that made Beverly Hills famous during the early 1960s: proms at the Beverly Hills Hotel, galas at Pacific Ocean Park, and sweet sixteen's on lawns as blue as Jay Gatsby's, where gloved waiters served petit fours with the girl's name written in the icing.

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The creamy white envelope arrived in the spring. Beth was having a party in the Pavilion Room of the Beverly Hilton. I ran through the house, shouting and waving my paper trophy. From then on, more invitations followed, exactly as predicted. There were live bands with emcees. There were barbecues on the beach. The owner of Uncle Bernie's Toy Menagerie on Rodeo Drive had an event "for the children of the stars" at his home in Coldwater Canyon. Film industry kids played with giant stuffed animals, and music flowed from speakers hidden in the hillside foliage. I left early, though, because I wanted to finish *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Fearing her class was losing touch with the real world, Miss Byers had weaned us from party scenes, starting with Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. No celebrations occurred between those covers, but I had devoured the book in three days and yelled for more. She served up *The Old Man and the Sea* and then Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel. Miss Byers had achieved her goal. Reading had become not just a habit, but a necessity.

Fortunately, the invitations keep coming, and so do the books. Unfortunately, I no longer careen through the house when an invitation arrives. But each one, be it handwritten or electronic e-vite, makes me think of Miss Byers. By reading about celebrations, she taught me to celebrate the printed page.

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## *A Moveable Feast*

*Phylis Warady*

It's the height of the great depression, circa 1929 thru the mid-1940's. My stepfather is a Chief Petty Officer in the U.S. Coast Guard. I'm five when we move to a small town hugging the Chesapeake Bay. I'm learning to read from signs I see from the train on the way to Baltimore on shopping trips with my mother and from the funny papers. I know that Annie Rooney's dog is named Zero, but since the country school where I start first grade at age six doesn't teach phonetics, it's years before I know how to pronounce a 'Z'.

I'm nine and my brother is six when my stepfather's transferred to the Boston Lighthouse. We live in an apartment in Chelsea. At least twice a week my mother takes us after school to see a double feature – which more often than not give me nightmares – chiefly triggered by my mind's insistence upon playing the “what if?” game – thus making mince meat of the happiest of happy endings.

A year later – yet another transfer. This time to Wood's Hole, MA. By now I'm inured to yearly upheavals for seemingly neither rhyme nor reason. I now hesitate to make new friends, knowing I'm destined to lose touch once we move on. I'm fast becoming a cynic when I stumble across the local library. Its exterior is stone; its interior gives off a musty smell of mildew that causes my nose to twitch. Much I care. Books cram the shelves in the children's section. Each Monday, I check out an

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entire series. I tie them to the shelf behind the seat of the bike earned babysitting and pedal home. At my mom's nightly call of 'lights out' I retreat under the covers with my treasured flashlight. By Wednesday, I return the entire series and check out another dozen.

World War II rages. Blackout curtains shroud every window. Now eleven, I've devoured the entire children's section and now pester the librarian for permission to read books shelved in other sections. In short order, I discover Daniel Webster, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Abigail Adams, plus a cache of historical novels that feature seafaring whalers with spouses haunting widow walks.

Best of all, for the next three years we stay put. Even better, each of those years, the librarian hands me the list of current children's books and lets me choose. Thanks to her mentoring, I now consider the local library my best friend ever. Just the same, at age twelve, I'm only dimly aware that I've formed a life-long bond with all public libraries.

Fast-forward two decades. In my mid-thirties, I challenge myself to write a novel and choose Regency England as my setting. Such a decision requires tons of research. I soon consider diaries, letters and autobiographies and well-researched biographies the most useful resources. Unearthing these treasures requires the assistance of countless librarians.

At my local library, I fill out the form requesting the diaries of Elizabeth Robinson, the original blue stocking. For a modest fee, a helpful librarian initiates the search.

Given today's electronic search engines, my request would have been processed in a day or two. But at the time when I sought background material for my "work-in-progress" the World Wide Web was in its infancy and there wasn't yet a convenient Google. Consequently, it took several months to locate diaries written in the 18th century. Yet, once found and in

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my hands, I'm allowed to keep them several weeks before obliged to return them to their "home" library.

To paraphrase Dr. Johnson, when writing an historical novel, it may well take over a half a library of research material to write a single historical novel. Happily for me, after several rewrites a publisher bought my first novel, resulting in copies on library shelves over the entire country. More recently, this same novel is reissued in large print and now graces the shelves of my local library as well as countless others.

Given my ongoing love affair with public libraries, insuring me as a child that I'd always have a friend waiting to be checked out – no matter how often my stepfather is transferred – it's easy to see why, as an adult, I continue to hold each and every library, great or small, in the highest esteem.

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## *Finding the Library*

Helen Ruggieri

There were only four books on the family bookcase, a wobbly four-shelf thing my mother got at an estate sale. There was a dictionary, a Bible, a one-volume encyclopedia she bought from some door-to-door salesman and a book about mechanics my father got when he took a course.

I was a reader. At ten I bought comic books rather than candy. In school I was always getting into trouble for not knowing the place when I was called on because I was about ten pages ahead. I picked old magazines out of the trash -- *Outdoor Life* and *Redbook*.

For my birthday that year I got two books – *Robinson Crusoe* and *Tom Sawyer*. I read them over and over until I could recite the entire list of things *Crusoe* brought from the ship to the island. Shortly after my birthday, we moved from a small town on the banks of the *Lackawanna River* to a small city on the banks of the *Allegheny River*.

We went from a town where there was no library to a place where *Andrew Carnegie* had given the city money to build one. Somebody told me you could go in this place – an impressive stone building with an ornate façade and rounded doors and windows – and they would give you books. Wow. Up to this time I hadn't know what a library was.

I walked in. No one yelled. I stopped in the rotunda and looked around at all the shelves filled with books. A gray haired

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woman in a long green dress covered by a smock pointed to the steps at the left – “Children’s Room,” she said.

I walked up. I was surrounded by books. I wasn’t sure how to go about getting them but I pulled off a stack of Nancy Drews and headed to a woman seated at a desk in the middle of the room.. She smiled. “You can only take out one Nancy Drew a week. They are very popular. But if you like Nancy Drew, you’ll like Trixie Belden.”

I gave her my address and she gave me a card and my future began to recognize what it would be. Somewhere out there in time the first rustling, pages turning, turning, turning. Thousands of books, and I could read them all. Yes, my life changed. Andrew Carnegie had me in mind when he said anyone with the inclination could educate himself. I walked through that rounded doorway into the rotunda of that beautifully ornate building and felt at home.

I would never have to read that mechanics handbook out of desperation. I could have a Nancy Drew and three other books every week until I had read all the Drew books and all the others shelved along the walls. When I finished upstairs, there was the downstairs. How did I become a teacher of literature? “You go into that building and they’ll give you books.” And they gave and gave.

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## Some Lifetimes You Just Get Lucky

Robert B. Robeson

When I was 11 and 12 years old (in 1953-1954), a majority of my Saturdays were spent in the Gooding, Idaho Public Library which was located in the center of town and about 2½ blocks from my home. As the second son of a small town Protestant minister, I spent lots of time there solving mysteries with Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys: Frank and Joe.

Nancy's (author Carolyn Keene) *The Secret of the Old Clock*, *The Quest of the Missing Map* and *The Hidden Staircase* were intriguing to me even if the main character

was a girl. Frank and Joe's (author Franklin W. Dixon) *The Tower Treasure*, *The Missing*

*Chums* and *The Shore Road Mystery* were a few of another long book series that took me along with them on an adventurous ride. I read both series a number of times.

I couldn't wait to go on the next adventure with Nancy and her pals George, Bess and Ned. This also applied to Frank and Joe and their best friend Chet Morton. The father of these two brothers, famous detective Fenton Hardy, was always somewhere in the background. I still have copies of some of these beloved young adult novels in my home library.

In 1954, when I was a sixth-grader, Gooding boasted a population of approximately 2,700 souls. This town was located in the middle of sagebrush country and one of the largest potato-producing regions on our planet.

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Our city library's old wooden floor would creak ominously, back then, as I wandered around the dusty stacks. High shelves were stocked with volumes of every size and subject. A guest in this literary realm was surrounded at all times by the rich and familiar aroma of vintage books. I felt at home here. It was usually quiet as breath itself. And there was plenty of time in those days – long before major TV programming – to think and be swept away to other worlds...adventurous worlds I wanted to be a part of one day.

