

# An Avid Bookworm

## Victoria L. Davis



Ellen Blum Barish, Bookstore Window

**A**s I begin writing this essay, I have twenty-four books on hold at my local library (their imposed limit), a source of security and delight for a bookworm. I have a system. I follow certain authors constantly, looking up their names online several times a year to see if they have a new work coming out. I also utilize book reviews and independent bookstore newsletters to discover new writers. I then write the title of the book, the author, and its projected publication date in my purse journal. Since our library will not take purchase requests more than three months prior to publication, I practice patience, then place a book order. Occasionally, someone beats me to the book order (irritating), but most of the time I

am the first person to read the book. This system is particularly important for eagerly awaited mysteries, novels, and memoirs. However, there are those books that sneak in under my radar; at these times I may even be tenth or (gasp) thirtieth in line for a book. I have a difficult time handling delayed gratification, so I check the status of my holds daily, sometimes more than once.

This obsession with books started young. Unlike my struggles to learn how to tie my shoes, I don't remember the process of learning how to read. The earliest book I remember is a picture book my grandmother gave me about a cat sneaking up a tree to pursue a bird. I don't remember if the book was read to me or if I could already read

by myself, but I do remember my feverish impatience to know whether the bird escaped.

I do not know who I would be without books. Sometimes when I cast my mind over my childhood, I realize my most vivid memories have to do with reading books or my early attempts at writing. Where my obsession came from, however, is a bit of a mystery. We did not have many books in our house, a mere two short shelves in a cabinet held them all. My father subscribed to *The Reader's Digest* and placed the most current issue on the back of the toilet. My mother did not routinely read to me except when I was home sick. I would coax her to read a story from *Uncle Wiggly and His Flying Airship* or a chapter from my current Thornton Burgess book. I didn't understand then the demands of having four children, nor did I know that my mother had not liked school. She had loved playing basketball, dancing, and singing in the choir. Reading remained a low priority.

Though my mother did not understand my obsession, she firmly believed in the importance of education for her children and supported my habit in two critical ways. When I was quite young, we had a branch library within walking distance. Since they did not allow children to check out more than five books at once, I walked there a couple times a week. When they moved that branch to a location too far away to walk to, I was devastated, and my mother did her best to drive me to the new branch. Most importantly, she did not restrict what I read. I remember in the seventh grade I was reading a best-selling novel about interracial marriage, *Five Smooth Stones*. My teacher felt it an inappropriate book for a girl my age and talked to my mother about it during parent-teacher conferences. Considering the

authority my mother placed in teachers, it is all the more admirable that she firmly told her, "I don't censor what my daughter reads. I trust her. She loves to read, and I can't keep up with all that she reads." (It is just as well my mother did not know I was also reading the books of Frank Yerby and John O'Hara at that time.) I still feel grateful for her stance.

My two oldest sibs were five and nine years older than me and were too busy with their own lives to care about how much I read—but not Cheryl. She would often come to my bedroom and ask me what I was doing. Since I was stretched out on my bed with a book in my hands, it was patently obvious. But then her litany would begin: "How can you read all the time?" "I'm bored—come play with me." I knew from experience she would not stop pestering me, so I would get up and play with her until a friend came and then gratefully retreat to my room.

If I was reading at school, I would often not hear the recess bell ring or the sounds of my classmates shoving back their chairs in their haste to escape. My teacher would have to come, place her hand on my shoulder, and say, "It's time to go outside now."

I associate books with kindness and generosity. When I was in fourth grade, the school allotted a set number of books per month to each classroom. I would devour them before the books were rotated and then have nothing to read. One day my fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Mikkelson, stood by my desk with a large cardboard box. Books were stacked up past the edges. She smiled and asked, "Who do you think these are for?" I remember vividly that blend of joy, shyness, and gratitude as I whispered, "me?" She told me they belonged to her grown-up daughter who was happy to loan them to me as long as

I was careful with them. She remains one of my favorite teachers, the one who gave me the gift of being seen and understood.

I also remember a student in that class—John Stevenson. Tall and thin, he wore thick-lensed glasses and had a distracted air as if he was listening to things none of the rest of us could hear. A quiet boy, I was surprised that he told his mother I loved books. Their house was just a couple blocks from ours, but it took me a few weeks to work up my courage to go there, even though John encouraged me. His mother opened the front door, smiled, and showed me a front-entrance closet that had nothing in it but shelves of books. She told me I could borrow books any time I wanted, but I was too shy to go often.

