

AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF A **BOOK** JUNKIE

Book Savvy Cynthia Lee Katona 2005

No one is a born reader; sometimes it just looks that way. We all expect the pert little girl who grows up in a perfectly civilized household—surrounded by colorful and enticing books, with parents who read to her every night before she goes to sleep and lovingly organize regular outings to the library (capped off with a stop at the ice cream store)—to grow up to be an avid reader. But the remarkable thing is that lots and lots of children who don't grow up in such nurturing and cultured environments still grow up to love books and reading, sometimes acquiring the passion a bit later in life, and sometimes in the most unusual of ways.

I am a good example of a **book** addict who grew up in a home that some folks would call “deprived,” who didn't get her first “hit” of fiction until she was fourteen and wasn't thoroughly “hooked” on books until long after she graduated from college. My story is proof positive that **book** addiction can happen to anyone, anytime. Of course, I hope that you have already “got the habit” and that you are already seriously “addicted,” but if you're not already “under the influence” I would love to be your “connection” to the world of books. Think of me as your friendly neighborhood **book** “pusher.”

I grew up in the 1950s, before the era of politically correct language, as what people used to call “poor white trash.” Back then, lots of kids growing up in inner-city Los Angeles could answer to that *sobriquet*. I came by the title honestly, being the “illegitimate” child of a waitress and a gambling man (civil weddings having no cachet in the Catholic Church, as the nuns continually reminded me). I had uncles who would drive all the way from LA to Georgia on long weekends just to bring back a little real moonshine, and who thought there was nothing more glorious than finding a good bit of road kill, fresh enough to barbecue in Griffith Park. I was half-Sicilian

and one-sixteenth Sioux, and I didn't know enough to check off the "Caucasian" box on official forms until I was a teenager.

I hasten to add that I was not an unhappy child—quite the opposite. My world was full of colorful distractions: Hollywood back in the 1950s and early 1960s was really Hollywood, swarming with big screen immortals. On my many youthful excursions to the Boulevard of "Stars," I was as likely at Schwab's Drugstore to run into Moses (or Charlton Heston, as some people called him then) as I was likely to see an aging Tarzan (Johnny Weissmuller). I ate my lunches at the Hollywood Cemetery sitting on the bench/monument of Tyrone Power, and I could bike to the Capitol Records Building on Vine, go into a booth, and listen to the latest 45 rpm. NBC on Fairfax was a great place to go in the afternoon and cadge tickets to be in the audience in of one of the many live kid shows, like *Howdy Doody*. At ten, I was yo-yo champion of Los Angeles; I had a half-page photo of myself "walking the dog" in the *Los Angeles Herald*. My philandering father had taught me to play a mean game of blackjack, and my mom waitressed at DuPar's in Farmer's Market, where I could always depend on the gals to sneak me an ice cream sundae. Muscle Beach was just a bus ride away, and the summers were hot. Believe me, there was plenty for a latchkey kid to do. But reading definitely wasn't in the mix. I do not, in fact, remember ever seeing a single **book** in any of my various apartments or halfway houses, not even the *de rigueur* King James Bible.

Thank goodness, the nuns of Immaculate Heart taught me to read, entirely against my will, around 1957. I had no idea what the skill might be good for, but I was sure that it was easier to learn to read than to brook the wrath of Sister St. Francis Cabrini. The nuns' attitude toward books was rather daunting, though. Books were objects of extreme personal hygiene; the nuns were more concerned that books had no bumped corners or folded pages than they were with whether students were enjoying them or not. When it came to books, the nuns gave me an exaggerated respect for the physical object but no understanding or love for what was contained inside. Books became, for me, simply another occasion of sin (cleanliness and godliness being definitely intertwined), not conveyors of joy, or leisure, or happiness, or any other pleasant thing. And yet somehow, by the time I graduated from eighth grade I could read. The nuns, God bless them, had taught me to read, and read well, and read phonetically. I was technically literate, and for this I will be forever grateful.

So at fourteen, I was able to read but unable to figure out why I should bother. I was not, thankfully, without glimmerings of imagination, though. My long-gone biological father, a first-generation Sicilian, who had been

functionally illiterate in both his native language and in English, had not been stupid, however, or without a sense of drama and a flair for the fantastic. So while I did not grow up with the classic stories like E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* or Dr. Seuss's *Sneetches*, I did grow up with incredible, and sometimes morbid, stories of my father's own devising. Every night before I went to bed I would ask him what I should dream about, and his answers were something that would no doubt have made the Brother's Grimm quite content.

I also had the movies. My best friend's older brother was an usher at the Pantages Theatre, and I saw every major movie released from 1956 to 1962, sometimes many times. I can't even count the number of times I watched *West Side Story* and cried till I was weak, or saw *House on Haunted Hill* and marveled over the skeleton that dangled over the audience's heads.