Saturday night was also special because that's when our family would often go to the library together. It was the cheapest form of entertainment in town. The selection process was like Goldilocks deciding over bowls of porridge. I had my own library card and could checkout a maximum of six books for a two-week period.

I discovered that there was an imposing castle with many rooms to explore in my

elementary school mind. And in one of those rooms, while engrossed in my book

exploration in that library, I became aware of the certain knowledge that I would become a pilot and writer one day. Don't ask me how. It just happened.

The aviation, adventure and World War II/Korean War books and biographies I read and absorbed there contained words, thoughts and emotions that gripped my heart and soul. Reading how others used their minutes, hours and lives gave me confidence that I could do about anything with my own. One of the major principles learned from these books and young adult novels was that I wasn't owed anything I wasn't willing to struggle and strive for.

Another element of my educational reading program had occurred years before. I can remember hot, summer Sunday mornings in our small country church in Truesdale, Iowa – a

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village of about 125 friendly people – when I was four and five years old. The sanctuary windows and door would be opened because air-conditioning was uncommon then, except in some stores in larger cities. Flies and bugs shared these services with our usual congregation of 70-80 worshippers. The sweet scent of new-mown hay would often waft in from fields across our main road into town.

As the song service was in progress, my mother would share a hymnal with me and use her finger to point out the words as the songs were sung. She was a Bible-school graduate and was keenly aware of how valuable this would be for my ability to compare the spoken word with the printed word even before I entered kindergarten and the first grade.

When I entered the third grade at Gooding Elementary School in Idaho (after we moved there between my first and second grades), my parents incorporated a more demanding reading program for me. Every day, before walking the half-mile to school, I was required to read a chapter aloud to them from the King James Bible. This meant that I had to be ready early and check to see how long the next chapter would be in order to allow enough time to fumble my way through it. This process was sheer torture in the beginning. My parents were strict but patient as I slowly sounded out names like Hadadezer, Nebuchadnezzar and Mephibosheth before we had our family prayer time.

My parents had no sympathy if it looked like I'd be late. I wasn't allowed to leave before that chapter was finished even if it meant my having to jog most of the way to school. It's also a fact that this scenario benefited my exercise program because it happened frequently. In today's convoluted world, some would probably infer that this parental behavior was child abuse. In that era, they considered it to be an appropriate foundation for lifelong discipline, responsibility and learning.

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My reading skills improved so dramatically from that daily Biblical regimen, and our trips to the library for tons of books, that my fifth grade teacher put me in charge of reading novel chapters to the rest of my classmates when she had to leave the room for various reasons.

As I advanced through elementary school, I used to stuff small rugs against the base of my bedroom door in an effort not to be discovered when reading late at night by flashlight under my covers. Some exciting books couldn't wait until the next day.

Sunday was my favorite newspaper day because, after church and lunch, I had first dibs on the large comics section. That was my introduction to Little Orphan Annie, Li'l Abner and the Katzenjammer Kids. Peanuts, Beetle Bailey and Garfield became my later favorites and their antics only helped to increase my reading comprehensionskills.

Reading was my opportunity to enjoy new experiences through other people's eyes and it infected me with optimism about life. I was willing to sit or lie for hours in bad lighting on rainy days or during winter weather with most of the blankets in the house wrapped around me.

It didn't take long to discover that if my parents saw me reading a book they'd seldom ask me to run errands or do my daily chores. My technique was a lot like what Capt. Yossarian used to do as a bombardier in Joseph Heller's classic World War II novel *Catch-22*. Yossarian would periodically pretend to be sick and check into hospitals to avoid bombing runs.

In my youthful mind a world without books would have been like experiencing heaven with a lobotomy. I didn't realize it, then, but reading was one of the most valuable investments in my future...and it paid off.

Writing, reading and Benjamin Franklin's gift to America of the circulating library system in 1731 have been time-sponges

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for me. What I absorbed from the words in those many volumes on the shelves of Gooding's city library taught me tenacity and perseverance. They gave me courage and inspiration to make the most of what abilities and talents God has graciously bestowed upon me and the limitless opportunities America has provided to each of us. They allowed me to examine my values, ideas and sensibilities against those of others.

Reading encouraged me to pull out all of the stops. Take risks. Be innovative. To write myself. It motivated me not to be afraid to try...anything.

In some ways, a person never leaves grade school behind. Some part of us is still

there and we carry its treasures in our heads and hearts wherever we go on this planet.

Nancy Drew, Frank and Joe Hardy, Eddie Rickenbacker, Anne Frank, Audie Murphy, Charles Lindbergh, Tom and Huck and all of the others I read about back then were important to what I've become today. They taught me early in life that whenever I was offered a choice between a cushion and a challenge (or adventure) I would be best served to choose the challenge.

Those many happy and enlightening moments at that little liberating library helped me discover strengths I didn't know existed. That was a portion of the "good" to be found in Gooding in the "good old days" of the 1950s. Some lifetimes you just get lucky.

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## *Bookworm Family*

*B.J. Yudelson*

When I wasn't twirling or standing on my head, I read and read and read--Freddy the Pig, Cherry Ames, sports books with forgotten names.

Perched in the fork of a climbing tree, I devoured words like a fledgling. In the shade of my grandparents' scuppernong arbor, I sucked the soft, sweet pulp of my favorites and spat out the tough coppery green skins. Under the bedcovers, my flashlight's snug circle of light illumined lives more dashing than my own.

Years later, I drifted off while reading to my first-grade son and awoke, two chapters later, to an animated solo voyager, his course set by his private Pooh passage. Today--writer, publisher, dad--he leads his kids to Oz with his grandma's ragged first editions and downloads stories to his cell phone to lull them to sleep in a room lit only by the screen's emerald glow.

My daughter's toddler backs toward me, picture book in hand, confident that Grandma's lap will be there when she lands. My son's son slithers through books on reptiles, his sleep-resistant siblings reading by the lamp that warms his albino corn snake.

I ring the doorbell at my childhood home, and strangers let me in. I grieve for spaces once sanctified by books now filled with autographed baseball mitts.

In my children's homes, as in mine, the celebrated sport is reading. We soar with whimsy, travel the bases to distant lands,

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catch moments of humor and stay up for one more page. Books overrun the playing field, and we cry, laugh, and cheer volumes that transmit a triumphant legacy in a family of bookworms.

## *A Classic Tome*

*Linda O'Connell*

*The Pokey Little Puppy*, its dog-eared edges  
and illustrations familiar as the words on the pages,  
a book bequeathed to my children,  
I've handed down through the ages.

Slowpoke is covered with finger smudges  
numerous spills and now, grandbaby's stains.  
A Little Golden Book it may be,  
but a classic it remains.

In her two year old, tag along,  
get-it-in-gear, hurry up world,  
I reach for Pokey, slow her down to a snuggle  
and read my favorite classic to Nana's girl.

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## *The Unlimited Budget for Books* *Beth Morrissey*

“Books are my best friends.”

I made this pronouncement at an early age, just a few weeks into the second grade when I was trying to convince a classmate that I should be the first to pull something from the little “Book Nook” library at the back of the room.

I was new to the school, just transferred to the Catholic elementary from the public elementary in town, and I had yet to realize that most of the Nook was just old copies of saint’s biographies and religious prayer books that the teacher didn’t want to throw away when she was finished with them. Few chapter books and even fewer novels graced the shelves, save for an incredibly tattered copy of *Heidi* that no one ever bothered to pick up.

Between the woefully stocked Nook and this teacher’s penchant for having us read the dictionary during Language Arts it’s a wonder I didn’t break up with my best friends that year, throwing them over for the delights of neighborhood kick ball games or the flickering lights of our tiny television instead.

It’s possible that our weekly class visit to the school library saved me, or my mother’s dedication to taking us to the public library. There the summer months were by far the best. The librarians gave out pristine black and white composition notebooks for us to record our summer reading, encouraging us along the way with small tokens of bookmarks and bookplates

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to urge us toward the end of summer surprises for those who met the program's goals. New notebooks! And library books! And PRIZES FOR READING! Life didn't get much better than that.

Except for the days of the Scholastic Book Club. Those days were like my birthday and Christmas rolled into one.

I knew when the new order forms had arrived because brightly colored flyers would appear on the teacher's desk in the morning, but they would sit there all day until just before the final bell when she would give a stack to the first student in each row and we would all take one and pass the rest down. I would put mine carefully into my school folder, smoothing the edges so they wouldn't get creased, and bring it home to obsess over for the weekend.

