

## **The Books that Find Us and the People We Meet Along the Way**

*“Perhaps there is some secret sort of homing instinct in books that brings them to their perfect readers. How delightful if that were true.”*

The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society

### *An Encounter with a Stranger*

She was surprised to find the Charles Singleton translation of “The Divine Comedy” at her local bookstore. Her professor preferred it to the more affordable translation she’d read in college. She pulled the copy of the “Inferno” from the shelf, \$19.00. “Midway in the journey of our life I found myself in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost.” After reading a few pages, she tucked the book under her arm and continued browsing. She moved about the bookstore pulling titles she’d read about in book reviews or titles that captured her attention.

“I noticed your copy of Dante,” the man said.

Pulling it from beneath her arm, she showed it to him.

“I’ve never seen that translation.”

“My professor recommended it when I was in college but didn’t assign it because it was too expensive.”

He was probably 20 years older than she was. Attractive. Salt and pepper hair, well groomed, jeans and a nicely pressed, button-down shirt.

She read him a passage from page 3. “It was the beginning of the morning, and the sun was mounting with the stars that were with it when Divine

Love first set those beautiful things in motion, so that the hour of the day and the sweet season gave me cause for good hope. . . .”

“I’d like to repay the recommendation,” he said. He led her to the fiction section.

“Do you know this author?”

She looked at the cover with an image of a tarot card. Robertson Davies.

“No. I’ve never heard of him.”

“He’s Canadian. I’ve read all his work. I think you might like this one. A wonderful female character, a scholar about your age. He’s just magnificent. Once you start reading him you won’t be able to stop.”

“Thank you.”

He placed “The Rebel Angels” in her hand and then drifted away, leaving her to wonder his name, his interests, his story; giving her a writer whose every word she would read, and whom she would one day see interviewed at the Herbst Theatre in San Francisco not long before his death.

### *Renee and Becoming a Reader*

How do books find us? And more mysteriously, how does a life of reading begin? Can I attribute my love of reading Robertson Davies to my beginnings with Dick and Jane, to Dr. Seuss, to “The Little House on the Prairie,” to the illustrated book of fairy tales I read over and over again?

I often ask people if there is one book that made them a reader. People who come from reading families usually can’t pinpoint one book; reading was always a part of their family life, practically in their blood. People

who don't come from reading families usually have a story about that one book that began their reading life.

And so it was with me.

Let me say that all the Nancy Drew mysteries I read when I was in grammar school do not count. Neither would I say do "Charlotte's Web," "Black Beauty," "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" or the Pippi Longstocking and the Ramona books.

My reading life began with a girl I met in the seventh grade. Her mother was a voracious reader. When I'd visit Renee's house her mother was always sitting at the kitchen counter with a paperback book and a cup of coffee in an ugly brown mug, the kind gas stations gave free to customers. At the time I must have thought her behavior unusual. I'd seen other parents of my friends reading books; it was just something my parents didn't do, although they did read the newspaper every day. Renee's mother was a housekeeper at a motel not far from where they lived, which I also found unusual. Most of the mothers in my neighborhood stayed at home or were either nurses or teachers. And the mothers who didn't work outside the home, volunteered. Renee's mother also seemed more cool than my mom. She didn't fuss, she didn't worry about beds being made and furniture being dusted, and she liked the music we listened to. We'd put on a Creedence or Beatles record and she'd be dancing with us. Years later I would learn that it wasn't coffee in her mug. Years later her 18-year-old son would disappear and she and her husband would excise alcohol from their lives.

The first book Renee gave me was “Flowers for Algernon” by Daniel Keyes. This is the book I attribute to beginning my reading life. It was first published in 1966 and has never been out of print. It’s the story of Charlie, a man with a low IQ, who participates in a scientific experiment to make him smart. I love stories that chronicle how a person learns to read, to love language, to develop a self, a mind. Frederick Douglass. Malcolm X. Eldridge Cleaver. Maya Angelou. Especially Maya when she writes about learning Shakespeare’s sonnet: “When in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes, I all alone bewep my outcast state. . . .” How a white man from England in the 1600’s could connect to a poor black child in Stamps, Arkansas slayed me. But reading the works of Douglass, Malcolm X and Angelou were years away from my middle school self.

The sharing of “Flowers for Algernon” gave me another gift, a library card. I was not raised in a house filled with books or with parents who frequented the public library. We did have a set of encyclopedias and Childcraft books. When I was in elementary school, I especially loved the volume with poetry and Aesop’s fables. “Who has seen the wind? Neither I nor you: But when the leaves hang trembling, the wind is passing through. Who has seen the wind? Neither you nor I: But when the trees bow down their heads, The wind is passing by.” I don’t know why this poem has stayed with me for all my years. Maybe because when the branches on the trees sway and the snow whips and swirls, I can and cannot see the wind.

The summer between seventh and eighth grade I’d ride my sturdy blue bike with its sturdy metal basket to the public library and comb the

shelves in the teen section for books. “Lisa Bright and Dark.” “Girl, Interrupted.” All the books by S.E. Hinton. And lots of fiction about the perils of using drugs. “Reds.” “Turn Me On.” In one of those books a girl cuts off a man’s penis. I wish I could remember how I thought about that act. I’d probably never seen a man’s penis and I was definitely unaware of people cutting them off as acts of punishment, revenge, power. Yet why do I remember that the girl carried it around in her purse? I was reading, but I wasn’t reading. Learning the elements and archetypes that shape stories was still miles and miles away. But I did have an inkling that something was amiss about the books I read. On one of my library runs I took a stack of books to the counter to be checked out; the young male clerk looked at me and asked if I ever read anything else besides this stuff. I’m sure I turned red and looked bewildered; I didn’t understand what he meant.

No one was directing my reading. And so it continued. All the classic children’s book never crossed my path. Not one Winnie-the-Pooh. Not one Secret Garden or Little Women. Not “The Velveteen Rabbit” nor “Anne of Green Gables.” I didn’t know that “Alice in Wonderland” or “The Wizard of Oz” were books first. The only classic literature I remember being exposed to in junior high school was Greek and Roman mythology.

My reading life in high school also was without direction. While students in other high schools were reading “Catcher in the Rye,” “To Kill a Mockingbird,” “Of Mice and Men,” “The Grapes of Wrath,” “Animal Farm,” “The Scarlet Letter,” “1984,” and short story anthologies, I was

reading Leon Uris, Irving Wallace, Irwin Shaw and James Michener. My freshman English teacher did have us read “The Merchant of Venice” and “The Hobbit,” both of which I found difficult and not enjoyable, and “The Lord of the Flies,” which traumatized me. I did, however, read a few books that I loved and have stayed with me: Margaret Mitchell’s “Gone with the Wind,” Benedict and Nancy Freeman’s “Mrs. Mike,” Ann Fairbairn’s “Five Smooth Stones,” David Westheimer’s “My Sweet Charlie” and Joseph Hyams “A Field of Buttercups,” the first of what would become a long list of books about the Holocaust.

My only other memorable high school reading experience was a bit upsetting. A friend of my mother’s who read a lot gave me a copy of a Sydney Sheldon novel. I don’t remember the title and I’m pretty sure I didn’t make it past the first torrid sex scene. I do have a clear memory of wondering why my mother’s friend thought I would like it. (I did eventually read a Sydney Sheldon novel, cover to cover, but only one, really!)

My parents did not go to college, nor did their parents. Although my father only read one book in his life, “Ivanhoe,” he was the kind of person who could learn how to do things without too much help. If the appliances broke, he would get out the instructions and fix them. If I needed help with my math homework, he’d read the textbook and show me how to solve a problem. He was fearless, and most of all, he was kind. He was what many men in the 1950’s aspired to be: a good provider. He retired from the phone company after 31 years of service in 1988. But he wasn’t intellectually curious and he never really understood my reading

life. He did, however, want me to go to college, but given that I attended a high school in a neighborhood of mostly blue collar, non-college educated families, he was unaware of how to help me. I did take my SAT's, I did apply to San Jose State University, I did get accepted, but I didn't go. I wanted to be out in the world. I wanted to work and earn money. I wanted to get an apartment with my friends.

Straight out of high school I got a job at a printing company in the bindery making \$5/hour when minimum wage was \$2.30. By summer's end I bought a used 1972 Toyota Celica, butter yellow with red and black stripes, and moved out of my parent's home and into a roomy 3-bedroom, 2 bath apartment in a complex with a swimming pool for \$240 a month with two friends from high school. I was eighteen and learning what it meant to be a responsible adult. In a year, after being laid off and told by the bindery supervisor that I should go to college, I was back home, working for an electronics company for minimum wage, and ready to take my first steps to attending my first semester at the local community college: A semester that changed my life, and my reading life.

### *Community College and a Kindred Spirit*

I once saw an interview with the comedian/actor/writer Steve Martin where he recounted his life correlative to his relationships with women. The Bernadette years. The Victoria years. The Anne years. Serial monogamy does establish a good timeline, as do schools, jobs, and places travelled. But so do books. When I read "Dreams of My Father" by Barack Obama I immediately felt a kinship because our lives were shaped

by the same books, the same words, the same sentences and paragraphs, thoughts and ideas. The time a book enters a life is almost as important as the book itself.

