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Summer Days in the Library

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Reading was the only thing that I ever did consistently as a child. I began in kindergarten and never stopped. *Harriet the Spy*, *Nancy Drew* and *Ramona Quimby* sat queued in stacks next to my bed by the time I was in elementary school. Their colorful spines greeted me when I awoke each morning. My mom made time to take me to the library on weekends during the summer. The building had a smell like air conditioning and yellowed paper. I loved it. I would race to read my stack of books in every free moment to win the summer reading program; our progress was celebrated on a rainbow, construction paper game board that circled the top perimeter of the library's children's section. In addition to my stack at home, I checked out two books at a time week after week. I never won the reading program. In fact, I never even came close. I suspect that some of those children cheated, although I would never care enough to find them all these years later and make them admit it. Reading was practically my life.

I continued reading this way until eighth grade. The change, mandated by the state of California, was that books became assigned to us and we had questions to answer based on the page numbers we had (allegedly) read. Reading went from magical to mechanical. I was no longer trying to check out stacks of books that my mom had to regulate out of consideration to other young readers. I had to purchase a book that was probably difficult for my mom to afford and read it "for comprehension." Reading under compulsion was a difficult transition, like I was moving from tropical Florida to Desert Palm Springs. I will not lie, laziness was a huge factor in why I did not enjoy reading for school as much as I enjoyed reading over the summers past. There is nothing quite as wonderful as doing what I want to do when I want to do it. The barrage of assigned books that I had never heard of were the beginning of a sense of dread toward reading even as I began to develop as a young writer.

My writing romance developed much later, relatively, than my relationship with reading. I have no qualms in declaring that I have been a strong writer since I began in the second grade. At the age of eight, I entered the OC Fair's writing contest because my third grade teacher, Mrs. Phelps, made us choose a category to enter. Other categories included art, cooking, and gardening, which would have been outright embarrassing for me to enter. Besides having no experience with cooking, I never felt proud of anything I created during art time, and plants played dead when they saw me coming. Writing was my default selection. My story was called "CiCi Dolphin's Journey," an original created just for the contest about a dolphin who is rescued from the wild and tries to make her way back to her family. We all turned in our submissions to Mrs. Phelps as a class assignment and waited. She brought them back to us several weeks later and called us up to her desk one by one to hand them to us. When I saw the blue ribbon attached to my title page featuring a colored-pencil dolphin that my friend drew for me, it made me relieved that I had finally done well at something

creative. I won first place in writing, along with 50 other children. This victory solidified that I could write, although I would not call it a talent until middle school.

My first middle school English teacher was Ms. Casey. Her class was everyone's favorite because she had a fun personality, a loud voice, always knew the answers to our questions and was the right amount of what we called "crazy" for us to think she was cool. She would sit in a director's chair (appropriate for the performing arts school atmosphere) and read short stories to us out loud at the beginning of class. Then we would free write in our huge, 5-subject notebooks about our thoughts on the work. Sometimes she let us write off the top of our heads about what was bothering us – it was wise for her to give middle school students a chance to vent on paper instead of through the mouth – and other times she had us do writing activities like "Dial a Mystery." I loved it. In retrospect, I probably liked being read to and having a chance to write down my opinions without anyone judging me. We could share what we wrote if we wanted to, but we did not have to.

In addition to informal writing, we wrote numerous essays in her class. I remember how she sat in her director's chair and told us to avoid regurgitating phrases such as: "This book is about ____" and superlatives such as: "Hold on to your hats while I tell you a great story!" I likely would have done both of those things if she had not banned them because I did not know any better. She actually allowed us to select our own books for our primitive essays and met with us individually to discuss their topics. I still remember those conferences where we got to pull up a chair to her desk and tell her our ideas. For one essay, I read a book that I grabbed from my local library called *The Party's Over* by teen fiction legend Caroline B. Cooney. Ms. Casey sat with me as I mulled over whether to discuss the "swear diet" instituted by the characters or talk about how Hallie Revness was struggling with transition. I ended up going with the latter, and I can still conjure up the feeling of how proud I was when I got an "A+" back on that paper.

I think it was crucial that Ms. Casey allowed us to retain our autonomy in regards to reading although the essays were compulsory. I probably would have burned out on reading if I had to write an essay on a book that I could not care less about. There were some books that we read altogether as a class, like *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, but the group projects for those readings were actually fun as we could do skits, write and perform a song or do just about anything that demonstrated what we learned from the text. My group did a skit for *Something Wicked This Way Comes* where I dressed up like a man, and my female friend dressed up like one of the young male characters. Some of the lines we said were from the book, but we also created our own content. We had just as much fun giving our presentation as we did seeing what everyone else came up

with and, incredibly, I was learning through the laughter. Even discussing the mandatory questions in groups was an enjoyable social experience because we were allowed to sit on pillows on the floor in her classroom or sit outside in the hallway where we felt like we were “breaking the rules” by being out of class.