My parents, though not big spenders on many types of children's entertainment, always agreed to something from the Scholastic Book Club. Knowing this, I would flip through the thin pages for hours at a time, carefully circling a long list of potential purchases then weeding it down to just the few that I knew my mother might approve. It was agony each time I had to cross off a possibility, like cutting off my own fingers one by one. Then there was the anxiety of waiting for my mother to sign off on the order, as well as the accompanying check, and the prolonged pain of waiting for the teacher to collect the orders and send them off. The tension heightened week by week until the ultimate, glorious day when parent volunteers would appear in the school hall, sort books into piles and finally deliver them to classrooms on any variety of rolling carts.

By the third grade I'd gotten wise to this routine and would cheer up the instant the AV trolleys began migrating towards the school hall. Surely my next installment of the The Gymnasts or The Baby-sitters Club couldn't be far behind.

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But then, just like that, the Scholastic Book Club was gone. My family moved to another country and I was left never knowing how the next gymnastics meet or babysitting adventure would turn out. It didn't really matter though, my eyes were wide open to the novels surrounding me in my new life. The works of Judy Blume, Beverly Cleary, Katherine Paterson and Cynthia Voight crept into my personal library. Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle In Time* and Tolkein's *The Hobbit* wormed their way into my heart even though I'd still swear up and down I "didn't really like" fantasy. I ran away with *Julie of the Wolves*, fought for survival on *The Island of the Blue Dolphins* and helped solved the mysteries *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*. There was nothing I couldn't do and nowhere I couldn't go when I had a book in my hands.

I returned to the USA just one school year later and launched myself at the school and public libraries again. I bought up even more books than before from the Scholastic Book Club and even found a little bookstore in our new town that would special order anything I wanted.

"You know," I heard my father say to my mother, somewhat mystified, a few months later, "she's the only person I know who has an unlimited budget for books and still manages to overspend every month."

I still wouldn't have it any other way.

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## *Spin Rack and Ruin or...*

*My Comics Obsession's Secret Origin*

*David Galassie,*

The smell of stale cigar smoke made me sneeze as I entered the door of Rudy's Magazine Rack. The old woman behind the counter said, "God bless you," as I shut it behind me. "Where are the comic books?" I asked. I had a whole half dollar burning a hole in my front pocket and I just had to spend it now. "All the way to the back," she barked, exhaling blue smoke and stubbing out her cigarette in the stained White Owl ashtray on the glass counter top.

I walked as fast as I could, tripping over stacks of out-of-town newspapers, as I hastened to reach the Holy Grail. A few more steps and here I was, face-to-face with an entire wall filled with the four-color wonders. Overwhelmed by such a bounty, I stepped back, right into a rack of hobbyist magazines. A copy of Air Progress hit the floor. I quickly picked it up and placed it back on the rack next to Model Railroader. Finally, things were right and I turned again to, what I later termed, "The Great Wall" and made my selections.

It had only been weeks before when I'd received my first comic book. Pneumonia had found me for the third time in my young life and on one of my parents' Wednesday night forays to the grocery stores, Dad had come home with a 12-cent treasure for me, Superman # 181. Its bright yellow cover made a spectacular backdrop as Superman swept across the sky. He

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appeared to be spanning the time barrier as a list of his ancestors went by: Superman I...Superman II...Superman III...Superman IV and so on. The story was "Introducing The Future Superman of 2965" and from just looking at that cover, I was hooked.

In retrospect, I could never have received a finer gift: one that cost so little, yet gave so much pleasure, spawning a lifelong fascination with this art form. I devoured that comic from cover to cover, soaking in the Curt Swan illustrations, the engaging Edmund Hamilton story, the goofy ads. I studied that book so much that even today I remember the names of those kids on the back whose testimonials made thousands of kids nationwide want to sell seeds for valuable prizes. I wonder how "William Hanlin" of Missouri and "Mary Zimmerman" of Wisconsin are today?

Needless to say, Dad's get-well gift was an instant hit. Little did he or Mom know how those little pamphlets would consume me in the years ahead. Almost immediately, I was a constant menace to their peace of mind, badgering them incessantly for a spare quarter here or there, begging to go on shopping trips to discover which of the three groceries could nourish my hungering fetish. Surely, there were more to be had, for I'd read the ads in the Superman book touting the adventures of other superheroes. I knew Supergirl and Wonder Woman were in peril from Multi-Face in *Brave and the Bold* # 63 and that Robin wept while holding a newspaper with the headline, "Batman Killed" in *Detective* # 347. I wanted them so badly, and I knew I wouldn't rest until they resided in the box under my bed.

The next week, I talked my way into accompanying my parents and I became a weekly visitor to Food Queen in neighboring Neenah, and to our own Red Owl and Super Valu stores. The Red Owl turned out to be a bust (no comics at all) and the Super Valu had a cranky store manager who didn't appreciate my hanging around his magazines. He must have

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thought I was just some ordinary kid! But Food Queen proved to be the winner of the comic book derby. No simple spin rack there; instead there were bookstore-quality magazine displays across from the refrigerated section to satisfy me...for awhile. There, I discovered that DC didn't have a commodity on superheroes; an outfit called Marvel was prevalent there with heroes I'd never heard of: Spider-Man and the Fantastic Four and a big green guy called the Hulk. But still, it wasn't enough to satisfy my comics frenzy. I couldn't put my finger on the feeling I'd had, but the remedy proved to be a short bike ride downtown, next to Menasha Furniture on Chute Street.

It was my Dad who had casually mentioned a place called Rudy's Magazine Rack one night at dinner. Being a kid who actually listened, I put two and two together and I probed him with questions until he cracked. Until then, he had considered my comic book obsession with detached amusement, but my mother, obviously tiring of my nagging, blurted out, "For God's sake Phil, take the boy downtown, will ya?!" That Saturday, after we mowed the lawn and cleaned up, we drove downtown and found my Mecca.

Rudy's Magazine Rack was several businesses in one. It doubled as a newsstand and smoke shop and was also the local ticket office for the Greyhound bus line. The store was long and narrow with creaky floorboards that alerted the clerk to my every move. I was never treated badly, but being 9, 10, 11 years old, I often felt as if I was under surveillance. It was understandable since I never saw any other kids in the place, only gruff older men grabbing a paper and a box of El Productos before hurrying out the door. At the back of the store behind the Great Wall was an office/work space where the periodicals were sorted and inventoried. I often heard movement and dull thuds emanating from the back as bound piles of magazines, newspapers, and my precious comic books were tossed around

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before being freed of their bonds and prepared for entry into the selling area for eager eyes like mine. And the smell of the glue and the ink! To me, it was pure heaven.

Eight heavy duty wire racks stretched up and down that wall for maybe five feet. I remember it was taller than me because I couldn't reach everything at the top and now and then I'd need to get help. All the major publishers were represented- DC, Marvel, Charlton, Dell, Gold Key, Harvey, and other lesser companies. The overflow that didn't make it to the racks, lined a bottom shelf built at floor-level against the wall. Sometimes, I'd run across a copy of something alien in the stacks- magazines with strange names like Playboy, Stag, or Gent. I was only too eager to toss these aside, not realizing that within a few years, I might have been a bit more reluctant to dismiss them so fast!

DC Comics became my brand of choice, probably owing more to that first Superman comic than anything else. And while Superman was my favorite, his fellow Justice Leaguers Batman, Flash, and Green Lantern all became my trusted friends, too. DC Comics introduced me to parallel universes, alternate Earths, time travel, and even some factual science. Many of these books, as I learned later, were edited by former science fiction writers and literary agents so it's little wonder that they eventually led me to conventional science fiction and Asimov, Bradbury, and others. And, wouldn't you know it, Rudy's had racks of that kind of book, too. But that was years in the future.

Rudy's was my mainstay for the middle part of the '60s, the comic books' Silver Age, as it is now called. In time though, my enthusiasm faded. Change had welled up in the comic industry- price increases came quickly, a new-found emphasis on realism took hold, and many of my favorite titles were discontinued. Comics were still great, but as these changes became more and more pronounced, I found new interests. The "divorce" was final for many years to come.

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Rudy's went out of business when I was in high school and its demise was lamented by few people I knew of and, sad to say, even me. My friends tell me today if I still had all those comic books, I'd be a wealthy man now. As a collector, I know better, yet the simple pleasure of being immersed in the comic culture of that era far surpasses any monetary gains that any online auction houses could bring me today. The thought of that little store on Chute Street still puts a smile on my face and you can't put a price on a memory like that. You always remember your first love.

