A Million Different Worlds

My earliest experience with literacy was with my parents, who read Chinese poems to me when I was an infant. I can’t recall this memory with great detail, but I do remember my parents continuing to read to me throughout my childhood, until my understanding of English grew and I no longer needed them to walk me through books. I loved my parents for encouraging me and giving me the support I needed to gain the ability to write and read, they played a major factor in the growth of my literacy. My first experience with writing that I can remember clearly is in preschool, when I was taught to write letters of the alphabet, my name, colors, and some objects. After learning these basic things, and with the constant encouragement and reading with my parents, I think my literacy grew naturally.

The first book I read when I was 5 was The Giving Tree. It was simple to read, but made me feel emotions I had never felt before. I treasured it so much that I wrote—in my chicken scratch, on the dedication page, “To Ruobing” above Shel Silverstein’s dedication. I felt sadness for the tree, and I felt sadness for the boy. It was an ominous vision to me, I thought that I would become the boy someday and leave my parents. It is significant to me now because I believe that these were the most complex thoughts I had about a book at that point in my life.

 After kindergarten, I was reading Junie B. Jones books by myself. I was enamored with reading of her adventures; they were different worlds that I could delve into just by opening a book. I have this memory of being in 1st grade, receiving a spelling list for the week, and mastering the longest word on the list—rectangle, within minutes. I was proud of how quickly I picked up on spelling words, and I loved to read with all my heart. By the 3rd grade, I was reading at an 8th grade level. My father encouraged me to read outside of school, we had quiet time at the end of the night at home strictly set aside for reading. My mother took me to the library once a week and I would bring the biggest pile of books to check out, and I’d be done with them before we went back the next week. I especially loved series books for this reason, I liked knowing that after the book I was reading, there’d be another one waiting for me.

 There were many book series that I read when I was younger, but two that specifically stand out to me now are The Unfortunate Series of Events and The Mysterious Benedict Society. I think the reason I specifically loved these two series is because of how I felt like I could relate to the characters. Both series feature young children who were very intelligent and experience difficult situations beyond their years. The relatable characters made the books that much more real for me, they were characters that I could see as my friends. I felt awestruck that a book could not only make me feel so many different emotions, but also take me to distant lands and meet all different kinds of characters, like a movie on paper. There is something special about a book that is able to take you to a different world just by reading it. Another type of book, one that captures real life and depicts realistic characters, was largely significant to me as well. A book series called The Beacon Street Girls was about a group of girls in junior high who lived in Brookline; it depicted scenes of school, family, and friends. It was something ordinary that I could relate to. My family was living in Brookline on Beacon Street at the time, and I felt that I could almost be one of those girls. The same way I could be one of Artemis’ hunters when I opened up a Percy Jackson book. I was obsessed with all of these worlds, and I was able to live in them by reading my books.

 I read everywhere I went, I read every book, even books that were beyond my years. Whenever I read a word I didn’t know, I’d use a dictionary to find the definition of the word, and these words were ingrained in me after understanding them in the context of a book I had read. This contributed to my vocabulary, which flourished while I continued to read. I read while I took baths, my books have water stained pages to show for it. I would read at the dinner table to the point my parents had to tell me to put the book down. The summer reading assignments were never a chore, and an assignment to read “outside of school” was absurd to me. It was something I enjoyed doing so much, I never needed someone to tell me to read.

 My parents were the greatest catalyst for my literacy growth. My mother was responsible for the majority of my time at the local library, but my busy father played as much of a role in encouraging my education as he could. My father was not a rich man by any means, but he always made sure that he had enough to spare a book. I can recall our Sunday visits to the Brookline Booksmith in vivid detail. The store had tall bookshelves and the layout was odd, I remember zig zagging through the bookshelves like it was a maze, all the way to the young adult section in the back. My father spent time looking at the clearance books and scientific journals. There were big comfortable armchairs, and I would bring a pile of books I had gathered to deliberate which book I’d take home that week. Plopping into the soft red chairs, I’d spend hours there reading each book until my dad would come and tell me it was time to leave. He bought me a book of my choosing every week, and my library began to grow quickly. I liked to own the books I loved, it gave me a sense of possession and I was protective of my books like they were my children. The smell of a brand new book, the paper and fresh ink wafting from the pages and it was my favorite smell. To this day, I think one of the greater satisfactions in life is opening and reading a new book.

My parents never denied me my love for books. One of my happiest days is when my parents took me to meet the authors of The Beacon Street Girls at an event, and I had my books signed. I don’t remember the authors with much detail, but it made me incredibly happy to tell them that I loved their books. The authors always felt so far away, just a small name on the cover of a book. This perception I had changed when I met the very ordinary authors of my favorite series. I realized that authors were probably all regular people, and that I wanted to be an author someday and tell my stories.

 It was difficult for me to pinpoint the time in which I began to acquire literacy because I have been reading and writing as early as I can remember. I still have my childhood books, as well as stories and poems I wrote when I was younger. My parents are to thank for my growth spurt in terms of literacy, they gave me all the tools I needed to read books and to love doing so. Between the library and bookstore trips, reading with them at night, or just sharing interesting things we read at the dinner table, I am inexplicably grateful for my parents’ support and encouragement, and can only hope to pass on these values to my children.

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