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Reflections on a Lifetime of Reading

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Reflections on a Lifetime of Reading

Abstract

Here I give an account of my life as a reader. The first books I remember enjoying are those that were read aloud on Captain Kangaroo, such as *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*, *The Story about Ping*, and *Stone Soup*. When I was a little older, in school we learned about science and current events from the stories in *Weekly Reader*. This was followed by an interest in baseball and the sports page in the local newspaper. In high school, I was more interested in films than books, but “visual literacy” has its place in life, too. My reading in college included poems by Wendell Berry, short stories by Flannery O’Connor, and *The Plague* by Albert Camus. Today I am often called upon to search archival collections for primary documents and photographs that have a bearing on what students are studying in History classes, such as the military dispatches found in *The War of the Rebellion*, the diplomatic messages collected in *Foreign Relations of the United States*, and the photographs taken by the Farm Security Administration in the 1930’s. The growing complexities of meaning in the texts I discuss make perfect sense from the perspective of developmental psychology. But so does my renewed interest in reading the stories that my grandchildren love. I suspect that every librarian could tell a similar story about their life-long love for books.

Cover Page Footnote

Gee, guys, I don't know -- you could add "works cited" like this, but I don't think I have written that kind of essay... Bush Jr., Harold K. "Wendell Berry, Seeds of Hope, and the Survival of Creation." *Christianity & Literature* 56, no. 2 (2007): 297-316. Carlebach, Michael L. "Documentary and Propaganda: The Photographs of the Farm Security Administration." *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 8 (1988): 6-25. Gleason, Benjamin. "New Literacies Practices of Teenage Twitter Users." *Learning, Media & Technology* 41, no. 1 (March 2016): 31-54. Hofstetter, Carolyn et al. "The Effect of the Weekly Reader on Children's Knowledge of Current Events." *Evaluation Review* 24, no. 3 (2000): 272-294. James, Jeffrey D. "The Role of Cognitive Development and Socialization in the Initial Development of Team Loyalty." *Leisure Sciences* 23, no. 4 (2001): 233-261. King Jr. Martin Luther. Letter from Birmingham Jail. (1963) https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html Meeker, Leonard. "244. Memorandum from the Legal Adviser (Meeker) to Secretary of State Rusk." In: *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968, Volume III, Vietnam, June-December 1965* <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v03/d244> O'Sullivan, Sheryl. "Books to Live By: Using Children's Literature for Character Education." *The Reading Teacher* 57, no. 7 (2004): 640-645. Spirn, Anne Whiston. *Daring to Look: Dorothea Lange's Photographs and Reports from the Field*. (University of Chicago Press, 2008). *War of the Rebellion*, Serial 65, Chapter XLVII. Operations in Charleston Harbor, Etc. Page 113. <http://ehistory.osu.edu/books/official-records/065/0113> Yeager, D.M. "H. Richard Niebuhr's Christ and Culture." In: *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics* edited by Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).



FEATURED ARTICLE

Reflections on a Lifetime of Reading...

By Fred Guyette

I.

My earliest memory of taking delight in books goes back to the early 1960s when I was six years old watching Captain Kangaroo's "Reading Stories." The stories I loved most combined the narrator's voice with colorful illustrations. *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* had that quality. So did *The Story about Ping* and *Stone Soup*. These stories awakened feelings of compassion for others in me. Mike and Mary Anne weren't ready for the scrap heap yet. There was still work for them to do *somewhere*. I didn't want Ping to be separated from his mother and father, eleven aunts and uncles, and forty-two cousins on the Wise-Eyed Boat. I felt, too, that the French soldiers returning from war were in danger of starving, until they could persuade someone in the village to donate a carrot, another to contribute an onion, and perhaps another villager to add a few potatoes in the community pot to make stone soup.

In the second and third grades, some of my most memorable lessons came from the *Weekly Reader*. The pages had a pulpy feel, similar to the newspapers our parents read, with black and white photographs and helpful diagrams. *Weekly Reader* brought news of deep sea exploration and the space race into our classroom. Reading the *Weekly Reader* is how we found out about the dive made by the *Trieste* (January 1960) and how its two-man crew had observed the sea floor of the Mariana Trench, 35,000 feet below sea level. Without doubt, though, John Glenn's orbit of the earth aboard the *Friendship 7* (February 1962) was most exciting for schoolchildren to read. Today

anyone can read about the deployment of weapons in space, but *Weekly Reader* spared us from such dark thoughts. The editorial focus was on getting to the moon. "But why?" was a question that we only learned to ask a decade later. The next step in that project was the *Gemini* spacecraft, followed by *Apollo*, and so on...

Most kids go through a phase when they are interested in stories about sports. In 1965 my father took me to a game between the Cincinnati Reds and the Chicago Cubs. My favorite player was Frank Robinson, and on that special day I had my picture taken with him. For the rest of that summer I couldn't wait for the newspaper to come every day, so I could turn to the sports page and read about his RBIs and batting average. I was flummoxed when the Reds traded Robinson to the Baltimore Orioles in the off-season. The next year Robinson had his best season, and the Orioles won the World Series. I remember it as personal vindication, a symbol of my loyalty to that one special player. That feeling closely resembles the point I want to make here. *Every time I read a story* about Frank Robinson's performance in a game, my loyalty to him grew stronger. I'm not saying loyalty is always the most important value – it needs to be tempered by other virtues. But in many areas of life, it's pretty important, yes?

II.