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## *The Bridge from Outside*

*Frances Davis*

The playground: swings, canvas swags  
hung from chains, merry-go-round,  
monkey bars, hanging by my knees,  
dress falling overhead, boys catcalling;  
and all around, the bushes, leaves we  
used as spoons to sip the taste of green —  
that world, open air, freedom.  
In the classroom, desks in rows,  
lined paper, rulers, flavor of white paste.

A woman who watched, bent to squeeze  
my fingers around a pencil.  
My book, hard with a string-raveled corner,  
paper smudged, limp. Pictures, three  
children, blue wagon, red ball, a  
marmalade kitten under a bush. Marks on  
the page. Words. The words and pictures  
fitting together like buttons into holes

What made the girl laugh, what frightened  
the dog? The mystery hidden in the pictures  
on the page, in the leaves, the bushes burning  
green beyond the windows. That world  
inside the book the same as my world

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outside – all one – everything, a key to  
a door, the door a book that opened to a  
place where – suddenly – I could go.





## *Saturdays at the Library*

*Suzanne C. Cole*

Growing up in the small community of Carbondale in West Tulsa, Oklahoma, meant walking to Alice Robertson Elementary School, stilt-walking at recess, ball games after school on the playground, trick or treating at the drugstore where a generous owner would give us each an ice cream bar. But mostly I remember Saturdays when we'd go to town – the town of Red Fork which contained the necessities for our life – good-sized grocery store, dime store, hardware store, movie theatre, the junior high school I would eventually attend, and, best of all, to me, anyway, the library. Post-World War II life was difficult for my family – my younger sister was born in 1946 with multiple physical problems and with no health insurance, we were in debt. To buy a book was a luxury limited to birthdays and Christmas. But the library was there, too far away to walk there alone, but readily accessible on our Saturdays in town.

Limited to six books per checkout, I agonized over my choices. In fact, first I'd crouch on the floor by the shelves, pulling thin books down and gobbling them whole. No sense wasting the precious book allotment which had to last seven whole days on books I could read in fifteen minutes. So I'd read and reshef, read and reshef, until Mother would eventually say, "Suzy, the groceries are getting too warm. You have five minutes to make up your mind."

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Then, changing strategy, I'd grab the fattest books, leafing quickly through them to see if I could read most of the words. If I could, I thought I could figure out the story, and I'd add them to my file. Finally, I'd proudly take my choices to check out and receive my treasure. Once in a while, the librarian would frown at one of my selections, peer over her pince-nez, and ask, "Are you sure you want this particular book, young lady? It's rather grown-up."

"Suzy reads very well," my mother would declare. "She's perfectly free to read any book she chooses." In triumph, we'd march to the car, me and my younger brother, happy with our loot. On the drive home, bare legs sticking to the vinyl upholstery, I'd check to see what books he'd checked out (hopefully at least one Hardy Boys mystery) and get dibs on reading them when he finished. Then I'd lose myself in my first book, coming to only when we pulled into the driveway, and I'd have to help put the groceries away.

Summers were special because of the reading certificate program. I'd race my brother to be the first in our family to accumulate the required books, writing them carefully on the list the librarian kept at her desk when we returned them. I wanted to get that coveted gold seal before he did, but then again, I was torn between choosing shorter books I could read faster or staying with the long ones that would last me for the week. Usually I chose the longer ones. Once the gold seal was pasted on our lists, we could take the lists home, although often we asked the librarian to keep ours so we could keep adding titles.

I wish I had some of those lists now, the records of my summer reading, but perhaps I don't need them – perhaps memory will suffice. I know I read my way through Lois Linski's books about children in other cultures, the adventures of Nancy Drew, Walter Farley's horse books, and Albert Payson

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Terhune's collie stories. And of course, growing up with Laura Ingalls Wilder from childhood through marriage and children of her own. I loved story and I loved series; how sad I was when I'd read everything in a series that was available in our small community library.

Yet that library – and parents who read to me when I was too small to read myself – inspired a love of books and writing that I still carry. After a graduate degree in English literature, I became a college instructor, and always, from grade school on, a writer, creating the worlds opened to me so long ago on those long-ago Saturdays at the library.

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## *Library Card in My Back Pocket* *Carol Carpenter*

When I was a little kid, my mom used to walk a mile with me every week to the Jessie Chase Branch Library in Northwest Detroit. I sat at the children's table thumbing through the picture books, deciding which I would check out. At 10, I rode my blue two-wheeler bike to the library. I felt like "big stuff" with my library card in the back pocket of my jeans. A flash of my library card led me into adventures with Heidi, the Bobbsey Twins and Nancy Drew mysteries. I carried home whole new worlds in the wicker basket that hung from my handlebars.

I promised myself that someday I would read every book, even those in the adult section. I learned how to look up answers on my own, how to use words, how to tell stories, how to expand my neighborhood by crossing oceans and climbing mountains in my mind. The librarians discussed books with me as if I were a grownup. They introduced me to Black Beauty and, in my imagination, I jumped onto that horse and raced the wind. I read everywhere: under the shade of the locust tree in our backyard, at recess in school, under the covers at night, waiting for my parents to get ready for church. I was that girl with skinned knees, a ponytail and a library card in her back pocket. On my 12th birthday, a cold day in November, my parents took me to the Main Detroit Public Library. It reminded me of castles I read about with its big pillars and its massive size. My neck hurt from looking up at the ceiling. My shoes slid

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across the marble as I headed for the ornate steps. I found room after room of books and people of all ages and types reading at tables. We found the young adult section and I had never seen so many books in one place. I stacked books all around me at the table and flipped through them. I didn't know which to read first.

I collected as many books as I could carry and went to the checkout desk.

My parents smiled at me as I pulled out my crumpled library card from my back pocket and presented it with a flourish to the librarian. "Ah," she said as she stamped return dates in each book, "I see your magic passport is well used."

"I work at the library at my school," I proudly told the librarian as I cradled the books and tried to keep the top one from slipping.

Long before college, my first library card had worn thin. It finally shredded in the back pocket of my jeans during a wash cycle. Luckily a library does not discriminate against anyone, even those who are careless like me. I received another card and I never left home without it.

The Main Library became my second home when I attended Wayne State University. Many days after class, I curled up in an upholstered chair in one of the quiet nooks. Here, I soaked up *Leaves of Grass*, *Moby Dick*, *Hamlet*, *Native Son*, *The Great Gatsby*. By now, I knew I could not read fast enough to devour all the books in the library. Still, I could not stop turning pages. From time to time, I looked down over the railing to the main floor. I learned I couldn't identify serious readers based on appearance. Reading seems to be one of those equal opportunity activities that lure all ages, all ethnic groups, all religions, everyone in the community. I watched so many people stream in and out of the library and wondered what they had chosen to read, wondered if maybe I had read the same book or should read it.

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When I became an English teacher at a Detroit high school, I gave my students extra credit for visiting the Main Library. I believed no one could pass through those doors without succumbing to the lure of books. Such a magnificent library breathes the history, the humanity, the individuality of each person who dares enter.





## *Reading Past Memories*

*Theresa E. Nelson*

“So what you been reading?” I casually ask, knowing full well that I’ve just committed myself to an additional 30 minutes on the phone, minimum.

“The Long Walk. I know you’ll like it,” dad says with a chuckle that matches his mood. “It’s about a Polish soldier sent to Siberia; how he escapes and walks south over deserts and mountains to freedom in India.”

We don’t have to clock many phone minutes before Dad and I invariably begin discussing our recent reads. A book, article, web site, it doesn’t matter as long as it’s print form.

Dad and books are as companionable as eggs and toast or steak and potatoes. I have early memories of him reading in the evening after we kids were in bed. I’d stumble out of my dark bedroom door into pupil blinding light to obtain some water or use the bathroom, and dad would be sitting at the kitchen table or on the living room couch, his strong hands gently cradling the spine of a book.

Before we were old enough to attend school, Dean my older brother, Bliss my younger sister, and I would vie for the coveted lap position as Dad read us a short bedtime story. Goliath and a shepherd boy battled for victory, a fiery furnace declined to consume three men, a boy was sold as a slave and then thrown in jail, and hungry lions refused to consume a falsely accused man. My fifth winter and Dean’s sixth, Dad took time to

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patiently decipher the language of the alphabet, explaining how the skinny black marks below pictures were interpretable codes. Our three red heads bowed and merged over a slender book filled with rows of rhyming words—oat, goat, coat, moat— which Dean and I triumphantly took turns pronouncing. Silly sentences were next. The cat and rat sat on a mat.