I was nineteen when I walked up the 384 steps to Ohlone Community College in the foothills of Mission San Jose in Fremont, California. When I called to get information on how to enroll, I was told it would be good to meet with an advisor. I was apprehensive. I did not know what to expect. After reviewing my SAT scores and noting the high school I attended, the advisor suggested I take a pre-freshman composition course. “Your scores indicate that you could begin with freshman composition, but you’ve been out of school for more than a year.” She also advised taking an introduction to philosophy class with one of the most beloved professors on campus. I complied.

In 1977 attending community college was nearly free. My only expenses were my books and parking sticker, and the costs of owning a car, paying my parents \$100 in rent, buying food (I was vegetarian at the time so I cooked all my own meals), and paying for clothes and entertainment. Fortunately, the electronics company I worked for let me continue to work part-time.

I had done a bit of reconnaissance prior to the day of my first English class so I would not get lost. I arrived early and took a seat near the front of the class to what I assumed would be the professor’s right. When she arrived, with her knocked about, leather saddlebag briefcase, I couldn’t

believe my eyes. She was so young, so confident, so smart. By the end of class I had completely fallen under her spell.

I'd never wondered where language originated until sitting in Professor Cynthia Katona's English class. I don't think I'd seriously wondered about anything. I just regurgitated what teachers put in front of me. I distinctly remember thinking that I'd been asleep for most of my life. I knew nothing of a life of the mind, of an intellectual life, of what it means to be a scholar. But my whole world changed when my philosophy class exposed me to Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Marcus Aurelius, and my English class exposed me to the rhetorical modes and writers who taught me how to read—actively, curiously, breathtakingly. I did not keep the assigned text but I do remember reading Joan Didion's essay "On Character" many times. I felt as if she were describing my paternal grandfather. I also remember finding Didion's collection of essays "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" at the college bookstore and buying the first of many purchases of her work.

While at Ohlone, I took every literature class offered. Introduction to Literature. A Survey of American Literature. A Survey of British Literature. Shakespeare. The Short Story. Mythology. Censorship, Obscenity and Literature. The Gothic Novel. Poetry. The Bible as Literature. Everything I read, from Homer and Shakespeare to Nathaniel Hawthorne, D.H. Lawrence, Vladimir Nabokov, Mary Shelley and Tom Robbins, shaped and reshaped my curiosity, my desires, my relationships, my conversations, my experience of the world. I fell deeply, deeply in love with reading and fascinated by the narrative patterns and tropes that

storytellers have imagined and re-imagined time after time after time. I also fell in love with how writers use language to tell their tales, express ideas, provoke, evoke, cause me to laugh, cry, rage, feel superior, feel stupid, feel compassion and find understanding. I also fell in love with the mechanics of writing, how words, sentences, paragraphs, characters, settings, events, dialog, point-of-view, symbols, and action come together to breathe life.

“My name is Albert Schweigen and I exist in time.” After reading stories by Hemingway and Kafka in my Short Story class, this was the sentence that introduced me to John Updike. The simplicity and obviousness of the declaration made me stop and read the sentence aloud. Yes. My name is Linda Moyer and I, too, exist in time. What I didn’t realize is that this sentence begins a narrative about Albert’s struggle to understand the murder of an acquaintance, which was a struggle I, too, was navigating. “I do not understand the connection between last night and this morning, but there seems to be one.” Yes. Exactly. Another sentence expressing what I was feeling. “Years and years later, when I taught “The Music School” as an assignment during a graduate seminar, my professor scoffed at Updike’s “romantic” language, his beautiful sentences, his elaborate prose. How could he think such a thing? He then read a passage he found particularly overwritten: “From all directions sounds—of pianos, oboes, clarinets—arrive like hints of another world, a world where angels fumble, pause, and begin again. . . .” I’m sure my hackles were up, but I tried to remain calm. I took a deep breath and argued that beauty and love and how we find it among life’s irruptions and disconnections is how the

narrator finds consolation and meaning in living. The story alone, its beautiful prose, its search for connection is connection. Although he listened to my argument, I don't think I convinced him. Rereading the story I am so thankful that this story found me after an acquaintance had been brutally murdered. Most of all I am grateful to Updike for the way he wove disparate elements and events to the closing, consoling paragraph: "The world is the host: it must be chewed. I am content here in this school. My daughter emerges from her lesson. Her face is fat and satisfied, refreshed, hopeful; her pleased smile, biting her lower lip, pierces my heart, and I die (I think I am dying) at her feet." Though I was not a parent at the time, I, too, died at her feet, at her innocence and at the narrator's finding connection in his particular life and the whole of life.

*"The Scarlet Letter" and "The Fear of Women"*

It was not easy for me to leave the radiance of learning I experienced while attending Ohlone, especially under the guidance of professors who encouraged me to pursue my education and gave me an even deeper love of reading. But on I stumbled to California State University at Hayward and to classes on Dante, the Romantic Era, Black Literature, Restoration Drama, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky and the Great American Novel. All the professors were men, all seemed disenchanted with teaching and with the thinness of educations. I will never forget Dr. Friedman chastising the entire class for knowing next to nothing about the French Revolution after being assigned Stendahl's "The Red and Black." His chastisement was a great lesson I carry with me. Better to

meet people where they are and share your knowledge than to belittle them for what you think they should know. This lesson served me well while teaching “Night” by Elie Wiesel and a few of my students knew nothing of the Holocaust.

But Cal State Hayward did connect me with two professors and books that are embedded deep in my psyche. They emerged not from literature classes but from classes offered by the Women’s Studies department: *The History of Women* gave me Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own,” “A Vindication of the Rights of Women” by Mary Wollstonecraft and Jane Addams’ “Twenty Years at Hull House.” The course *Women and Violence* gave me Betty Friedan’s “The Feminist Mystique,” Susan Brownmiller’s “Against Our Will,” Kate Millett’s “Sexual Politics,” Sandra Butler’s “The Conspiracy of Silence: The Trauma of Incest,” and “Woman Hating” by Andrea Dworkin. But more than the reading and discussions of these seminal feminist texts, my professor let me pursue an idea that felt as if it were written on my body since reading Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Scarlet Letter.”

Hester comforted and counseled them, as best she might. She assured them, too, of her firm belief that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven’s own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and women on a surer ground of mutual happiness. Earlier in life, Hester had vainly imagined that she herself might be the destined prophetess, but had long since recognized the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with a life-long worry. The angel and apostle of the coming revelation must be a woman, . . . .”

I did not read “The Scarlet Letter” until I was 21. It horrified me that men could even imagine putting a woman to death for having a child conceived out of wedlock. What fed this behavior? Why such fear of female sexuality? Why such fear of women and their ability to bear children, something that is usually looked upon as a miracle? So I presented my thesis to exam the fear of women in literature. Which led me to a book published in 1968: “The Fear of Woman: An Inquiry into the enigma of Woman and why men through the ages have both loved and dreaded her” by Wolfgang Lederer, M.D. Lederer.

This is the story that never leaves me. From chapter 19: Envy and Loathing–The Patriarchal Revolt:

“The Ona of Tierra de Fuego, for instance, having lived long enough in abject fear of and subjugation by their women and their women’s magic ability to cause sickness and death, finally carried out the clever plan of killing all the initiated [menstruating] women, and then setting up a secret magical society of men. This immediately placed them in a position to intimidate not only the little girls, who were the sole survivors of the massacre, but also all future women.”

Once upon a time men were unaware of their role in procreation. And then they realized the power of the phallus and semen. Once upon a time woman created life and then myths arose where Athena was born from the head of Zeus, where gods disguised themselves to mate/rape human women, where societies designated women and children as property, where women were forbidden to take part in civic life, where women were blamed for male weakness and mortality, where women were stoned for adultery and banished and shamed for having a child out of wedlock,

where matriarchies became patriarchies, where women lost their power and men ruled by fear. Hawthorne imagined a world where men do not fear women. I've often wondered if Margaret Atwood read Lederer's book.

### *A Reading Buddy*

After finishing my Bachelor's degree and a few semesters of graduate school, I settled into work steeped in the graphic design industry and met a woman who loved reading as much as I did. She had majored in art but was working as a sales rep for one of the high-end printers in San Francisco. She was tall, thin, Italian-American beautiful and East Coast smart. She had relocated from Cape Cod to California with her fisherman boyfriend and bought a house on the coast in the small community of Montara. They were both voracious readers. She was a few years older than I was but she seemed much more grown up. I don't think I knew anyone my age who could even afford to buy a house who wasn't married. Our friendship kicked off when she saw me reading "Jitterbug Perfume" by Tom Robbins while waiting to do a press check. She, too, was a fan. We immediately fell into a conversation about writers and books we loved.

She introduced me to writers I was completely unaware of: Margaret Atwood, Jim Harrison, Richard Ford, Louise Erdrich, Michael Dorris, Anne Tyler, Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison, Jay McInerney, books that were being published under a series called "American Contemporary Writers." We also attended the City Arts & Lecture series at the Herbst Theatre in

San Francisco, seeing many of the writers we admired: Robertson Davies, Margaret Atwood, Marge Piercy, Joan Didion, William Styron, Barbara Kingsolver, Fran Leibowitz, Molly Ivins, A.S. Byatt, Michael Ondaatje, Amy Tan. Reading and talking about books kept us sane in a world that often felt ridiculous. How many times did we would look at each other in a meeting and wonder why missing a deadline was being discussed as if it were the end of the world? Producing a marketing brochure is not life and death, especially when we knew they would end up in a landfill somewhere or would have to be redone because it was rushed to the finish line, inaccurate and incomplete. Eventually our professional paths diverged but our friendship endured, all the while sharing books of fiction and nonfiction that reflected our interests and attention.