Ms. Casey’s approach to teaching helped me to maintain my appreciation of reading throughout middle school; yet, until writing this essay, it had not occurred to me that my deep love of poetry could be traced back to Ms. Casey’s class as well. Of all of the forms of writing that I currently engage in, poetry is easily my strongest suit and the form that I gravitate towards when I sit down at my laptop to write. I should really find her and thank her for giving me a “writer’s ear” for words. I vividly remember lines from the portfolio that she had us create such as: “All I could do was cry / And watch her velvet glove / As it floated to the floor” from a poem whose title I cannot remember. Or the poem “Talkative” which read: “No voice / No sound / Just thoughts / How can you / Say that you / Hear me?” To be able to recite poems from eleven years ago so vividly shows the deep connection that was forged between my heart and my notebook. As we did in-class peer editing workshops that I actually enjoyed, I felt proud as my feedback was almost always positive. For a girl with oily skin, few friends, an intensely wild unibrow that my mom would not let me get waxed, and a loathed boyfriend-less status, my ability to write was the only trait that I had going for myself. Everything else said that I was not good enough but my readers and my grades for my work said that I was.

I would need that shred of enduring self-confidence when my life as I knew was taken from me. A series of traumatic events in the eighth grade led me to a point where I craved any sort of release possible. My sharp mind was mushy, and I was a step behind the beat of my life. Faced with few resources and little authority, I wish that I could say that writing was a lifeline. Instead, it would be most accurate to say that reading was out of the question, and writing was my most successfully-functional activity aside from eating and watching television. Reading required my mind to focus on one activity, which made everything that I was trying to run from come to the forefront of my mind. Writing could at least be done while I had my headphones cranked up to the loudest setting, drowning out everything possible.

It was at this point in my life when I mastered the art of writing an essay without doing the reading. Without fairly opening a text, I would write an essay on the material from listening to class discussions and frantically flipping through the book for quotes the morning that the paper was due. Somehow, even with all of the reasons why I should have gotten an “F,” the grade was still an “A” most of the time. My God-given gift for writing enabled me to remain an honor student though I felt like a complete charlatan. I actually knew what the word “charlatan” meant from our vocabulary lists. From eighth grade through high school, papers

were printed out at the last possible second before I rushed to school, late, but with a strong paper.

When I transferred to Northwood High for my sophomore year of high school, all of the existing students kept moaning about the dreaded Anchor Assessment. It was an essay worth 30% of our grades where our English teacher graded it based on a writing rubric and our history teacher graded it for historical accuracy. “No matter what,” my classmates swore, “it lowers your grade.” We were given time to work on it in class, but I wasted time and did only enough to get the points for doing the class work. “This is not my real essay,” I told myself. I planned to write the real one later. Other good students had practically finished their papers with the time that they were given. The image of them scrolling through their essays on the monitors in the computer lab played in my mind as I hammered out my paper the night before. I felt guilty, knowing that I should have used my time better. I turned in the paper regardless and moved on in life. I was not at school the day that the papers were handed back. My history teacher looked at me as he stood before the class the following day and said that I had gotten one of the highest grades in the class. Knowing how it was composed, I did not believe him. He walked to his desk, glanced at my essay and announced, “99!” to the class that was listening. “A 99% on a paper that I had written the night before?” I thought to myself. I tried to process the wonderful yet guilt-inducing feeling. Were it not so successful to operate that way, I would have changed my ways to maintain my honors student status.

I wish that I could say that the harried ways and struggles of my younger-youth were in the past. I still write papers at the last minute, and I still have a hard time getting myself to sit down and read because it requires quiet focus in order for me to do so intelligently. I could not be a sentient person without poetry, although I no longer need to have music blaring and I have transitioned from a notebook to my trusty laptop. With or without external stimuli, I write because I am a writer. In regards to reading and writing, it seems that I am an older, confident, self-sustained version of my junior high self. Part of me is horrified by that thought, like I have gotten stuck at a shameful formative stage that requires court-ordered counseling as the only remedy. More realistically, I think it means that I built upon the groundwork that I formed when I was younger: what worked remained (no matter how dysfunctional) and what was unnecessary I discarded.

If my personal journey with reading and writing were my main priority going forward, I would have nothing to be concerned about. Yes, my methods could be improved, but they can't be wholly objectionable if they work for me. What scares me is that I plan on teaching middle school English. My personal reading and writing habits are insignificant in comparison to how important it is to me to be able to teach reading and writing to my future students. I could potentially be responsible for fostering or destroying someone else's love of

reading and writing. I hope that I will be a Ms. Casey as I inspire students to read and write in new ways that will stick with them for the rest of their life. I hope, but I know that my best may not be good enough. For now, I am focusing on writing my personal statements for credential programs and remembering why I want to do any of it by thinking about those summer days I spent scooping up books by the armful in the library.