Reading expanded my life unquestionably. It became my favorite pastime. I'd get so caught up in the plot of a book that I'd turn on the small light beside my bed to satisfy my curiosity concerning the plot and characters, all the while listening to Bliss whine about not being able to sleep. Always I'd listen and try to anticipate when dad would walk down the hall to check on us so I could extinguish the light and pretend I was sleeping.

Other families I knew camped together, played baseball together, hiked through mountains together, but what drew our family together was dad reading aloud to us.

This routine existed for years.

Reading aloud to us kids was something dad took for granted. One of the more enjoyable parts of daily life as a dad, and yet another item on his already burgeoning to-do list. Yet it shaped my siblings' and my life, creating our fondest memories of childhood and family times.

When I started second grade, dad began reading chapter books aloud—creating a routine that would continue until I was in my late teens. We sat around the dinner table during winters, and dad deposited us into the middle of families with a bushel of red-headed kids (*Cheaper by the Dozen*), transported us on fishing trips that turned sour (*A Fine and Pleasant Misery*), introduced us to a dog who thought he was human (*The Dog Who Wouldn't Be*), and carried us to a farm where two oxen captured a boy's heart (*Farmer Boy*).

For an hour or so my siblings and I sat enthralled, taking a break from our daily skirmishes, relaxing our battle lines with

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each other. We became so mesmerized by the character's struggles that we forgot our petty grievances and complaints about the day. Suddenly it didn't matter that our teacher had forgotten that I was to walk the milk money to the office, or that our Bliss had stuck her tongue out at Dean and I and mom had yelled at my brother and I when we wouldn't let her ride bikes with us.

These characters dad introduced to us appeared in our daily conversation. Bliss and I would discuss the plot and characters as we lay in bed before sleep sneaked up on us. Dean liked to act out the more exciting parts of the story and repeat certain phrases and lines. We compared our current life, situations, and even others to the plots and characters. "There's a Rancid Crabtree," we'd observe to one another as we sat licking our ice cream cones and watching the parade of people pass on the sidewalk. We talked about the characters as if they were our intimate friends we cared about, as real as our classmates or best friends. And we did care about the characters and what happened to them – cared fiercely. It was this caring for them, this identifying with them and their conflicts that drew us back to hear more.

Characters planted themselves in my dreams. Sometimes I would be Laura finding my way

home through a blizzard, or plotting revenge on Nelly Olson – who seemed to resemble my sister. I would adopt a character's style of talk and imagine I was them until they became imprinted on my character and soul—the two of us blended into a new person.

Books were chosen for enjoyment, humor, and memorable characters. During funny parts, as tears of laughter streamed down dad's once freckled face, we'd laugh—Bliss sliding off her chair, Dean whacking the table in rhythm to his chuckles, and me banging the leg of the nearest person.

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During sad parts, the family pet dying, a crushed dream, we sat motionless, trying to hold back the tears that knotted our throats and stilled our breathing. Then suddenly mom was passing Kleenex and we quickly blew our noses and wiped our eyes, casting quick embarrassed glances at each other to make sure we weren't the only one crying. Though if we were, teasing always came later.

After a few chapters dad closed the book and announced bedtime. We'd loudly protest that we weren't tired and beg him to read more, but usually the pages remained shut. Slowly we'd disperse upstairs, our thoughts so full of characters and speculating about their next adventures that it didn't seem such a big imposition to share the toothpaste with a grabbing brother or wait ten minutes for Bliss to emerge from the bathroom.

Dad has perfect rhythm and a strong voice that floats smoothly into ears when he reads aloud. I tend to hurriedly sprint from the end of one sentence to the next, my voice rising and falling like irregular breathing. Still, the routine dad started, is continued. I read aloud to my husband and daughter at home and in the car, traveling through many of the same books dad read during my childhood, as well as new ones, revisiting old friends and making new. Sometimes we pass the tissue and sometimes we slide off chairs in waves of laughter.

My dad is the only person I know who can coherently read aloud and laugh at the same time. His eyes will begin to moisten like saturated cotton balls and his voice will rise an octave to high alto, but he'll keep reading. Occasionally, though, he'll burst out laughing and have to set the book down to wipe his eyes and blow his nose.

Unfortunately I wasn't gifted with dad's knack of reading aloud and laughing simultaneously,

which means it takes time to wade through the funny parts when I now read to my family. I'll be laughing and slapping my

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knee with the book, my words incoherent with laughter, and my daughter and husband will look at me, chanting in unison, “What’s so funny? Read it to us.”

At times like this I miss dad and his gift of reading.

So we call each other and do the next best thing. We discuss books, share observations and opinions about our reading pursuits, and recommend our favorites. And occasionally I’ll ask him if he remembers that Patrick McMannus book he read to us, or the story of the dog who wanted to be a person, and we’ll laugh and reminisce, discussing the plot and characters as if no time has elapsed.

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## *Confessions of a Book Addict*

*Robbi Nester*

“Reading is Fundamental,” proclaims a well known slogan designed to entice children to read. The statement suggests that literacy is not only a virtue, like vegetables perhaps, but actually worth doing for its own sake. But I would argue that the sentiment is a bit forced, and grows out of a popular, if unspoken, feeling we as a society might not be so quick to admit that habitual reading is essentially somehow adverse to one’s own natural instincts, and that it is therefore not likely that any child, left to her own devices, would embrace it, and regard it, without being told to, as an activity worthy of one’s precious and scarce free time. It is only by holding one’s nose and taking the medicine, the covert message implies, that one can actually convince herself that reading is recreation and not primarily a chore.

I am one of those comparatively rare souls who never needed slogans to want to read, someone for whom the smell of library stacks arouses pleasant memories of lazy hours immersed in a favorite activity. In fact, I can say, as a person at an AA meeting might, that I am an addict, who cannot imagine life without books, but that, much as an alcoholic might, I have had to hide this at various parts of my life, have had to pretend that for me, as for most, reading was just a tool and not an end in itself.

When I was a child, I lived in a suburban Philadelphia neighborhood of the very sort this slogan targets. It was a

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compact place, lined with brick row homes the color of dried blood, with neat postage stamp lawns or patios. Within easy reach, one could find schools, a bakery, a butcher, post-office, grocery, and most important to me, a branch of the free library, right across the street.

The Bushrod branch was very small, boasting at most a couple of thousand volumes, most of which I had read by the time I went away to school at 19. The collection aimed to please the locals, with special displays of romance novels and best sellers on many of the central shelves, and on racks near the circulation desk. But there were plenty of other, less conspicuous, books on the back shelves, in the poetry section, the prose fiction section, the science fiction and fantasy section, whole worlds quietly waiting, yet to be plumbed. I aimed to explore these worlds.

I spent the dark ages before I could read trying to puzzle out the hieroglyphs on the page and on street signs. It was a painful itch, the desire to know what they said, much like the feeling I still have in a restaurant when I cannot make out the sheet of specials written out in Chinese, where I suspect all the choicest dishes are hidden. Once, I even stole a newspaper from the still-warm stack on the corner, reasoning that perhaps if I could claim a copy for myself (since my father never let me touch his), I would be able to crack the code.

At five, I joined the club of literate citizens, and was permitted my very own personal library card, a day I recall as a major milestone in my early life. Each week thereafter, I carefully combed the shelves for books of all kinds – stories, poems, biographies, coffee table books as wide as the day – checking out the limit of 11 books I would carry home in bags, one on each shoulder.

One would think that school would be a haven for such a bookish child, but it was not. Instead, I plainly felt that to admit

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my addiction would be unwise. I had seen this clearly at home, where my mother, on finding me immersed in a novel on a sunny weekend in summer, would unceremoniously boot me out of the house to play with the neighborhood kids, as though to stay inside on such a day were entirely unnatural.

So perhaps it is not so surprising then that my favorite place to read was the top step of the cold, unfinished basement, dark as a cave. By the light of a single swinging bulb, I would sit in silence, reading the dwindling pile, hoping not to be discovered. I knew that if my mother found me, she would send me outside to play. At the same time that reading was supposed to be good for me, a virtue, it was also a kind of guilty secret I had to hide. I knew it wasn't considered quite normal to want to read as much as I did, and that's why I hid away to do it, as alcoholics hide quarts of vodka in the cupboard or in the sock drawers.

Further confirmation of this came in first grade, an academic summit I had imagined in kindergarten as a world full of stories and books, which was actually something far more dull and expected – just a continuation of the same old thing, without the naps. The only reading matter were Dick and Jane readers, where the ninnies populating the pages would exclaim endlessly over an ice cream cone or the antics of the equally vapid dog and cat. Still, slim pickings were better than none, and as the class waited its turn to read these books aloud, one halting sentence at a time, I had already read the book twice from one cover to the other, and thus did not know which line I was supposed to read. This my teachers interpreted as solid evidence of my lack of intellect.