### *The Man on the Train*

How do books find us? Why do we choose to read J.K. Rowling but not C.S. Lewis? Why do some people only read mysteries or science fiction or nonfiction and yet others read across all genres?

When I was in my mid 20s commuting by train from the peninsula to San Francisco I was constantly looking at what people were reading—and making judgements about them. *Wall Street Journal* readers, good. Romance novel readers, bad. *New Yorker* magazine readers, good. Tabloid readers, bad. I knew my thoughts were those of a snob but I couldn't understand why a person would want to read a Harlequin romance when you could read Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte or George Eliot. And then I

met a man who read a lot of self-help books. Another genre I had no use for.

Every day I would see him emerge from the park in his suit and walk across the train tracks and stand with a book in his hand waiting for the train to arrive. Every day I would wonder what he was reading. From the first moment I saw him I knew we were destined to meet and that our lives would become connected. I was in my late 20's and he was in his mid-40's. When I finally got up the nerve to sit across from him, I was surprised to see that he was reading a self-help book on procrastination. I don't know what compelled me to engage him in conversation but I asked if he no longer procrastinated. He laughed and said, I read a lot of self-help books but they don't really help. I still procrastinate. I couldn't help but laugh. I couldn't help but fall in love.

Sharing a book with someone I admire and whose opinion I respect is a scary, intimate act. When I was in high school I would, on occasion, take BART into San Francisco. I'd look at the people in their work costumes commuting to work and feel as if I were looking at strangled lives. Every day the same routine. Catch the train at 8 and arrive at the office at 8:30. Catch the train at 5 and arrive back to home at 5:30. At 17, I didn't understand how organizing and comforting such routine can be. I also didn't understand that taking public transportation can be a way to meet the only lawyer who argued an anti-trust case before the United States Supreme Court before passing the bar exam. This was the man reading the self-help books and who humbly claimed "it's been all downhill since then."

One conversation led to more conversations which led to becoming train buddies. As I suspected, he was a fellow reader. He was also a deep listener. What attracts one person to another? It wasn't until I turned 21 that I experienced finding a man sexy. He was tall with an olive complexion and penetrating blue eyes and a quiet intelligence that causes a room of people to take notice. The man sitting across from me on the train did not have blue eyes, nor was he tall nor olive complected but his intelligence, his listening and conversational skills . . . I was a goner.

It took months of train rides and rambling conversations before I decided to share a book with him. It happened after we'd both read the article "The Warrior" in *Esquire* magazine by George Leonard. One of the jobs I had while attending college was working with blind and deaf adolescents at the California School for the Blind after it moved from Berkeley to Fremont. I was responsible for helping with their homework. Most of the time, however, they just wanted to talk. So I made a deal with them. I'd read a story that we'd discuss and then they could talk about anything they wanted. I'd recently read Kurt Vonnegut's story "Harrison Bergeron" in my Introduction to Literature class and thought it would be an interesting story to read to the kids. Before I finished the first paragraph about the Handicapper General and how everyone had finally become equal, one of the boys asked: "Does that mean there would be no more beautiful people in the world?" How could a blind person understand the inequality of beauty? Luckily, no one could see the tears streaming down my face.

I did not share “Harrison Bergeron” with the man on the train but a book I found worn and alone on a shelf in the community room of the school’s dormitory: “The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle” by J. Glenn Gray with an introduction by Hannah Arendt. It had been left by one of the counselors who had studied philosophy at Berkeley in the late 1960s. Why I decided to read this book at the age of 22 I cannot say, but most probably it was the final line of the blurb on the back cover: “. . . the average reader will find in it the most conclusive evidence why war must not have a future, for it shows in detail what war does in degrading and dehumanizing the souls of men.”

The giving of this book to the man on the train began the giving of other books. His first gift to me in response to sharing Gray’s book was a book of essays by Gretel Ehrlich, “The Solace of Open Spaces.” He told me if I wasn’t captivated by the first sentence, the first paragraph, he would never recommend another book. Captivated. Entranced. Intrigued. Jealous of her powers of description. “It’s May and I’ve just awakened from a nap, curled against the sagebrush the way my dog taught me to sleep—sheltered from the wind. A front is pulling the huge sky over me, and from the dark a hailstone has hit me on the head. I’m trailing a band of two thousand sheep across of stretch of Wyoming badlands, a fifty-mile trip that takes five days because sheep shade up in hot sun, and won’t budge until it’s cool. . . .” I’ve often wondered if the man on the train, like me, looks forward to each new work published by Ehrlich. I will die not knowing. After three years, my life took a new direction which ended

my rides on the train and my connection to the man who shared my love of books and reading.

### *Books as Talismans*

Nothing makes me feel more gratified than when I connect a friend or even a stranger with a book or writer I think they'll like. Sometimes I think it's why I've been placed on the planet, but there is always a risk. When I first saw her, she was sitting alone with a book eating breakfast in the dining room at Rancho La Puerta. She was old, in her late 70s, and after asking if I could join her I learned that she and her professor husband had fled Nazi Germany in 1939. They escaped to St. Louis where she and her husband lived a comfortable life. She was small and round, round face, round eyes, round body. Her hair was the darkest black and her eyes the brightest blue. Beneath her face powder, freckles and age spots sprinkled her cheeks. Pentimento. While conversing we learned that we lived within blocks of each other. She moved to the San Francisco Bay Area after her husband died to be nearer to her son. She gave me her name and address and we spoke of getting together for lunch. I loved listening to her stories. And like me, she loved to read.

After a few weeks, I called and asked if I could stop by, that I'd like to give her a book I especially liked. She lived in a building I had walked past many times. I had always thought it was populated by businesses like the floor at ground level. I was greeted by a doorman who buzzed me in and showed me to the elevator. She lived in the penthouse apartment.

When I emerged from the elevator I was taken with the largeness of the room and the view. I could almost see the Bay Bridge. She was sitting behind a desk stacked with books. We greeted each other, but I sensed something amiss. When I told her about the book I wanted to give her, she rejected it, saying that in the little time she had left she only wanted to read important books. I tried to convince her of the book's beauty but she said she had no time for fiction. It was then that I noticed the gravity of the books on her desk, Hannah Arendt, Primo Levi, Gitta Sereny. All nonfiction, all books about the Holocaust, many in German.

In the elevator, I wept. How do we measure the importance of a book? I did not see her again.

For book lovers some books become talismans. The book I wanted to give her was one of my talismans, a first novel written by a woman in her 70s that tells the story of an American couple who move to the town of Ibarra in Mexico to resurrect a copper mine abandoned by the husband's father 50 years earlier in 1910. The author, Harriet Doerr, received the National Book Award for First Book of Fiction for "Stones for Ibarra" in 1984. I cannot remember how this book found me, but it was a book I would buy again and again and give to people I thought would enjoy and appreciate it as much as I did. "Here they are, two North Americans, a man and a woman just over and just under forty, come to spend their lives in Mexico and already lost as they travel cross-country over the central plateau. The driver of the station wagon is Richard Everton, a blue-eyed, black-haired stubborn man who will die thirty years sooner than he now

imagines. On the seat beside him is his wife, Sara, who imagines neither his death nor her own, imminent or remote as they may be.”

My first talisman, however, was a book that was given to me while I was touring Europe with a group of college students in 1979. It was billed as an educational grand tour but felt more like a “if this is Tuesday it must be Belgium” experience. The group was made up of 45 students from various colleges and two Canadian women from McGill University. I immediately felt odd person out; most of the students were attending universities and were funded by their parents. I did not realize that saying I was studying at a community college said something about a person’s intelligence. I packed two books: Simone de Beauvoir’s “The Second Sex” and Henry James’ “The Portrait of a Lady.” Unlike John Irving’s “The World According to Garp,” my books did not get passed around the bus. In eight weeks we travelled to fourteen countries and twenty-eight cities. It was in Paris that one of my fellow travelers surprised me with a book that would become my first talisman: “The Little Prince” by Antoine de Saint Exupery.

“Do you know this book?” she asked as she sat next to me on the bus.

“No, I’ve never heard of it.”

“I saw it in a bookstore and hoped you hadn’t read it.” Leslie was a music major and planned to one day play french horn for a symphony orchestra. “It’s become a standard text when studying French, ‘Le Petit Prince’.” That’s how I discovered it, but I love the English translation just as much. For you,” she said, and handed me the book.

“Is it a children’s book?”

“Yes, but a children’s book every adult should read.”

And she was right.

It is my most sacred of treasures, a treasure that in 1979 cost \$1.50.

I’ve lost count of how times I have read this tale of the pilot whose plane crashes in the Sahara Desert and is visited by a very small person from Asteroid B-612. I have lost count of how many times I have purchased “The Little Prince” and how many times I have given it.

During the last week of my father’s life, I read him this story. I don’t know if he heard me, but, in truth, I was reading it for myself.

“Here, then, is a great mystery. For you who also love the little prince, and for me, nothing in the universe can be the same if somewhere, we do not know where, a sheep that we never saw has—yes or no?—eaten a rose.