More close at hand was our across-the-street neighbor, Helen Weinberg. She had a complete collection of Nancy Drew mysteries from her childhood. Some sat on a shelf above her piano, but others spilled onto a shelf in the closet. She loaned them to me one at a time. If I finished one late at night, I would get up the next morning, carefully avoid the squeaky floorboard in our kitchen, and dash out from our back door to hers. I am certain that I must have woken her up on many 7:00 am mornings, but she never complained and never withheld a new book, though I know she must have been relieved when I finished the series.

Even my church had riches to plumb. Though it had only a one-wall library, the lowest shelves held a series of biographies for children. These volumes had thick plastic covers with intriguing pictures on the front. I read every one of those biographies: Martha Washington, Thomas Edison, Washington Carver, and others I can't recall. I do remember being disappointed that they did not have any

biographies about artists except for one book on Stephen Foster. I don't think I could have consciously articulated that I was looking for role models, for books about writers.

Very early I knew I wanted to write books as well as read them. In my childhood, schools did not bring published authors to read their work and talk to students about writing. No one I knew wrote books. But when I was given a copy of *Little Women*, I found my inspiration—Jo. I read that book at least thirty times, crying every time at Beth's death, identifying with Jo's passionate, impatient temperament, her desire to write, and feeling envy for her attic retreat. I read all of Louisa May Alcott's books, rereading *Little Men*, *Jo's Boys*, *Eight Cousins*, and *Rose in Bloom* often, though *Little Women* remained my favorite.

No one guided me in my book selections, so my childhood reading did not include the classics by Virginia Woolf or Marilynne Robinson. I remain an avid mystery fan (my literary bon bons), though my love of biography has turned to a preference for memoir. My love of literature is guided primarily by a passionate love for story, whether a novel, essay, or short story. I did not read poetry or plays as a child; both of these loves came much later, feeding my love for the spoken word.

A few years ago, I was invited to join Random Review at my library, a committee unlike any other I have served on; we met only once a year and the process was a joy.

About two months in advance of our meeting we submitted our three book choices based on our reading that year (one book could be a classic) and presented a written, often impassioned case for why these books should be chosen by the committee for inclusion in the coming year's ten Random Review books.

We were also challenged to think of the perfect reviewer for each of our book choices, reviewers who were "a draw" or experts on the topic—preferably both; an ability to speak in front of a crowd was a given.

Our valiant committee chairs coordinated our work and sent out a complete file; we then read every committee member's comments in preparation for what was generally a four-hour meeting. Picture it: you are in a room with twelve passionate bookworms, gladiators for books, each convinced that their recommendations should make the list, knowing they will be lucky if one makes the final cut. (To have two chosen meant you must try not to preen). One by one each of us was granted time to make a plea for our books. Nonfiction trumps fiction the majority of the time because more people attend the reviews when nonfiction is presented—sad but true—but those of us who love fiction persisted. Once everyone made their case, we voted. No secret ballot voting. Raised hands made it clear, sometimes painfully clear, that your book choices were not even contenders that year. Some books emerged clear victors. Tied books required another vote. Reviewers were then chosen and committee members assigned to do "the ask." When the final list was read, we felt a keen satisfaction and a recognition that the communal effort had yielded, yet again, a better list than any of our single efforts would create.

After serving on the committee for eight years, I decided it was time to resign and give someone else this opportunity. But in my last year, I rather desperately wanted the committee to choose one of my nominations—Patricia Hampl's *The Art of the Wasted Day*. I confess I stacked the deck. I told them that if they chose it, I would review it. Since they

had been asking me to review a book for some time, that cinched it. I remain deeply touched by the audience's response in the question-and-answer session. They shared their own struggles to escape workaholism, to find (even sneak in) solitude, to regain the gifts of reflection and daydreaming.

The current pandemic returned me to this essay. Since solitude and silence have long been sought companions for me, the isolation imposed by COVID did not affect me as deeply as many people. Closures were more of a challenge, but the most difficult closure for me was our library. It was not as if my bookshelves lacked books I had not yet read or worthy of being reread. But I felt a deep sense of loss.

However, our much loved library found a way to serve us. We could continue to place books on hold (they even lifted the twenty-four book limit!) and also place purchase requests for new books. Intrepid volunteers then delivered the books to our homes in neatly wrapped, clear plastic bags. My golden doodle, Moxie, would hear their arrival, even if they did not ring the doorbell, and begin barking. I would open the front door to find books on my doorstep—does it get any better than that?—and call out a "thank you" to the volunteer who was already back at their car. They would shout back, "You're welcome" and proceed to their next delivery. Books=kindness and generosity, one equation I can understand.

I renew myself through story. When I feel afraid, I seek inspiration from story. When I feel numbed by information and statistics, I desire the wisdom of story. When I feel too keenly the global scale of human suffering, I need stories of compassion. My hunger for story will never be assuaged. ∞