I could not wait to get out of the school so I could head home, not to the house, but to the library, where I could indulge my craving undisturbed. It was cool on the hottest day, and held others like myself, who would look up occasionally from their books or magazines with pure gratitude, knowing the others

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there would not judge them for good or for ill. The librarian in particular was always glad to see me, and would rush up as soon as she saw me, holding out her latest find, one set of false eyelashes hanging loose on her cheek like a demented daddy long legs.

As a teacher today, a professional reader, I can never reclaim the pure joy of these earliest forays into reading. But sometimes, with luck, I can relive them in flashes. In these rare moments, the moment expands indefinitely. I am no longer a resident of this world, but of another, permitted the magical power to live whole lifetimes in another's mind, another's world. I emerge slowly, blinking and dazed, like a prophet returned from the wilderness or a warrior from the vision quest. My world is altered forever

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## A Sea of Safety

Alyssa Riley

They tore up the concrete around the playground when I was in fourth grade and replaced it with woodchips. They called them “safety fiber,” but it was really just a foot or so of fake woodchips scattered around the jungle gym and swings. This served the dual purpose of making me very uncomfortable and saving Rick Woodard’s life.

The summer after third grade, my Uncle Bill – then working on his Masters in History with Clark University – handed me a copy of *Master and Commander*. I was a bit young to understand all of the banter that flew between the principal characters, Captain Jack Aubrey and Doctor Stephen Maturin, but it was a gift from Uncle Bill, so I spent much of that summer with his book alongside another one – my mother’s red Webster Dictionary. By the time I returned to Saint Hilda’s Elementary School in September to find a bunch of nasty mulch surrounding my beloved playground, I was well into the next of the series, *Post Captain*.

“My little girl’s going to be an old maid because of you, Bill,” my mom told him once. “Stuffed up with stories.”

“Nonsense,” said Bill, grinning from the depths of a blonde beard he must’ve grown only the day before. “Heck, if she were fifteen years older, I know men who would be positively lining up to take Alyssa to the movies.”

“Gross, Uncle Bill!” I said.

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My affair with O'Brien's nautical adventure series would have been fine if I hadn't needed the darn dictionary to remind myself what words like "lubberly" meant. I couldn't smuggle mom's in the screamingly pink backpack she'd purchased with the start of the school year, and so I had to sneak Miss Donna's dictionary off her shelf before first bell and jam it into my desk if I wanted to read during class. Sacrifices were necessary to make it fit, and *Math Quests Four* got stashed under my chair.

But Rick Woodard saw me do it, the little twerp. Looking back, I suppose he might've liked me, as much as a boy can think he likes a girl at that age, or else he would've turned me in from the start. Instead, he waited until lunch break to confront me about the transgression.

Back to the safety fiber. The plaid Saint Hilda's skirts and jumpers were already itchy and uncomfortable, and September was still quite warm – it was an Indian Summer that year, I remember. But at least when the concrete was in place I could find some shade and plop down with a book. With the installment of safety fiber, however, it suddenly became very bothersome, trying to find the proper position for reading outside. Especially in a skirt; those stupid woodchips had a way of snagging on my underwear, and they were none too easy on the bottom. So the woodchips were distracting, when the love interest between Jack Aubdrey and Diana Villiers required my full attention – I was already in a rotten mood when Rick Woodard approached me that recess.

"I saw you reading in class," he told me.

"Yes." Here I imitated my uncle by keeping my eyes trained on the page as I spoke, something he did with my mom whenever she was angry at him.

"My brother says girls don't read," Rick said. There was challenge in his voice, as if he was certain I could no longer

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ignore him. Clearly, he was unfamiliar with the exploits of Aubrey and the good doctor.

“You don’t read, Rick,” I pointed out. “Does that make you a girl?”

I stuck to my original position, refusing to glance up from the novel, but the look I imagined on Rick’s face was supremely satisfying. He made a small noise, as if he had the first words of a protest but nothing beyond that, and was reluctant to begin. My logic was flawed, obviously, but somehow I figured that as long as I didn’t make eye-contact with the kid, he would never find that out.

“Wait!” He finally had it. “That makes you a boy!”

And with that he snatched the book right out of my hands. I scrambled to my feet and hastily slapped at the bits of safety fiber clinging to my bottom – it’s hard to look intimidating covered in those beige bits of wood – and held out my hand. “You better give that back, Rick.”

“No! You’re a boy and I’m a –“ He examined the book at arm’s length, snatching it back several times as I unsuccessfully grabbed for it, some sinister cogs slowly beginning to turn behind his eyes. “I’m a pirate!”

It was an easy mistake to make, I suppose. After all, the cover of *Post Captain* did prominently feature a man aboard a ship, set against the wild, white-capped waves of the ocean. And for a boy who watched as much television as Rick Woodard, “pirate” was the logical conclusion.

Too bad for him, I was suddenly the one man who could face down even the worst of pirates, and I told him so. “Well, I’m Commander Jack Aubrey, formerly of the *HMS Polychrest*, and in the name of the Royal Navy, I demand you return that book to its rightful owner!”

He squinted at me, working on what I’d just said. If he had thought a bit longer, he might’ve pointed out that I had just

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effectively admitted to his charge of being a boy, but we were both caught up in the moment. Rather than take the time to decipher my command, Rick gave a whoop and dashed into the mess of metal that was the jungle gym.

I can't accurately describe the chase these days, mostly because I remember it as an epic pursuit through the rigging of a schooner steadily dipping to starboard. I remember that we both wore very impressive hats, and that the air rang with the sound of our sabers as we parried each other's desperate thrusts, and that I could feel the ocean's spray on my face. And then Rick was falling off the jungle gym and into the foamy sea – which very quickly reverted back to the mass of safety fiber it had been just moments before.

Leave it to Rick to wreck his ankle after a fall of just three feet. Not only was he injured, but he was humiliated, crying louder than a siren when the school yard monitor came to investigate. I got my book back, but I also wound up in the principal's office. Once the whole story was out – colored more than a little by a combination of Rick's unimpressive imagination and his damaged pride – my mom was called in. To be fair, things might've been bloodier if they hadn't put in the wood chips; they're supposed to absorb most of the force from a fall.

Later, I'd endure several sessions with a "councilor" before the adults in authority were convinced I didn't *actually* think I was a boy.

When Uncle Bill visited that Thanksgiving, he waited until we were alone in the den before bringing it up.

"Your mom tells me you've given up on O'Brien," he said.

I nodded. "That's what she thinks. I hid *Post Captain* in a my secret box outside, but she won't let me use her dictionary anymore." Bill was the only person I'd told about the tin lunchbox hidden in the elm tree out back.

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“What are you reading now, Alyssa?”

I showed Uncle Bill the copy of *Pride and Prejudice* my mother had given me.

“Oh. How do you like it?”

“There’s no fights,” I sighed.

“There’s not, are there?” said Uncle Bill.

It was only when I was going to bed that I found the slim volume stashed beneath the covers. At first, I thought it was going to be the next in the series, and I felt upset rather than pleased with the gift – Didn’t I just tell Uncle Bill that I couldn’t read O’Brien’s nautical narratives without help?

But it wasn’t the next book – which I would acquire and read later that year – but a much slimmer text. It was red, with gold lettering on the front cover and tiny, almost impossibly small words running across its gauze-thin pages. It was a pocket dictionary, small enough to fit in my secret box.

Or, as I’d find out later, a purse.

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## *A Family of Readers*

*Sharon Hogan Ellison*

There was hardly a time in our home when someone wasn't reading something. Mother, Daddy and my paternal grandfather all read our local newspaper every day. They received letters from friends and relatives, and I remember listening as they updated me on what these distant folks were doing. Mother and Daddy read their Bible and taught Sunday School, so they studied those lessons.

No doubt, there was more reading in our household before we got our television which happened when I was five. Prior to the arrival of the television, there was a routine every night after supper.

"Will you read to me, Papaw?" My grandfather lived with us, or perhaps we lived with him. It really didn't matter. We all lived together.

His standard response was, "Yep. Bring me a book." Usually I brought three or four. He and my parents would smile at each other as I climbed onto his lap.

I knew every word in every Little Golden Book in my bookcase, and there were many! Dumbo, the Flying Elephant, The Bingity-Bangity School Bus, Babar, and The Little Red Caboose were some of my all-time favorites. My parents probably bought every one published until 1958.