Look up at the sky. Ask yourselves: Is it yes or no? Has the sheep eaten the flower? And you will see how everything changes. . . .

And no grown-up will ever understand that this is a matter of so much importance!”

Before giving me the book, Leslie inscribed it: *Linda, A small thanks for your literary guidance and unselfish friendship*. If only Leslie knew how her gift enriched my life and how her gift continues to give.

I wish I would have squirreled away twenty copies of “The Little Prince” when it still cost \$1.50 and before it had been re-translated in 2000. How

could I have imagined that in 2019 the Katharine Wood translation would sell for \$14.50 on a nowhere-place bookseller called Amazon. Fortunately, I am a person who prefers buying used books and sometimes I can still find a copy of “The Little Prince” for under \$5.

Although some of my closest friends refuse to read used books, it is a matter of pride that some of my greatest reads have been books I found for a dime or a quarter at Goodwill, Salvation Army or Friends of the Library stores: T. H. White’s “The Once and Future King,” which began my quest to seek out other imaginings of the King Arthur legend: Mary Stewart’s Merlin series, Marion Zimmer Bradley’s Avalon series, John Steinbeck’s “The Acts of King Arthur and his Noble Knights”; My entire Kurt Vonnegut collection; J.D. Salinger’s “Nine Stories”; John Updike’s short story collections; Theodore Roszak’s “Flicker”; Isak Dinesen’s “Out of Africa,” Marge Piercy’s “He, She and It,” and many more. Books are my refuge, bookstores and libraries my cathedrals.

### *Listening to the Universe*

I wish I could remember the first book I bought. I think it might have been one of the Nancy Drew mysteries. I do remember it was at a bookstore at the local shopping mall. Like most people who love to read, I love bookstores. I can spend hours browsing, taking books off the shelf and reading the blurbs and the teasing summaries. Why I never thought of working in a bookstore or owning one I attribute to my prejudices regarding retail work—selling things, making minimum wage. I didn’t realize that people who work in bookstores, or own bookstores, have one

of the best jobs in the world—until in 2002 I found myself working in a bookstore owned by former teachers in “one of the best small towns in America.”

I envy people who find their lifelong passion when young—and then pursue it without caring about what other people think. When the Loma Prieta earthquake hit in 1989 I found myself huddled beneath a drawing table at Apple Computer wondering if the building was going to come crashing down and end my existence. Only one thought held me: that I had wasted my life. I hadn't pursued the destiny I had imagined for myself, that of being a scholar, writer and community college professor. I had let my insecurities regarding my height and intelligence and my success in the graphic design and tech worlds distract me. But I promised myself that if I survived I would return to graduate school, complete my MA, and teach writing and literature at a community college.

In 1991 I found an MA program in English that was designed for working professionals at the College of Notre Dame in Belmont, CA, headed by the luminous Dr. Sylvia Rogers. Although in 1991 I was unaware of Paulo Coelho's “The Alchemist,” a fable about pursuing one's dreams, I tend to believe that meeting Dr. Rogers was the soul of the universe helping me to make a course correction to finding my true north.

There's nothing more attractive in a person than intelligence tempered with humility, curiosity, kindness, generosity, and backbone: Perfect qualities for people in positions of power who mentor. Dr. Rogers was the perfect mentor.

A question can change the way we think, and haunt us. I was twenty, taking my first college literature class, when just such a question entered my life. On the final exam, Professor Cynthia Katona asked how Vladimir Nabokov's novel "Lolita" would be changed if it had been told by Lolita rather than by Humbert Humbert. Until I read that question, I hadn't considered how point-of-view can radically change how a novel would be conceived—and read. Point-of-view in works of fiction became one of my obsessions. With every book I read I would think about how it would be different if it had been told from a different point of view—as did many contemporary writers, most fortunately for me, the writer Susan Sontag.

In Susan Sontag's novel "The Volcano Lover: A Romance" she tells a historical story from multiple points of view and in so doing deconstructs how the reader perceives the "truth" of each narrator's telling, including the author's. How this book found me brought my question full circle. When the topic of my thesis (how point-of-view in narrative changed over time) received Dr. Rogers' approval, I immediately called my first literature professor, now my lifelong friend, for her blessing. She could not have been more encouraging and supportive and also ready with the perfect novel to anchor my research. After reading "The Volcano Lover" I felt as if I'd hit the jackpot. Not only did Cynthia provide me with the perfect novel but I now had two of the women I most admired and respected directing my research and writing. After a year of research and months of writing and four rounds of editing, Dr. Rogers signed off on my thesis "Point of View and the Art of Narrative in Susan Sontag's 'The Volcano Lover: A Romance'." She then invited me to give a lecture to one

of her classes. In that classroom, in front of other students of literature, I finally felt like a true scholar.

Dr. Rogers also encouraged me to pursue my interest in Virginia Woolf. Until doing my thesis research I had only read “A Room of One’s Own.” I had no idea that she was one of the earliest novelists experimenting with point-of-view. What I learned from Woolf was that particular points-of-view in concert with each writer’s language create their own rhythm and as readers we need to give ourselves over to those rhythms if we want to hear the music.

Around the same time, in another country, writer Jeannette Winterson was pondering a similar idea, which she expressed exquisitely in “The Veil of Words” from her essay collection “Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery.” “The pace of Woolf’s writing is carefully measured. In ‘The Waves’ the pace is slow. This is not a defect. Nobody would expect to play a piece of music at twice the speed of the score and be able to enjoy it. Yet, in literature this is happening all the time. The reader chooses the pace without taking the trouble to first pick up the rhythm. To get use to a writer’s rhythm, to move with a writer’s own beat, needs a little bit of time. It means looking at the opening pages carefully. It can help to read them out loud.” I did not find this piece of writing until years after I had finished graduate school. But the universe must have been listening, because I refer to Winterson’s novel “The Passion” in my thesis, and, after reading Woolf’s entire oeuvre, “The Waves” is my favorite.

*Four Deaths and No Weddings*

The problem with changing directions nearing 40 was that it was harder to put up with the bullshit, bureaucracy and absurdly low pay proffered to part-time college instructors, especially when I'd experienced working in an environment that valued hard work, creativity and equitable remuneration. While at Apple during what felt like my thousandth meeting, the assembled constituents were failing to reach a consensus; no one wanted to compromise. A voice from the back of the room said, "Let's face it, we're sitting in a room of 'A' students and no one wants to get a 'B'." Until hearing this pronouncement, I hadn't thought about the kind of students we all may have been. While teaching at different community colleges in the San Francisco Bay Area, I experienced the complete opposite. Only some students were interested in doing the work it took to get an 'A' and most students disliked reading and disliked writing even more. What disturbed me most, however, was that somewhere between my college years and 1996, students believed that all they needed to do to pass was show up, and sometimes not even that. Dear Woody Allen, if 80% of success is just showing up, you haven't read student essays.

Until I began teaching I had not realized how much I took my reading skills and the pleasure of reading for granted. I desperately missed graduate school and the camaraderie of my fellow scholars. But teaching has its seductions, especially when observing a student's posture change, knowing that the life of the mind has been engaged. But the seduction of awakening a student's imagination was not enough for me. My teaching career ended after three years. In all that time, only one student

recommended books to me: “The Giver” by Lois Lowry, a young adult utopian/dystopian novel, and “The Reader” by Bernard Schlink, a German novel exploring how the generations after WW2 relate to the generation responsible for the horrors of the Holocaust. Both gifts. Both books I have recommended to others. Years later, while working as a school librarian, and after reading the third book of Lowry’s Giver Quartet series, I emailed her, asking if she would like to speak to the students in Haines, Alaska. Her regrets were graciously stated, as were her thanks that the students were reading and enjoying her work.

Until I began teaching I had not realized how lonely it could be, especially when most of the students sat in my classes because passing freshman composition was an unavoidable requirement. Teaching did not take me to my tribe. But if I have learned anything after 60+ years on the planet, people who read find each other, even if it’s at a gym while waiting for an aerobics class to begin or at a store in San Gregorio, California, where musicians play for tips on weekend afternoons. How could I have imagined that keeping myself sane by sweating in a gym and listening to local musicians would open my world to writers and books I’d yet to explore?

Since my under graduate years I had become a faithful *New Yorker* subscriber and always kept an issue in my bag in case I had to sit and wait. I was sitting and waiting and reading the *New Yorker* when a fellow aerobics class member asked if I’d read the essay “You’ll Never Eat Lunch on this Continent Again” by Adam Gopnik. I wasn’t sure but I did reply I was a Gopnik fan. At the next aerobics class Karen (we’d exchanged

names by then) gave me a copy of the essay and I immediately remembered. Gopnik had parodied a book about drug abuse and backstabbing in Hollywood—“You’ll Never Eat Lunch in this Town Again”—but used dinosaurs. It’s hilarious. We bonded. We’ve been tribal members ever since and still love discussing *New Yorker* articles and sharing books, one of the most recent and memorable being Edmund de Waal’s “The Hare with the Amber Eyes.”

A book shared can deepen one’s reading of a work and enrich a friendship, especially when it occurs at just the right moment. “The Hare with the Amber Eyes” found me at just the right moment, beckoning to me from Karen’s bookshelf while I slept on her foldout chair. Weirdly, it was a book Cynthia had recommended not long after its publication in 2011. And Cynthia was the reason, in 2017, I was back in the Bay Area couch-surfing at Karen’s. I had a memorial service to attend, and having once introduced Karen to Cynthia, I asked if she’d make the journey with me.