I don't recall reading many books between the ages of 12 and 18. I was much more interested in watching movies, and yet it never occurred to me that some of my favorite films were

based on books. *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971) was a dramatization of short stories written by Sholom Aleichem, but let's face it, we remember *Fiddler on the Roof* because of classics such as "If I Were a Rich Man" and "Sunrise, Sunset." *Cool Hand Luke* (1967) was based on a novel by Donn Pearce? Who knew? *Dr. Zhivago* (1965) helped me understand a *little* (and I must emphasize *little*) about the violence and suffering of the Russian Revolution. I knew in a vague way that Yuri, Lara, and Tonya were characters in a novel written by Boris Pasternak, but I remember thinking that his book was *Way too long! So many pages!*

My crazy aunt tried to tell me that although I had laughed all the way through *M*A*S*H* (1970) at the theatre, the novel was even funnier – but then again, this was the same lady who talked to her car every day, always addressing it as "Rosemary." *Planet of the Apes* (1968) made a lasting impression on me about the madness of nuclear war and some of the ways institutional religion can go wrong. It took me thirty years to realize that it was a novel first, written by Pierre Boulle and published in 1963. Many librarians will already know that Boulle's other great book was *The Bridge over the River Kwai*. In real life, Boulle had been one of the POWs forced by the Japanese to work on that infamous bridge. Again I have to confess that I loved David Lean's film (1958), but I have never read Boulle's book.

I'm not sure I can draw a meaningful lesson about all the great reading experiences I missed out on in my adolescence. As an enthusiastic filmgoer, I did develop a kind of visual literacy. That's some consolation to my older, wiser self. I can reassure parents, "Don't worry if your teenager doesn't love to read right now. Maybe later..." But I do worry about this generation. Aren't Tweets limited to 140 characters? Not much space for a narrative there, dude!

III.

When you become a college student, you must (must?) become more serious about your reading. I was very fortunate to find a poetry teacher who somehow chose poems that caught my imagination. Wendell Berry was one of the first poets to make a lasting impression on me. Berry's poem, "To the Unseeable Animal" is just one page long, but reading it helped revive my faith when it was almost dead. Another favorite by Berry is "The Sycamore," about an old tree that has been damaged in many different ways over the years, but keeps flourishing. Strange, amazing, that the lines of these poems come back to me in the middle of the night, even after 40 years. Berry's poems led me to other poets, too: Robert Frost, Randall Jarrell, William Stafford, Mary Oliver...

Another college professor of mine let us choose books from a recommended reading list, and I will always be grateful that one of them was H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*. Niebuhr's book brings together many examples from scripture and church history to illuminate social ethics. He tries to show that in some societies, faith can enjoy a close relationship with government and the arts (think Thomas Aquinas and the medieval painter Giotto), while in other societies, it makes much more sense for faithful people to protest what they see going on in the world around them (think Martin Luther King and *Letter from Birmingham Jail*).

In another course, we were asked us to read Camus's *The Plague*, which I interpreted to be about the value of friendship in extremely difficult circumstances. My classmates and I also read half a dozen stories by Flannery O'Connor, including "Good Country People" and "The Displaced Person." O'Connor's fiction has a unique way of piercing those invisible barriers that allow us to imagine that we are

better than other people. Her characters are always having epiphanies when they absolutely do *not* want to see what it is that God wants them to see about themselves.

IV.

I'm going to fast forward again in order to give a brief account of several more recent experiences with books. A few years ago, my wife and I had to drive long distances to take care of various family matters. It was a perfect opportunity for us to listen to audiobooks borrowed from our public library in Abbeville. Alexander McCall Smith's stories about *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* rank high on our list of favorites. Mma Precious Ramotswe, of "traditional build," is the central character, assisted by Mma Grace Makutsi, and Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni. Another very fine novel to listen to on the road is *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver. What's it about? Nathan Price is an American missionary who takes his family to the Belgian Congo in the 1960's. He is forever misunderstanding the culture of the people he is trying to convert. Consequently, he keeps leading his family deeper and deeper into trouble. The stories about *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* are mostly comic, with some elements of sadness, while *The Poisonwood Bible* is mostly tragic, with only a few rays of hope and light. Both are unforgettable.

In the college where I serve as Reference Librarian, our history professors are always encouraging their students to work with primary sources. Some of the professional reading I do now involves finding good examples of these documents for students to analyze. Often primary sources are found in series with well over 100 volumes. *Records of the War of Rebellion* has several dispatches from 1864 pertaining to the C.S.S. *Hunley*, the Confederate submarine that attacked and sank the U.S.S. *Housatonic* before it, too, went down in Charleston's harbor. *Foreign Relations of the*

United States is another huge series compiled by the US Department of State. There are hundreds of documents in *FRUS* from the era of the Vietnam War, for example. Among them is a memo written by a diplomat named Leonard Meeker which he sent to Secretary of State, Dean Rusk. In summary it says: We are losing our way in Vietnam and we cannot foresee the outcome. Wouldn't this be a good time to develop an exit strategy? It's the date of Meeker's memo that always makes me pause and wonder, "What if..." It was Christmas Day, 1965.

Historic photographs sometimes figure into these assignments, too. Lewis Hine's photos of children working in the textile mills (circa 1908) were catalysts that made a difference in American labor laws. The photographers sent out by the Farm Security Administration – among who were Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and Gordon Parks -- helped build a consensus for FDR's New Deal in the 1930s. Politicians might love these images and what they stand for, or they might hate them and think they have led our nation astray. In any case, there they are, in the archives of The Library of Congress, and as detectives sometimes say, facts can be very stubborn things.

Is there a point to your story, Mr. Guyette? Hmm, well... If I try to imagine a life without books, without libraries, it would be pretty bleak, don't you think? It would be like... like *The Book of Eli* – do you know that movie? Or like *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, right? Which is why I go on reading stories to my grandchildren now: *Froggy Goes to School*, *Officer Buckle and Gloria*, and *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*...

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