My grandfather surely read each one to me hundreds of times. He seemed to love reading them as much as I loved

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listening and looking at the pictures. Often he would say the wrong words, or change the order of what he was reading. At which point, I would say, “No, Papaw! That’s not what it says.” Then he and my parents would chuckle. Sometimes I would quote the correct words to him, and he would tease me by saying, “Well, if you can read this yourself, you don’t need me.”

I would then remind him that I was not yet in school and that I could not yet read words. He elicited that same response from me dozens of times. Apparently he enjoyed it.

I was nine when Papaw died. From then on, each time I read through any of my Little Golden Books, I treasured the memory of sitting in his lap hearing him read.

Mother also bought a large book of Mother Goose poems as well as a big Children’s Bible Story Book. She would take turns, reading rhymes one night and Bible stories the next.

Then there was Nanny, mother’s grandmother. She enjoyed reading the newspaper and magazines that came in her mail. Because she was a prolific letter writer, letters from her far-flung children and siblings appeared almost weekly in her mailbox. After she read carefully through the letters, she would often read them to me while I tried to remember what those people looked like.

By the time I started school, reading came easily to me. I loved going to the school library. It opened a whole new realm of possibilities and imagination. I would check out a book and take it back within a couple of days.

In third grade, I caught the measles and had to stay home in bed for almost a week. Nanny came to stay with me, but she couldn’t entertain me all day, and with only two channels on our TV, daytime programming was pretty limited. One afternoon, Mother made the mistake of bringing me a Nancy Drew mystery to help keep me entertained while she and daddy

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were at work. Before noon the next day, I had finished the mystery and wanted another one.

“Hello?”

“Mother, would you bring me another Nancy Drew book when you come home for lunch?”

“Have you already finished the one I brought you yesterday?” She seemed stunned.

“Yes, it was great! And I want another one,” I responded cheerily.

“Well,” she hesitated. “I’ll see what I can do. I need to come home, eat and get back to work, you know.”

I hadn’t any idea how much effort it would take for mother to leave work, drive to TG&Y, buy a book, come home, eat lunch, then head back to work and punch that time clock. Nor did I have any idea books cost money, but I found out the next day before she left for work.

“Don’t call and ask me to stop and get you another book today, honey. I don’t get paid until Friday.”

It was a life lesson for me. These wonderful books weren’t free like at the library. They apparently weren’t in our budget, either, at least not too many all at once. What a bummer.

The name of that first Nancy Drew mystery eludes me, but I still enjoy a good mystery, as well as many other types of books.

Fortunately, my husband was a reader, and we read to our son when he was young; so, he has grown up with a joy of reading. My mother and step-dad also read to him, which left him with some fun memories.

Now he and his wife, who also likes to read, have two sons. They spend time reading to their children, which blesses our hearts.

I’ve had fun reading to our oldest grandson before he goes to bed. Sometimes I use the wrong word or read a sentence the

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wrong way. His blue eyes sparkle as he says, “Naw, Gramma! That’s not what it says.”

Makes me smile, just like when my Papaw did it to me. Quite a family of readers.

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## *A Challenging Start*

*Dionne Obeso*

The Nancy Drew adventure lay abandoned on my bed. I stood in my doorway feeling even younger and smaller than I really was at six years old, my father looming over me. “You picked it, and you will read it,” he said. He shut the door.

Reading, to me, seemed like a lot of hard work for very little reward. I had been able to read for more than two years, but the sounding out of words, remembering their meanings, and stringing them together was boring. Kid books were too easy. This was too hard.

“Look, it says she’s answering the phone. What do *you* think she’s doing? Is she playing with her hair? Wrapping the cord around her finger?” my dad asked, trying to engage me. He wanted me to see the picture that the author painted, but I just saw pages and pages of words, marching on to form the biggest book I had ever tried to read. My optimistic goal was more than I could chew, but my father wouldn’t accept that.

“You can come out,” he said, “when you have read the first page aloud to me.” It wouldn’t be that hard. I was defiant. I refused.

It was summer break, and there was little else that was required of me. For days, my parents brought meals to my room, brought me a basin and my toothbrush at night, and required me to stand in the doorway and yell for permission every time I had

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to use the bathroom. My brother was forbidden to give me company.

For the first day or two it was novel. After that, I kept myself entertained with the sheer pleasure of defiance, which for small children is no small matter. But finally, one day, the complete and overwhelming desire for something to do led me to pick up the book that I had tossed in the corner, and start to read.

I never did have to read that first page aloud to my father. He found me in my room that day, absorbed in the adventure and so focused on the story that I didn't even hear him come in or call to me. My love for books and my passion for the places they can transport me has only grown over time.

Though the air was close and thick and hard to breathe, I would duck under the covers with any source of light I could find, from flashlights to book lights to LED key chains to read at night, coming up every so often for a fresh, cool air.

Christmas time was always my favorite time of year once I became a reader. My parents allowed my brother and I each one string of Christmas lights to decorate our rooms, and this light was more than enough to read by if you have young eyes and the desire. I would hang my lights as early as I was allowed, and read by them every night, long after my parents told me to go to sleep.

To this day one of my favorite things to do before bed is snuggle up under the covers and read until I'm exhausted. The medium may have changed to an electronic book reader, and I no longer need the flashlight, but the passion and love for a fine piece of writing that can transport me to another world – that is just the same.

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## *A head full of words*

*Anna G. Joujan*

A 5-year old freckle-faced tomboy, I sat cross-legged on the floor with my classmates, listening to the tales of Dick, Jane, and Spot, and repeating after Miss Deacon, “roof,” “book,” “look,” carefully copying her correct British pronunciation, as we were instructed to do. From that point on, I was hooked. Just a short time after the first term of boarding school that year, I had mastered the art of reading, and was reading voraciously.

It was later on that books became more than just a hobby – they were a lifeline after my happily simple childhood was rocked by our family tragedy. Suddenly books were an escape – beautiful worlds of fantasy where life was kinder than the real world. I read, and re-read classic works of fantasy, fiction, and fairy tale.

I needed these books desperately, and then was embarrassed at how much emotion they wrought. Once, when reading *Where the Red Fern Grows*, I was moved to tears, and soon was bawling my eyes out. Embarrassed, I crouched behind the couch in the living room to cry in peace, knowing that our noisy household would keep my muffled sobs from giving me away. I was foiled, however, when our Boxer came to lick my face and whimper with me, giving away my hiding place.

I am fascinated – and occasionally frightened – by the power of quality children’s books to teach, move, and heal, and I am inspired by the prospect of helping young people discover

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this power as I did. There is no doubt in my mind that reading was more than just an escape for me as a child; rather, the literature I read played a vital and active role in my healing process.

You see, when I cried as I read *Where the Red Fern Grows* as a child, I was not simply crying for those dogs. Those were not simple tears – they were gut-wrenching sobs that leapt out of my closed-off heart. I cried for my father, for my mother, and for myself. The gifted author’s words allowed me to release all the grief that I could not let out on my own. Being too young to understand and process the pain I felt, I needed those stories to allow me to feel the emotions that I did not have the capacity to release on my own.

For I remembered that day – November 30 – in 1988. On that day, I awoke excited – no, more than that – I was ecstatic. I was running through lines of the Christmas program in my head, eagerly rehearsing for the program that night. You see, tonight we were performing for our families, for my family. They were on their way by this time, I knew, beginning the drive early that morning that would bring them along many lonely dirt roads, winding through villages and across open plains, to arrive here.

It had been 3 months now since I last saw them, when I boarded the little Cessna on the grass strip of our village, clutching my stuffed bear in one arm and holding my sister’s hand with the other. We stood there waving goodbye one last time on the boarding stairs, and then waved again out the window as we sped along the airstrip and lifted off into the air. I loved that moment of lifting off in the airplane – and have ever since – the exciting rush of becoming airborne and soaring faster and faster through the air.

That day, however, my excitement of the beginning was tinged with the sadness of knowing I would be away from my

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family for many nights now. The days were always full of learning, fun adventures in the bush with friends and with various creatures to be discovered and trees to be climbed. The nights were the hard part, though, when I fought the tears that often came in spite of my fierce will, silently dampening my pillow while I stifled the shortened breaths that may give away my tears to the classmates sleeping near me in rows of bunk beds.