Objects tie us to the story of our lives. And objects, in and of themselves, have their own stories. It’s one of the themes in de Waal’s book as he relates the story of his family and a collection of Japanese netsuke that were passed down through five generations. One of the collection’s story is that it survived the looting of the Nazis because the family’s maid hid them in a mattress. It is a beautiful book. Cynthia was a collector of objects d’art and a collector of netsuke. She was also a photographer and writer and in 2006 she collaborated with Anthony Chan to create “Modern Ivory Netsuke: A Book for Collectors.” It is also a beautiful

book. At Cynthia's memorial service her wife prepared a room of all the art and artifacts Cynthia had collected: Pottery and teapots from all over the world. Fountain pens. Chinese painted perfume bottles. Scholar's rocks. And Netsuke. Her wife decided to pass on her treasured objects to the people who loved her, nearly 150 of us. I am not a collector but on a shelf in my living room is a fountain pen, a perfume bottle, a ceramic bowl from Turkey, and a tiny pig carved from ivory.

Reading de Waal's book gave me a deeper appreciation of an obsession I never fully understood but admired. "How objects are handed on is all about storytelling. I am giving you this because I love you. Or because it was given to me. Because I bought it somewhere special. Because you will care for it. Because it will complicate your life. Because it will make someone else envious. There is no easy story in legacy. What is remembered and what is forgotten? There can be a chain of forgetting, the rubbing away of previous ownership as much as the slow accretion of stories. What is being passed on to me with all these small objects?"

On a shelf in Karen's living room sits an Egyptian cigarette case, a miniature clay teapot, and two intricate carvings of beavers. What has been passed on with these small objects? Most certainly, love and friendship. Most certainly, life and death. And most infinitely, art. "If truth is that which lasts, then art has proved truer than any other human endeavor. What is certain is that pictures and poetry and music are not only marks in time but marks through time, of their own time and ours, not antique or historical, but living as they ever did, exuberantly, untired." Objects are symbols. Books are symbols. The finding and reading of this

book will forever be entangled with Cynthia's memorial service and the generous friendship of the woman I met at the gym because I was sitting and reading the *New Yorker*.

I was sitting and reading student response papers when I was approached by a musician who'd finished performing at the San Gregorio General Store. He stopped at my table and asked how I could grade papers while listening to the music. That he had been a teacher once. These are just 10-minute writing exercises, I told him. I'm not really grading them just making sure that the students are listening and able to create a piece of writing in response to a poem or piece of music or whatever I decide to use as a prompt. Last week I used the word trouble. After they turned in their writings I then played Natalie Merchant's song "Trouble Me," which explores the layers of meaning found in one simple word. It gave us a chance to discuss language and context. This stranger, this musician, this singer-songwriter, this young man who also was an avid reader, became a pen-pal and sharer of books.

My first gift hit a homerun, but then it's hard to miss with Tom Robbins' "Jitterbug Perfume." When I asked for a list of his favorite writers, Charles Dickens appeared in his top five. I had to confess that I had only read "Hard Times." Because we were both English majors he was surprised or maybe appalled that my education lacked the Dickens' catalog. One cold autumn morning when I did not want to get out of bed I decided to finally open the pages of a somewhat dog-eared copy of "David Copperfield" I'd found at a used bookstore: "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by

anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o' clock at night." I barely moved from my bed all weekend. I could not leave *David Copperfield* until I learned whether he was the hero of his life. What sentences! What characters! What comedy and tragedy! What plot twists! I filled my bookshelves with Charles Dickens, but "*David Copperfield*" is my favorite, although I do occasionally re-read "*A Christmas Carol*" during the dark days of December. He was a genius.

Charles Dickens was not the only writer he gave me. This stranger, this reader, this letter writer, also introduced me to the writer Leslie Marmon Silko by giving me a battered copy of "*Ceremony*." It was 1997 and I had never heard of her—and "*Ceremony*" had been published in 1977. I was embarrassed. How could my reading of Louise Erdrich, Michael Dorris, and Jim Harrison not have led me to one of the most important Native American writers of the twentieth century? "*Ceremony*" is an extraordinary work that searches for healing in a world that has been blown apart by genocide, by war, by hatred and prejudice, the loss of identity, and the forgetting of stories. "They are afraid, Tayo. They feel something happening, they can see something happening around them, and it scares them. Indians or Mexicans or whites—most people are afraid of change. They think that if their children have the same color of skin, the same color of eyes, that nothing is changing.' She laughed softly. 'They are fools. They blame us, the ones who look different. That way they don't have to think about what has happened inside themselves.'"

At the time I read “Ceremony” I did not know that Leslie was beloved by the poet James Wright, and that his poetry had influenced the poems that appear in her novel. In 1972, my beloved Cynthia wrote her master’s thesis on James Wright and always taught his poem “Saint Judas” in her *Introduction to Literature* course. I love this poem, this sonnet, this condensation of the ineffable. I feel as if it is etched on my soul; it never leaves me. Nearing the end of Cynthia’s teaching career I asked if she still taught James Wright’s poem. She said she gave up. None of her students understood the references. I felt as if a knife had entered my heart. How can a story of betrayal and compassion ever lose its power?

Saint Judas

by James Wright

When I went out to kill myself, I caught  
A pack of hoodlums beating up a man.  
Running to spare his suffering, I forgot  
My name, my number, how my day began,  
How soldiers milled around the garden stone  
And sang amusing songs; how all that day  
Their javelins measured crowds; how I alone  
Bargained the proper coins, and slipped away.

Banished from heaven, I found this victim beaten,  
Stripped, kneed, and left to cry. Dropping my rope  
Aside, I ran, ignored the uniforms:

Then I remembered bread my flesh had eaten,  
The kiss that ate my flesh. Flayed without hope,  
I held the man for nothing in my arms

A couple years after Cynthia's death while searching [betterworldbooks.com](http://betterworldbooks.com) for a collection of James Wright's poetry, I stumbled upon a book of correspondence between Silko and Wright that had been published in 2009: "The Delicacy and Strength of Lace." Did Cynthia know this book? Was the universe asking me to send this book to the man who gave me "Ceremony"? It had been more than fifteen years since I had received a letter. Fifteen years in which he had become Portland famous, had become a husband and father, record producer and entrepreneur. On page 70 their correspondence told me what to do: "I don't believe in random occurrences or blind chance, though I know the patterns of this world are capricious and terribly complex." I sent the book.

The year I turned forty I left teaching and turned to copywriting for a small design firm owned and staffed by former colleagues and friends from Apple. The year I turned forty, my beautiful Italian friend and her fiancé were in a freak car accident. Without warning, her fiancé slumped over and the car, an antique Packard, rolled off Dry Creek Road and collided with a shed. Her fiancé was acting the chauffeur and she and a neighbor were sitting in the back. She heard her soon-to-be husband's final breath leave his body and after 20 minutes crying for help she, too, resigned herself to death. Her leg was shattered. Her arm was shattered. A

deep gash ran across the top of her head. She and the neighbor survived, but she lost everything. Her fiancé had not updated his will.

Two more unexpected deaths of people near my age fractured my world, both from cancer, one a colleague I'd met while teaching and another the husband of friend. Death gives us pause. Death makes us re-examine. And then another friend died in another senseless car accident. Four deaths of people I had imagined I'd watch grow old. And still I was sitting in meeting after meeting of Internet start-up companies knowing they didn't have a chance in hell of succeeding, but also knowing I had to write copy that portrayed them as the next best thing. How did this become my life? How did the beautiful Bay Area turn into an over-priced, traffic-ridden, vacuous landscape? How did all the interesting, quirky people I'd first met when entering the computer industry in the early 1980s, people with degrees in biology and philosophy and psychology and literature and art and engineering turn into amoral MBAs and computer science majors in 2000? I quit my job, subleased my apartment, and decided to spend a summer in a land I'd always dreamed of— Alaska.

### *Touching Alaska*

From the moment the plane touched down in Juneau at 10 p.m., the sky still spilling its endless sunset colors, to the moment I disembarked from the Alaska Marine Ferry Columbia in Haines, just 90 miles north, I knew I would never leave. The sheer grandeur of sailing the Lynn Canal surrounded by mountains reaching 3000, 4000, 5000, 7000 feet into the sky told me this is where I belonged. In all my travels no place had said

“this is home.” Was the universe speaking to me yet again? Did the universe know that the studio apartment I rented was across the street from the public library and next door to the bookstore?

During my brief interlude as a community college instructor I taught at the Toyota manufacturing plant in Fremont, California. A college degree was required if an employee wanted to move into management positions so Toyota worked with the local community college to bring the classes to the plant. While teaching *Introduction to Literature* I assigned not only critical analysis essays but also creative writings. One of my students was a second generation Chinese-American. Because he only spoke Mandarin at home he did not feel confident in English, yet he was the student who wrote the best short story that ever felt my grading pen. It was about a boy who grew up feeling like an outsider because he’s Chinese, but as an adult while taking a Karate class realizes that a common interest unites people no matter their differences. As a book lover I know I can pretty much count on finding a kindred soul at bookstores and libraries. The bookstore and library in Haines did not disappoint.

