How I Became A Reader (and a Writer)

written by Holly
December 17, 2005
By Holly Lisle

Like the other people who have answered this question, my relationship with education was an odd one, and my introduction to reading started early.

My mother taught me to read by getting me a Dr. Seuss Books subscription—one book in the Dr. Seuss line-up came to our house every month, and went into rotation with the growing stack of Little Golden Books that I think she picked up for me from the grocery store. She read to me, and when I started memorizing the books, let me "read" to her. My parents spelled things out in front of me that they didn't want me to know—early on, understanding the relationship between letters and words became a high-value pursuit for me, and by the time I was five, I could read well and they had to give up spelling anything because I'd broken their code.

This presented a few problems when I started school. I already knew how to read, so the odious Dick, Jane and Spot books that my first school used as primary readers didn't even slow me down. Nor did they engage my interest. I dutifully filled out the mimeographed worksheets we were handed, and I did the reading (in about three minutes), but my teacher ended up giving me other things to do to keep me busy.

I liked writing projects, though, because then I could use my own words and engage my imagination in telling a story that I found interesting. The first time my writing was recognized as being exceptional was in the first grade, where my teacher chose a three-page story I'd written about Winnie-the-Pooh (going well over my assigned wordlimit to do so—an issue I

have since mostly resolved) to read aloud to the class. This was a big deal for me, and I still clearly remember my delight at both pleasing my teacher and interesting my classmates. My story had a beginning, a middle, an end, and a plot, even if it was a pretty minimal one. (Pooh was having issues with bees and honey.)

I lived for Scholastic books, because if I was very careful with the budget my mother allotted to me, I could get three or four books out of every order.

Aside from that, though, I remained mostly bored by school and ahead of my classmates through the third grade, when we moved to Alaska.

The trip to Alaska changed my life. Suddenly, I was in a one-room schoolhouse with grades one through six all taught together, and I was the only native English speaker in my class. I didn't fit in and I didn't make friends; I was too different, and unlike the other children there, I had parents.

Besides, I was good at school; this was a big issue for children who were struggling with the basics of speaking English. I was seen as privileged (and compared to them, I was.) So I was isolated, and very lonely. However, along with being encouraged to read books to the kids who were having trouble learning to read, I was given carte blanche to read anything I wanted, any time I wanted. This took the place of most of my classwork. I did my required math, and then I was left to my own devices.

This was wonderful in two ways—first, the missionaries who'd been dorm parents before my parents took over had been science fiction and mystery readers, and had left their extensive collection of books behind. I read most of them, in spite of the fact that most were written for adults. Second, the boys dorm had an enormous collection of National Geographic magazines from the 1800s and early to middle 1900s, and I read

all of those, too. Science fiction and National Geographic both had a special resonance for me, because I was in an alien culture, completely cut off from the world I had know up to the age of nine. I absorbed myself in other alien cultures, fascinated by all the possibilities, consuming our world, its history, and its possible futures at a tremendous rate.

We returned to the world I had known (Ohio) in time for me to start fifth grade, but I was not the same kid who'd left. I'd lived without plumbing, hot and cold water, television, 24-hour electric, and friends who spoke English. I'd learned to carve linoleum block prints, run a hand printing press, weave a fishing net, walk in snow shoes, ski, drive a snowmobile and a boat with an outboard motor and a dog team, shoot a gun, paddle a kayak, set nets for salmon, and countless other real-life skills that meant survival. I'd learned to read for entertainment. And I'd been cut loose from the lock-step educational model I'd left behind. I never bothered trying to get back into step again.

From fifth grade on, I read my textbooks when I brought them home for the first time, then never bothered with them again. I took a cold and distant view of homework; my opinion was that if teachers weren't good enough at what they did to teach me what they wanted to know in the many hours a day that I was at school, why should I bother with their crap in my own time? Unless a grade rode on the homework, I didn't do it. What I did with my own time was teach myself. I learned to roller skate, hike, read maps, sew, draw, paint, do various crafts.