The 3 months since that last flight had passed quickly – 3 months of good books read, math problems solved, geography discovered, play weddings acted out in free time, and all manner of grade 4 activities. I had also turned 9 the previous month, and knew my family would now celebrate my birthday and my brother's 4th birthday 3 days earlier, as soon as we made it back home. While on a shopping trip in South Africa, my Dad had acquired our first car, so he decided to make the road trip instead of Helen and I flying home as we had always done before. So, I knew they were loaded up in the Isuzu, along with 2 village friends – a teenage student of my Dad's and the Zambian pastor he worked with in our Church.

So that afternoon, after various activities designed to keep all us boarding students preoccupied so we wouldn't be bouncing off the walls with the excitement of our families' arrivals, we all filed out the drive-up area to await the first arrivals. I had in my mind the perfect picture of what to expect, so as each vehicle arrived, I craned my neck to see my mom's long arm waving out the window and Alex's goofy grin peering out from her lap. But the cars came, parents claimed their clamoring kids, and my picture-perfect arrival still had not appeared. Finally, a lady I recognized as the mom of some friends who lived fairly near us went over to our Dorm Mother and said something to her, gesturing in our direction. She then

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came and told us to go ahead and get ready for the program – not to keep waiting for our parents there.

I was disappointed, but assumed they would arrive at any moment, so just kept waiting as we practiced our songs. My mental image just altered itself to adjust to a late clamor of hugs and kisses rushed in before the program started . . . but the program came, began, and ended, and they had not arrived. The next morning we were taken to the Cessna, and told we were going to go back to the village by flight after all. This time I imagined the whole family standing there on the airstrip, coming into focus as the plane landed, with eager smiles and waves – still, no. The parents of a classmate took us in their car instead – so of course I changed my expectation once more, this time thinking they were taking us to our house where the family would be, picture-perfect, waiting in front of our little home.

Instead we arrived at their house. Auntie Elaine (according to British habit, all family friends were “Auntie” and “Uncle” to us kids) finished up dinner preparations while we helped set the table. And then, instead of sitting down to dinner, she asked Helen and I to come and sit with her on the couch – “Anna, Helen – I have some really sad news . . . your Daddy went to heaven . . . “ Before the sentence was finished, I had burst into loud sobs, Helen looked at me and started crying, and Auntie Elaine and her daughter were both crying and hugging us.

I don’t remember any mention of the rest of the family at that point – nor did I wonder, as far as I can remember. The rest of the day, of the week, of the month, passed in a sort of a fog, in which my memories are clear but displaced, as if each memory was plucked from its proper place in the continuum of time and placed instead in some never never land of homeless moments.

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I remember falling asleep with fitful dreams, waking up convinced I had dreamed reality, and that Daddy would walk in and comfort me any moment. I remember being reunited with my brothers, staring at Alex's discolored and misshapen head, and carting Ian around carefully in his body cast, propping him up against walls . . . supporting him and holding his modesty blanket over his midsection as he pinned the tail on the donkey at his belated birthday party. I remember visiting Mom there in the Zambian hospital, horrified at the sight of my strong, active, beautiful mother lying there on the stretcher bed unable to move herself. At one point during a visit, the nurse had to turn her over so that she wouldn't get a bed sore. As she did so, she let go of the sheet and mom was briefly exposed to us all in the room. I didn't know whether to blush, sob, or scream – I wanted to just run away, to disappear forever into the endless, dreadfully beautiful African wilderness. I hated seeing mom like that, and dreaded the visits . . . and I hated myself for feeling that way, thinking there must be something wrong with me if I didn't want to see my mother . . .

Somehow, time passed. My Daddy's funeral passed in a blur of friends, strangers, languages I didn't know, and wails I knew only too well. As soon as mom was strong enough to be transported, we were shipped to the U.S., where hospitalization and then physical rehab came for her. I hid in my books – in beautiful worlds of fantasy – to the extent that my grandmother still teases me for always having my “nose stuck in a book” as a child.

And eventually Mom was well enough to take over the care of the 4 of us again. I still don't know for the life of me how she did it – a paraplegic supporting and caring for a home of her own and 4 not-always-angelic children. She did it well . . . she loved us well.

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On this day, as a child, Mom beautifully commemorated the anniversary. She would buy what looked to me like hundreds of helium-filled balloons, bringing them home so that the house was bursting with balloons. Then she tied note cards to the string of each one, and told us to write notes on them – as many as we wanted, and whatever we wanted to say to a stranger. I remember writing things like “Jesus loves me this I know . . .” and “My Daddy died on this day, and he is now in heaven with God, because he loved God. I do too.” I wrote silly notes, but meaningful ones, longing, in all my childhood intensity, to somehow tell the world that I had a great Daddy, and that some day I would see him again.

I still catch myself, when I am still enough to listen to the deeper desires of my heart, craving moments of remembrance of my Daddy, and eagerly clasping to memory any tidbits about him that people from his past may be able to share with me. And thankfully my own mind clamped down firmly on all the memories I had of my times with him, out of a personal need for them and, I suspect, out of a nagging suspicion that someday, somehow, there would be a greater use for, outlet for, it all.

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## *Escape in a Rocking Chair*

*Jenna Wright*

My earliest childhood memory of Mom is sitting in a plaid platform rocker in a corner of our first home, a two-story red brick on a sloping hill. There is a tall floor lamp by the chair, but the light is not on-no need. Our newspaper comes in the afternoon. Mom will read it all later, but first she gathers me, her three-year-old daughter, into her lap and holds me closely, snuggled into a peaceful lull. She reads me the comic strips from the newspaper. I can hear my mother breathing as she rocks and clutches me close to her, and then we laugh at the latest escapades of Beetle Bailey. The silent air again is broken with our laughter as Dagwood outwits Blondie or Mr. Dithers, Nancy and Sluggo get into benign mischief, or a doctor and nurse save a life from a dreaded but little known disease. I don't remember the names of the fictional doctor-nurse characters, but perhaps they reminded my mom of her days-just five years before-at the hospital where she had been head nurse.

I sometimes wonder how she felt about going from that thriving small-town hospital nurses' station that she commanded during and just after World War II to that quiet rocker in the farm house on the rich green hill at the city limits of a hamlet of a few hundred people-only seventeen miles away, but a world from her career. She must have embodied some remorse about walking away from her profession-at least from time to time. After all, I-her captivated, awed child audience smiling up at

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her in that cocoon rocker as she read-could not comprehend the demands on a woman in the 1940s and 1950s whose aspirations to be a doctor were crushed by the financial and cultural limits of the day.

In the years to come, I would sometimes see her get a far-away look in her eyes when she would recount how she literally had her suitcase packed after applying to be a Navy nurse in WWII-an appointment with potential for medical school. Then, she would look at me and explain-for me or herself, I don't know-how the doctor in charge of the hospital dashed her hopes when he offhandedly commented that she wasn't going to the Navy for he had deemed her "essential" to the medical needs of this rural West Tennessee region. Then, Mom would tell me how she unpacked and went back to the daily hospital routine.

Whatever she felt about giving up her nursing profession, she never shared in depth with me as a small child, in fact, never shared throughout her life. Now, in her silence I will never know. But I do know that she was my first reading teacher, enticing me with the exciting world of reading in that rocking chair cocoon and offering me an invitation to join her in that world which would present both of us opportunities for encouragement and escape.

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## *Discovery of the Ancient Tomes* *Madeleine Kuderick*

The year: 3,020

Expedition: Ancient books

We found a vault beneath the earth and voyaged in to look.  
The smell near overtook us with a scent we did not know  
like the wooded forest samples from the earth of long ago.

The catacombs were brimming with these ancient artifacts,  
with these bound and paper volumes, with these dusty, yellow  
stacks.

My researchers took images. They sampled and they scanned.  
They weighed and measured every tome, but not how we had  
planned.

It started with my linguist as he tried his first decode.  
He slipped into a corner where the *classic* books were stowed.  
“The print beneath my fingers . . . there’s some kind of  
strange effect.

The ink on skin connection. It defies my intellect.”

He started turning pages as though he were mesmerized.  
Then every archeologists put books before their eyes.  
“It makes me want to curl up. It brings me such a calm.”  
Then even my young diggers started leafing through the  
psalms.

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“It’s not like modern digests that we plug into our brain,”  
They gazed upon the pages of an ancient called Mark Twain.  
“These books give us a *feeling*. They’re not useless as they  
seem.”

And soon the books had hypnotized each member of my team.

“If only I could break the code,” my linguist said at last.  
These books could be a portal to the future and the past.”  
That’s why we toiled night and day. We knew we must  
succeed.

And soon discovered ancient gold. The lost art how to read.

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