When I visit a new place I like to find books by regional writers. I especially like to see what’s in the poetry section. Sometimes I get lucky and find a string of words that open my wallet like when I found a collection of Dionne Brand’s poems in a bookstore in Toronto: “No Language is Neutral.” At the Babbling Book in Haines, I not only found several books of poetry but an entire Alaska section.

This is the moment when I cross my fingers and hope that the person behind the cash register knows how to recommend the perfect book. If the conversation begins with asking me what I like to read I know I'll leave with a treasure. With the help of the owner, Liz Heywood, I went back to my 300-square-foot studio with two treasures, one published in 1942 and the other in 1951.

Until I decided to explore Alaska, I was unaware of the rich literature its Natives, residents and interlopers have produced, that there exist shelves and shelves of "classic Alaska books." I was unaware that one of those classic books, "White Fang" by Jack London, was made into a movie and filmed along the rocky shores, grassy knolls and towering snow-capped mountains of the Chilkat Valley. But it was a book published in 1942 that I decided to read first: "50 Years Below Zero: A Lifetime of Adventure in the Far North" by Charles Brower. And what adventures!

"In the end, we all become stories." I love this quote by Margaret Atwood. Not only do we become the stories we tell, we also become stories that others tell about us. Charles Brower's stories were unlike anything I had read. Like the young man he depicts at the age of 21, I knew nothing of the "Eskimo" people who lived along Alaska's shores, of their numerous villages, their distinct tribes and languages, their relationship to the land and sea, their arts and crafts and culture. Charles Brower is the kind of unpretentious storyteller and writer who makes you feel that you would follow him anywhere, that with him as your Captain life would be rich and expansive and filled with wonder and gratitude. Who would not follow this man's story after reading his first sentence?

“To a boy not yet twenty-one but already fed up with the solitude of seven years at sea, the bustling San Francisco of 1883 looked like the Promised Land.” Little did he know that he would return to the sea and north to Alaska, to become one of the first men to hunt whales with the Inuit, marry a beautiful Native woman, and spend his life in Barrow where his progeny still live today.

The second book was by a woman who was born in Wyoming in 1908, who bumped about the country with her family, who landed in Pasadena as a young adult, who had a brief career as an artist and movie stand-in in Hollywood, and who, in 1937, followed her two brothers to Craig, Alaska, where they had decided to build a boat and troll for salmon—a boat they would name Diana, after her. Like many people who venture to Southeast Alaska, she fell in love, with the landscape, with the people—with a life that was deeply connected to nature and the characters that created the fishing community. “As the Sailor Loves the Sea” by Ballard Hadman is both a memoir and a handbook. If you want to know what it was like to be a woman in this setting, she does not hide from the truth, neither its drama nor its comedy, nor its men.

“When it began to be noised about that I was—as it is so euphemistically put—expectin’, Shorty and The Danish King rose to the occasion nobly. Shorty sent me bottles of a light, red loganberry wine, ‘Fer makin’ red blood, now, you can’t have too much of’t, and ‘twaant hurt yer none.’ Danish King sent me haunches of venison, also for makin’ gude blood.’ Both he and Shorty were self-constituted authorities on bringing up

‘leettle fellers.” For a crying baby Shorty recommended a sugar-tit dipped in straight whiskey.”

If you want to know what it is to be a salmon fisherman, there is no better text. She fished along side her brothers and then her husband. I thought I was brave to the leave the comforts of my life in the Bay Area. Not once have I found myself sheltered in a cove during a storm, stuck on a boat, low on foodstuffs, waiting for weather that would return me home.

“We ran short of food and water, put ourselves on rations and went dirty. Jamie [her husband] got the lion’s share of the provisions. I was to lose fourteen pounds. No one who knows the country ever starts out anywhere without six weeks’ or two months’ supplies on board, because you never know. We had, of course, been on the short side when we left Sitka. Bushy Island [where they hauled up] was a fox island. As the days passed we got some food from the fox farmer, though naturally, we could not take the chance of running the farmer short of supplies. This fox farmer was a lovely woman with fine features and visionary blue eyes, with the look that comes to those who live much in isolation, looking away at empty horizons. . . .”

With the vivid memoirs of Charles Brower and Ballard Hadman rumbling in my imagination I immediately went to the library to read more “classic” Alaskan books: John Muir’s “Travels in Alaska,” Margaret E. Murie’s “Two in the Far North,” Michener’s “Alaska,” Robert Specht’s “Tisha,” John McPhee’s “Coming Into Country,” Jonathan Raban’s

“Passage to Juneau,” Grinnell’s “The Harriman Expedition to Alaska,” the anthropological texts on the Tlingit Indians by George Emmons and Federica De Laguna, and many others. But it is a book that was published in 2002, just a year after making Haines my permanent residence and acquiring a Sunday job at the bookstore, when another literary talisman found me.

If you love to read, working in a bookstore is the best job in the world. Working in a bookstore that has a substantial Alaskan collection is an added bonus, and also, at times, overwhelming, especially when being quizzed about a title that I had not read. I cannot remember if someone recommended it or if I was drawn to the title, cover blurbs, or reviews. *The strength of this beautifully crafted memoir lies in its evocation of the overpowering Alaskan landscape and the thoughts it imposes on the author's agile and receptive mind, gradually opening his solitary heart to the grace of true friendship.* But whatever attracted me to “The Blue Bear: A Story of True Friendship in the Alaskan Wild” by Lynn Schooler, I and everyone I have given this book to, and who have purchased it on my recommendation, are grateful. It is one of the most memorable books I have read about the nature of friendship and also one of the most exquisitely rendered books about the nature of the place I now call home—Southeast Alaska.

I had not planned to move to Haines permanently even though at summer’s end I bought an unfinished 24’x24’ cabin with a half loft on 1.25 acres about a mile from downtown. Alaska would be my summer place. I would become one of the somewhat disparaged “snow birds.” But the universe had other plans. At 42 I no longer wanted to spend my life in a

car commuting to jobs that felt meaningless. I was tired of high tech and IPOs and stock options and signing bonuses and the escalating prices of real estate. I wanted to live in a community where people know one another and look out for one another. Where I could find work that would connect me to the community. So on June 6th, 2001, after selling everything I could sell, I boarded an Alaskan Airlines plane in the morning and arrived at my unfinished cabin on Sunshine Street in the early afternoon via a small plane. The sun was shining, the house was warm inside, the carpenter I'd hire was hanging out in his pop-up camper having a beer, and a family of squirrels were scampering about in my roof. Welcome to the neighborhood.

### *The Best Small Library in America*

What is the likelihood that a job requiring the whole of my work experiences would be advertised in Haines? In the fall of 2001, the Haines Borough Public Library (HBPL) and the Chilkoot Indian Association received a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services to create a program that would employ two people, one to assess the community's technology needs and provide better computer access and another to promote the program and mentor "at risk" youth to teach computer skills to the technology disenfranchised. When I read the job requirements I knew no one else in town would have all the desired skills. But most importantly, it was a job where I would be surrounded by books and people who love to read—and it was part-time. I would still have time to work on finishing my cabin.

“So many books. So little time.” is a bumper sticker that always makes me smile. But “so many books” also means choosing the ones of the many. In a small library the responsibility of selection falls to the person who does collection development. At the HBPL her name was Ellen Borders—a soulmate of many readers. Like me, Ellen read far and wide and was a longtime *New Yorker magazine* subscriber. Also like me she was interested in Holocaust stories.

### *Queen of Books*

Ellen died on March 24, 2011. She was 56 years old. She had Type-1 diabetes and had been led to believe by her doctors that her life would not be a long one. April first was to be her last day as queen of books at the library. Just days before returning to say good-bye to her library friends, she died of a heart attack while visiting her family in Los Angeles. Her husband Ralph, also an avid reader, was with her. I wish I could remember all the books Ellen and I shared. We bonded over Pat Conroy, Joanne Harris, Anita Shreve and the essays of *New Yorker* writers Atul Gawande, Adam Gopnik, and Philip Gourevitch.

During one of our many “literary” lunches at the Chilkat Bakery and Restaurant we discussed the 1999 essay “The Memory Thief” by Philip Gourevitch. It examines the allegations that Benjamin Wilkorminski’s memoir, “Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood” was a fraud, a book Ellen and I had both read and liked. It was a book I had also taught along side Elie Wiesel’s “Night,” Victor Frankl’s “A Man’s Search for Meaning,” and Barbara Ehrenreich’s “Blood Rites.”

Using the Holocaust to create a work of fiction always gives me pause. How am I to enjoy reading a story that is predicated on horrors that I know are true but my mind finds unimaginable, especially when there are people who deny such atrocities? I felt this way after reading William Styron's "Sophie's Choice." To create such beauty from such tragedy, to lay bare the darkest darkneses of the human soul yet also lay bare the resilience and fragility of the human spirit. Yet this is what art is capable of doing. Art is the making of a truth that can lead to *enlightenment*, to love, forgiveness, compassion, empathy, anger, amazement, laughter, insight, transformation. Which is why Ellen and I both still liked "Fragments," even if it is not based on Wilkorminski's (not even his birth name) personal memories. "A novel does not have to be factual to be truthful." But Ellen and I did agree that it should be reclassified as fiction and prefaced with an introduction summarizing the controversy of its detractors and defenders.