However, when I was fourteen my life was forever changed, and I could not have become more desperately miserable. My mother remarried; I suddenly got a twelve-year-old stepbrother; my beloved dog and all my precious belongings were left behind; my new "family" moved to the incredibly retro, one-theater suburb of Castro Valley, in northern California; I was thrown unceremoniously into public schools; and everything I knew as real life was pretty much over. Little did I know then that this new life would be the making of me.

When high school started the following fall, I discovered, much to my surprise, that I was two years ahead of the kids in public school; my teachers thought I was smart. My Cs and Ds were suddenly coming up As, and I found that I kinda liked not sitting in the "dumb row." At home, when I locked myself up angrily day after day in my room, my amazing stepfather, who was trying valiantly to get me out of my deeply flamboyant teenage depression, started to give me best-sellers to read. It was totally inappropriate stuff for a virginal Catholic innocent like myself—Nevil Shute's pot-boiler *On the Beach*, Kyle Onstott's slave-trade novel *Mandingo*, and John O'Hara's seductive *Butterfield Eight*. Goodness, how I enjoyed reading them, although I certainly wouldn't let my stepdad know. Hmmm . . . books were sexy, and my stepdad was sorta cool. I wasn't really sure what I could do with that information.

And then I was put in Advanced Placement English at Castro Valley High, where I had the most inspiring teachers. I imagine many people can trace some of the good things in their lives to a caring teacher, and I'm no exception. I remember particularly Mr. Rankin; he was a short, mesomorphic sort of fellow, a wrestling coach as well as an aesthete. He encouraged us—in fact, he required us—to mark in our books, which was extremely

painful to me after all the teachings of the nuns. I still have my copy of 1984, which I read and discussed with much delight in his class, and I am amazed at what a thin, faint line I could make with a ruler and a pencil back then. It can barely be seen today, and I doubt it was much more apparent at the time. Mr. Rankin taught me to “savage” the physical book but to love the characters, ideas, and words contained within.

There was also the remarkable Ms. Butler, who chose me to be Juliet in the school production of *Romeo and Juliet*, mostly because of my great Roman nose, but partly because she was trying to teach me to love literature in the form of drama. Having seen *West Side Story* innumerable times, I was totally prepared for the role.

The lack of things to do in my adopted hometown, my new “smart” friends, and the guidance of my stepdad and my teachers were slowly changing me. So, when I was almost sixteen, it seemed natural that I take a good-paying part-time job at the Alameda County Library as a page (a book shelve). It is difficult now to credit the quiet, reverential attitude toward books in American libraries in the early 1960s. It was the nuns all over again. So for the next seven years I worked my way through school and up through the library system, by taking the oddest jobs available there. I rode on the bookmobile, taking books to the folks in low-security prisons, juvenile-delinquent holding tanks, and county hospitals. I eventually became a patient librarian at Fairmont Hospital, one of the last residential hospitals in California. There I donned a mask to take books to the TB ward, ran reading groups for drug addicts, and read stories to the quadriplegics coming back, in alarmingly large numbers, from the Vietnam War. My life was full of books, but not necessarily full of reading. I knew that Shakespeare was shelved in the Dewey Decimal 800s, but I had still read only one of his plays.

Between my stepdad and my teachers, college was a given. So off I went to California State University at Hayward—the first person, not to mention the first woman, in my entire family ever to graduate from high school, let alone go on to college. Not being born to academia, I signed up as a poly sci major, because it had the shortest registration lines. I was still not “hooked” on books, and I didn’t become an English major until my senior year, and only then because that was the major with the fewest required units. I had a rather pragmatic view about getting a degree and getting out of college as quickly as possible.

Once again, amazing teachers made all the difference. In my senior year of college I had to scurry to get all my English credits finished, and in the process I found my intellectual home. Mr. Bevin introduced me to Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Professor Rosenbaum gave me

back the Bible as literature, Ms. Standiforth showed me the detective nature of research, and Professor Markos guided me so tenderly and expeditiously through my master's thesis that I had my master's degree in a mere two years. I graduated long before I was really ready to leave, but I had learned one incredibly important thing from college—that my real education was just beginning. I was hooked on books, and thirty years later still have an ongoing and expensive habit. (If you're going to mark your books . . . you have to buy them.)

As you can see, never did a more unlikely soul become a professor of English. And like any late convert to a powerful religion, I am the most rabid practitioner of all, proselytizing my life away, trying to get others to join my sect, and unhappy until I can convince every single human on earth to be a reader. Hence the **book** you have in your hands—*Book Savvy*.