And then my folks took us down to Central America, where for seventh grade, I went to the Friendly Hippie School (actually called the Costa Rica Academy) in San Jose, where I learned to build geodesic domes, create my own cartoon characters, unlock the mysteries of the Mayans, design my own science experiments (teaching a parrot to talk and determining how long it took ants to find and clear measured amounts of sugar from different locations in and around our home), and other goodies

way, way outside the normal US factory-school curriculum. The librarian turned me on to Tolkein. I was the only missionary kid in with a bunch of kids who thought I was weird. I finished my school year early and became the youngest student to that point to be accepted into the Instituto de Lengua Española. My fellow students there ranged in age from twenty to seventy. I was fourteen. It was a tremendous learning experience. After my trimester there, we moved to Chiquimula, Guatemala.

And I homeschooled (a horrible, horrible Christian correspondence course that had no redeeming value whatsoever, except that it was so easy I could knock out a day's work in about half an hour). I attended the Quaker school next door, which was taught in Spanish—I found the challenge of doing classwork in another language much better than the awful correspondence course. And in my free time, and I had a lot of it, I unravelled a moth-eaten cable-knit sweater and taught myself to knit by watching the stitches come undone. My first project was a very small cable-knit sweater. I taught myself to read basic music and play the piano in the mission, and hung in the hammock reading the stacks of ancient Readers' Digest Condensed Books and magazine issues there. I discovered both Cherry Ames nurse novels and Charles Dickens in the mission library, and read those by the pound, and then tripped over Cervantes and the magnificent **Don Quixote**. In the evenings, I sat around and argued politics with the David the Socialist Draft Dodger (AKA concientious objector) who thought communism was a great idea, and fell madly in love with Loren the Vietnam Vet who was fresh from the war and suffering from shell shock, and who never knew of my wild adoration. At least I hope he didn't, poor guy. They were both mission volunteers, and when they went, another batch came.

And then there was the earthquake. Feb. 4rd, 1976. BIG earthquake. Devastating. We ended up back in the US, back in Ohio, and as far as anything like regular education was

concerned, I was completely broken. Don’t get me wrong. I made great grades. But it was a game, and I played it like a game. I read the books I wanted to read in class, I did only the homework that was required to pass the course, I studied for the teachers I liked and blew off the teachers I didn’t, I took courses that interested me regardless of the college-prep value, and kicked around in summer school with my friends simply because we could rack up extra credits toward graduation that way. I had no intention of wasting my time in college; I knew I’d had enough of sitting in desks and being talked at. I had a couple of great teachers, a pretty good pool of good ones, and the usual execrable disasters, but I knew by then that my life was going in a different direction. For fun, I taught myself to play guitar, and I wrote notebooks full of dreadful, angst-ridden songs. I had a few friends (some of whom are still friends today), I hiked the hills around our house in the country, and I read. Everything. I finished off most of our school library, and became friends with the librarian. I joined the Science Fiction Book Club. I ordered everything that hinted that it might contain questionable content. I devoured anything with words, in any subject, any genre.

I was established as a reader, I knew how to find out whatever I wanted to learn by reading and then applying what I read, and I’d determined that I was going to be famous. I didn’t care whether it was as an artist or a musician, just so long as fame was in my future. I tried out dramatic signatures on my teachers. (The John Adams clone signature didn’t go over too well.) My junior/senior English teacher had us keep a notebook, in which we had to write five pages a day. Didn’t matter what we wrote, but by the end of the semester, the notebook had to be full. I’d always written, I’d always received positive attention and praise for doing it, but that was the moment in which I discovered I could write in bulk. It had never occurred to me to do that before.

It took me years and a bad marriage to come back to what I'd learned about writing pages per day, but I did eventually get there.

And here.

Contents © Holly Lisle. https://hollylisle.com All Rights Reserved