In the summer of 2018 I worked with the editor of *Capital Weekly*, Clara Miller, on the publication of an essay I'd written about a dark secret in Haines that came to light after the suicide of a local man. As we got to know one another, I asked for a list of her favorite books. Near the top was "Fugitive Pieces" by Anne Michaels, a book and Canadian writer I had not read. I searched the library's catalog and was delighted that sitting on a shelf in the stacks was a copy of the book, which was published in 1996. "Fugitive Pieces" is the story of a young Jewish boy who sees his family slaughtered by Nazis and who is rescued by a Greek archeologist/geologist while hiding in the ancient site of Biskupin in

Poland. “Fugitive Pieces” is also a story of the experiences of war and grief that live deep in the earth and in people and their families generation after generation. When I read the synopsis I knew that Ellen had purchased it for the collection. When I opened the book, there was her handwriting “FIC MIC.” I can only hope that Ellen read this extraordinary book and that it always remains a part of the library’s collection. Upon its publication, writer and critic John Berger wrote “the most important, beautifully important book I have read in forty years. . . .” Anne Michaels’ writing made my head explode, so astonishing is her language and imagination; I immediately added it to my talisman list and sent it to my reading soulmates. And then I inhaled everything she had written. Her poetry added this line to my vocabulary: “Grief strikes where love struck first.”

Nearly ten years on and Ellen is still a part my reading life—and many people’s reading lives. And though I still grieve the loss of my friend, what an amazing legacy she gave—and gives—to the community.

### *Mysteries*

One of the benefits of working at a library is getting to see what books and materials people check out, although the number one cardinal rule is never to talk about what books and materials people check out. Yet anyone can see what people borrow just by looking at the cart stacked with returned materials, which in 2020 consists mostly of DVDs. In 2001, it seemed to me to be mysteries. Until I worked at the Haines Borough Public Library, I did not know that mysteries had their own section and

call number, “M”, since I had long ago abandoned the mystery/detective genre after tearing through Nancy Drew, Sherlock Holmes, P.D. James and Agatha Christie in my youth. I will blame my degree in English for the abandonment, and yet none of my reading friends were mystery readers either. Although I always considered myself a rather eclectic reader, working at the library and the bookstore made me reconsider my opinion.

It’s time for me to make a confession. I don’t understand people who have the ability to read and yet choose not to. I also don’t understand people who only read nonfiction or true crime or mysteries or history. Which brings me to an exercise we started at the library that was inspired by a session at one of the Alaska Library Association conferences. Every person on the library staff had to read a book in genres they usually avoided and then share their experience at the monthly staff meeting. I decided that my first foray would be mysteries, that I would read one book of the many different mystery writers to see if any of the books compelled me to read more by the same writer. As a result, I am now an avid mystery reader. I especially enjoy mysteries that take me to places and cultures that I am unfamiliar with or that I only know superficially, like Venice, Italy. Thank you Donna Leon for creating *Commisario Brunetti* and its cast of characters, particularly his wife who is a professor of English and a lover of Henry James. I am also a fan of Louise Penny, Colin Cotterill, Laura Lippman, Susan Hill, Tana French, Denise Mina, Jane Harper, William Kent Kreuger, Amy Stewart, Elly Griffiths (I will

miss Dr. Ruth Galloway), Belinda Bauer and, one of my favorite writers, Kate Atkinson.

### *Kate Atkinson*

How did I decide to read Kate Atkinson? Because I love British mystery television series and I fell in love with the actor Jason Isaacs as Jackson Brodie in “Case Histories.” Kate Atkinson is a writer whose work defies conventions, whether she’s writing a novel based on historical documents and people or a mystery series that examines the messiness of life that sometimes includes a murder. “The beginning is the word, the end is silence, and in between, the stories.” Another fact I love about Kate: She didn’t start writing until her 40s.

### *E, JFIC and YA*

One of the best things about working in a library is that I was inspired to read like a kid again, only this time with the benefit of guidance.

Literature for children is a country all its own. It’s filled with colorful picture books that teach how to share, how to count, the names of animals, that mama loves you, the plight of polar bears, even how to poop. Some are filled with rhymes, some are filled with funny animal characters, and some are filled with stories about grandmas and grandpas and soup and red wagons. At the Haines Borough Public Library these books are in a room designed for children and their parents with the call number E for Easy.

As adults it is not easy to return to the innocence of childhood, yet it is forever on display in a story like “Harold and the Purple Crayon” (1955),

“The Story of Ferdinand” (1936), “The Velveteen Rabbit” (1922), “The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales” (1992), “Close Your Eyes” (2002), “Oh La La, Max in Love” (2018) and so, so many more. If you haven’t spent time in the children’s section of a library lately, I encourage you to do so. Just spend an hour and look through the bins. Let me know what you find. Jane Yolen’s books about dinosaurs that rhyme and rhyme and rhyme, never fail to make me laugh and win the heart of any child.

But “E” books were not the only children’s literature I explored. A revolution was taking place in children’s literature in the early 2000s and it all started with a single mom in England writing a book that begins with the chapter heading: “The Boy Who Lived.”

### *The True Magic of Harry Potter*

When I visited Haines in the summer of 2000 I met a man who was reading the third book of J. K. Rowling’s brilliant Harry Potter series to his 5-year-old son. While the dad read I tried not to interrupt to understand the back stories of the characters and narrative. This woman is a genius, I thought. She’s mashed up different genres and created something absolutely unique and brilliant. But why didn’t she make the hero a girl? Because, as I learned over and over again as a librarian, boys probably would not have read “Hermione Granger and the Philosopher’s Stone.” And besides, she created Hermione smarter than the male characters. “When in doubt, go to the library. Because that’s what Hermione does.”

For people who were not part of the Harry Potter zeitgeist that took over the world with each new publication of the seven book series, my condolences. For people who love to read and watch young people get excited about books, it was a magical time. Library programs encouraged costume parties and trivia games. Quidditch matches were held at local ball fields. Fan fiction was written, shared and discussed. Midnight lines at bookstores of people of all ages wound around blocks waiting to purchase the latest book. And, for the final book, a sleepover and reading of “The Deathly Hallows” at the Haines Borough Public Library until we couldn’t keep our eyes open. While sanding, painting and working on finishing my house, the audio books performed by Jim Dale kept me company. I listened to them three times, the last time I started with the final book and worked backwards, relishing her foreshadowing.

In 2018, to celebrate the 20-year anniversary of the publication of the first Harry Potter book, a box set was released with illustrations by Brian Selznick. I decided it was time to re-read the series and see if it still held its magic. I am glad to report, it’s magic begins with a sentence that pops in your mouth and imagination— “Mr. and Mrs. Dursley of number four Privet Drive were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much.”—and doesn’t let go until the final sentences of the final book: “His scar had not pained him for nineteen years. All was well.”

But Harry Potter was just the catalyst for my forage into books for the young and young at heart.

### *You Learn So Much from Young Readers*

Until Harry Potter I was not a fan of “fantasy” fiction. But the young people I mentored and worked with at the library grew up on fantasy fiction. I had no idea how many books about dragons filled the shelves.

*“Beyond here, there be dragons.” And vampires, too.*

While the Harry Potter books owe much to the literature of boarding schools, a home-schooled boy growing up in Paradise Valley, Montana, took his inspiration for his dragon series from Tolkien, which he started writing at age 15. With help from his parents, “Eragon” was self-published in 2001, then republished by Alfred Knopf in 2003 after being discovered by Carl Hiaasen after a recommendation from his son. Like many stories, it is both a coming-of-age tale and the journey of the hero epic. But unlike Harry Potter, if library statistics can be trusted, it appeals more to boys than girls, even though the dragon young Eragon bonds with is female. Paolini published three more in what is known as “The Inheritance Cycle” and often the books would be returned, battered and water stained, and needing to be replaced with new copies.

Little did I know that in 1901 British writer Edith Nesbitt of “The Railway Children” fame published a series of books about dragons that, according to Wikipedia, influenced C.S. Lewis, J.K. Rowling, Diana Wynne-Jones, P.L. Travers, and, though not referenced, I’m speculating also Patricia Wrede, Susan Fletcher, Anne McCaffrey, Naomi Novik, Robin Hobb, Elizabeth Haydon, and Ursula LeGuin. I’m still pondering if

having moths eat dwarves who wear seal coats was the best way for Jane and George to make their escape.

I often wonder if young people will still be reading these authors in the future. Will someone be as surprised when opening Patricia Wrede's "Dealing with Dragons" and smiling when reading: "Chapter 1: In Which Cimorene Refuses to Be Proper and Has a Conversation with a Frog." Or Elizabeth Haydon's reimagining of the myths and legends about floating islands in "The Lost Journals of Ven Polypheme" series. Or Naomi Novik's reimagined fairy tales in "Uprooted" and "Spinning Silver." Or Anne McCaffrey, who blends fantasy and science fiction to spin tales that bring together dragons and artificial intelligence and defiant female heroines and so much more.

Books find their readers. Readers find their authors. But will the books still be in print? Will the authors still be lauded or will they be cancelled for a controversial opinion or moments of bad behavior? Does art survive the maligned artist? In 2024, Philip Pullman, writer of "His Dark Materials" series and Cornelia Funke, writer of the "Inkheart" series, are still in good standing and still seeing their books in print, stories I believe that will have a life in the future and, unlike Harry Potter, stories that are led by pre-adolescent girls.

*First times.*

The first time we take a step, say mama or dada, go to school. The first time we ride a bike, catch a ball, fall in love. When I hear people tell the stories about the moment of learning to read, that moment of understanding that marks on a page create sounds that make words that signify “Go dog go,” I’m envious. I cannot remember the moment before and after learning to read. But I do remember feeling perplexed by the word “laugh,” which I did not know how to pronounce when asked to read aloud during my first grade reading time. I could not figure out how to pronounce the “gh.” And when I did learn that “gh” can sometimes make an “f” sound: Why, I asked, isn’t it spelled “l a f f.” Years later, when I would be teaching writing to many ESL students, I would find myself sympathizing with their confusions, frustrations and bewilderments. Homophones, egads! Verb tenses and conjugations and all the exceptions to the rules, Yikes! And idioms. How do you grade students who were conscripted to fight in the Soviet Afghan war at age 11 and for whom English is their fourth language?

But I digress.

How does one come to add “vampire” to their list of words, to their imagination, to their reading life? For the young people around the world in 2005, “Twilight” by Stephanie Meyer resurrected the genre. For me and my friends it was the afternoon TV serial “Dark Shadows,” which according to IMDB ran from 1966 to 1971. What do I remember? A creepy, sinister house. Dark forests. A vampire by the name of Barnabus.

Julia, a doctor, trying to find a cure for Barnabus, but suffering from unrequited love. A witch named Laura. A werewolf named Quentin. A housekeeper named Maggie, and two children. Must have stole that storyline from Henry James' "The Turn of the Screw." I do remember being scared. But I had no context for the literature and tropes creating the show. It wasn't until taking a Gothic Novel class that I discovered where many of the stories originated.

I wish Professor Katona were still alive so that we could revisit her lectures on the Gothic novel or that I still had my yellow, 3-pronged folder with all my notes and essays. But I do remember one of her lectures "Did God create man or did Man create God?" and the discussion of how the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution contributed to the rise of Romanticism in Literature and the Gothic Novel.

Most scholars credit Horace Walpole's 1764 "The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story" as the first novel to use many of the tropes that would come to define the genre. As a student in 1980, it was a slog, but as a student of literature I suppose it was important to read the novel that began a way of storytelling that explores society, human behavior and psychology that has never gone out of fashion. Love, untimely, mysterious deaths and supernatural elements. Castles and grand houses in decay, dark forests, treacherous landscapes, ominous weather. Strange visions, disturbing dreams, foreshadowing omens and curses. Superstitions. Transgressions and subversions, sexual and social. Ghosts. Aristocracy and Catholicism. Femme fatales, villains and anti-heroes. In fact, Writer/

Director Emerald Fennell uses many of these tropes in her 2023 movie “Saltburn,” which she describes as a “gothic, horror, romance.” It was the other books on Professor Katona’s syllabus that were much more enjoyable: Mary Shelley’s “Frankenstein,” Bram Stoker’s “Dracula,” Charlotte Bronte’s “Jane Eyre,” Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and “Interview with a Vampire” by Anne Rice, all books that are still in print and still part of the cultural landscape.

Until taking Professor Katona’s Gothic Novel class I had never heard of Anne Rice and had never read a novel with vampires. In the 1980s, Anne Rice was my generation’s Stephanie Meyer. But her novels were not aimed at a YA audience, even though in one sense they both ask the reader: “Would you become a vampire if given the opportunity?” I, of course, read most of Anne Rice’s novels and never once, that I can remember, was tempted to the dark side. Immortality? I’d rather die and come back as a cat. A cat? In 2005, with vampire novels on the rise, I especially enjoyed Scott Westerfeld’s YA novel “Peeps,” which reimaged “vampirism” as a result of a parasite. It was from reading this very clever, very fun book that I learned of the parasite *toxoplasmosis*, or sometimes called “crazy cat lady syndrome.” I do not know if I have the parasite, but I plead guilty to loving cats.

*And speaking of cats.*

Today is Friday, the eighth of March, 2024. It’s snowing, again. Everything is white. There are twenty or more redpolls and a few juncos pecking at the food in the bird feeders on my porch. My beloved cats, after living

with me for more than twenty years, have died—thus the bird feeders since 2021.

*Perhaps there is some secret sort of homing instinct in books that brings them to their perfect readers.*

Last year, after reading Maggie O’Farrell’s “Hamnet,” which I decided to read after listening to the podcast “Bookish with Sonya Walger,” I watched a conversation between Maggie and writer/bookstore owner Ann Patchett on Youtube. Both highly recommended the “Old Filth” trilogy by a writer I’d never heard of—Jane Gardam, British, born in 1928.

I fell in love.

“. . .that’s what all my books are about, the end of empire,” she confides to Alex Clark in a 2011 interview published in “The Guardian.” Yes and no. Her books are about the people living their lives during the end of empire, with all their loves and jealousies, quirks and foibles, joys and sorrows, conventions, subversions, and ultimately, their gloriousness.

And so, as I was trying to think of a good story to transition from books about vampires to books about cats, “The Queen of the Tambourine” found its way to my home via a search for other novels by Jane Gardam.

“The Queen of the Tambourine,” published in 1991, winner of the Whitbread prize for Best Novel of the Year, is not about cats. It is an epistolary novel told by an attractive, childless, upper-middle class woman, age 50, married to a diplomat, living in an upper-middle class enclave in London whose world is becoming unglued. One of her neighbors writes children’s books (94 of them) and also has written one

adult novel—that is not selling well in America. While in America, after finishing her wildly successful book tour for her children’s books, she meets with the publisher of her adult novel in New York, a woman she has never met. This is the tail end of the story the neighbor relates to the narrator of “The Queen of Tambourine.”

"I'm sorry to have to say this," she said, "but the book isn't going too well. You know, the trouble with us Americans is that we're just not egg-heads."

I said, "But it's only about love. You liked the book. You bought the book."

"Well," she said, "I didn't exactly buy it, someone else did, and she's left. She was the house drunk. Matter of fact I haven't exactly read it yet. Say—", she said,—"do you have a cat? I'm a cat-lover. Do you ever think of writing a book about a cat? I live with my cat and - do you know what - I don't seem able to feel for anything like I feel for my cat. Not even for Central American politics, which is my area."

(p. 178)

As much as this scene made me laugh, I also had to admit to myself that I have the same feelings about my cats and cats in general. Which then made me think about a scene from “What Are You Going Through” by Sigrid Nunez.

*Sigrid Nunez*

Another writer whose words and imagination, intelligence and sensibilities fill me up with love—and make me laugh. Another writer I'd never heard of until listening to a 2019 Fresh Air interview with Terry

Gross. Another writer who made me feel that the universe was speaking to me once again.

It was during this interview that Sigrid spoke of her time and relationship with Susan Sontag and the book she wrote about her experience, “Sempre Susan: A Memoir of Susan Sontag.” Susan Sontag, the writer of a book pivotal to the argument of my master’s thesis. Sigrid Nunez, a writer who during the course of her ninth book published in 2021, “What Are You Going Through,” shifts the point of view from the unnamed narrator to a cat. (Point of view being the focus of my thesis!)

“The cat came in on little fog feet. I was not even aware of him until he jumped onto the bed. His whiskers tickled as he snuffled my cheek. Earlier he had lain by the fireplace. Is there anything more hygge than lying close to a loudly purring cat whose warm fur smells of woodsmoke, watching him knead a duvet?

I closed the book and turned out the light.

I had a decent home, the cat said, his words muffled by the purr but still clear. I’m not saying it was the lap of luxury. But I had food and fresh water every day, and a dry bed, and at the same time I’d never known anything better. I was born in a cage in a shelter, he said. I never knew how sweet, with the right human, life could be, especially when the human is a female of a certain age living without a mate.” (p. 75)

On Wikipedia there are a few pages devoted to “fictional cats and felines.” It is far from exhaustive and neither references Rita Mae Brown’s Sneaky Pie mystery series, which I stumbled upon while shelving books at the Haines Borough Public Library in 2002 or the “Catwings” series by

Ursula LeGuin, which I discovered while hanging out with Ms. Saunders' class of third grade students in 2008. 2008 was also the year I was encouraged by a small group of animal loving 9-year-old girls to read Scholastic's "Warriors" cat series, which I found clever and amusing because the writers used as its bones the legends of King Arthur (and I learned a lot of facts about cats).

Until my foray into the reading habits of young people I hadn't noticed how much of literature written for children depends on animal narrators. My deepest memory of animal stories is from a collection of books that stayed in my life until I left home at 18. It was a set of Childcraft books, 15 volumes, that sat on a shelf next to a set of encyclopedias. These were the books that introduced me to nursery rhymes, poems, fairy tales, and Aesop's fables. Probably the fable that most people know is "The Tortoise and the Hare" and its moral: Slow and steady wins the race. Did the creator of this story also know that tortoises live long lives and hares live only briefly?

Every culture uses animals to tell stories that are lessons for humans. How many times has the story of "The Scorpion and the Frog" been used as a warning about character, that certain traits are in their nature? In *Star Trek Voyager*, it is used as a warning about cooperating with the Borg, although the frog is changed to a fox. Using animal characters offers storytellers a way to subvert race, age and gender even though as readers we may apply our own assumptions and prejudices.