JOYS OF READING

Although I can recall no childhood bedtime stories (or even if my Mother read any to me), I do recall my first book. It was from the Little Golden Books series, and it was about dinosaurs. Although my original version has vanished, I did find a duplicate at a used book sale, so I still have a copy. Thus began my fascination with both dinosaurs and books.

Strange as it might seem – seeing as I am now both a reference librarian and an amateur author -- my boyhood home had virtually no reading materials in it, other than the Chicago Tribune newspaper, which was delivered daily. Naturally, as a child, I had no interest in it, other than in viewing the Sunday comics! After badgering my parents, our family was finally allowed to have a cheap encyclopedia set, which was sold at our neighborhood Jewel Foods supermarket for a dollar a volume. It was called the Golden Book Encyclopedia, and I have a complete duplicate set as an adult to this day. I must have read every page over a dozen times as a boy!

But what especially satisfied my new-found thirst for books was the South Shore Public Library at 73rd & Kingston Ave., which was located about a dozen city blocks from my house. Every Saturday, in all seasons, I rode my trusty green Schwinn bicycle with its handlebar basket to the library, my library card being my passport to the wonderful world of books. I always took out the limit of ten books a week: a variety of volumes which included thrilling adventures, outer space, ancient civilizations, maps and the cultures of foreign lands, biographies of famous people, the Old West, animals and insects, and of course more dinosaurs. At this point in my young life, I dreamed of being an archeologist, a world-renowned explorer, an astronaut, a scientist, an inventor, or an airline pilot.

Next up in my reading repertoire were comic books. They cost ten cents each. New ones came out every two weeks or so. I regularly bought mine at the Vera Shop on 79th & Burnham Ave., about three blocks from our house. Run by two elderly sisters, this variety shop had a huge selection of penny candy and 99 cent plastic models of cars, ships, tanks, and airplanes, as well as comics and magazines. My favorite choices were all centered around World War Two, especially with Sergeant Rock and his Dirt Patrol fighting those evil Nazis! Another series, for fifteen cents each, was the Great Illustrated Classics, wherein I was introduced to shortened versions of Moby Dick, Great Expectations, Ivanhoe, Call of the Wild, Treasure Island, and Sherlock Holmes, as well as the exciting works of Jules Verne, Edgar Allen Poe, and H.G.Wells. My buddies and I would trade or borrow each other’s comics, so there were perpetual reading treats to enjoy and discuss.

Whereby my two sisters had the Nancy Drew girl detective mysteries to savor, us boys had The Hardy Boys series back in the day. I collected about forty of these bright blue-covered, hardback classics, as brothers Frank and Joe used their brains and courage to outwit the bad guys. Each book cost $1.25, so I was able to buy my own from money earned doing chores and errands around the house or in the neighborhood, seeing as I never received any weekly allowance from my parents.

Around age 16, I was introduced by my girlfriend, Vivian Davis, to the incomparable author Ray Bradbury. His science fiction and fantasy novels and short stories were so imaginative! His Dandelion Wine and his Martian Chronicles were an early influence on my later desire to become a non-professional writer of short stories. Rod Serling’s tales, powerfully brought to television in his The Twilight Zone, meshed well with Bradbury’s dual flair for both nostalgia and the insertion of a memorable, unexpected story ending.

World travel became my next passion in reading, so I discovered The Book of Marvels, The Royal Road to Romance, and other works by author-adventurer Richard Halliburton. Lowell Thomas, radio newsreel announcer and interviewer of the famous and historic, was also an author who scoured the globe hunting for interesting stories and people and then writing about it. Both men were a vital inspiration to help me look beyond my limited world on Chicago’s South Side, along with my reading National Geographic magazine every month, and enjoying its spectacular and exotic photography.

When the spy genre became popular, both on television and at the movies in the 1960’s, I enjoyed all of Ian Fleming’s James Bond 007 novels. It was reported that President John F. Kennedy was a big fan of these sexy, action-packed secret agent books, which caused their publication numbers to soar.

At Northern Illinois University, I was deluged with course-work reading assignments, both as an undergrad and especially as a grad student. I learned to wade through torrents of printed material quickly, and to read speedily when gathering information for seemingly endless research papers. This was when I first needed to wear eyeglasses – my tired eyes usually red-rimmed from overuse! Needless to say, my personal reading for pleasure was rather derailed at this hectic time of my life. I did, however, find time to read the fine works of Hermann Hesse: Siddhartha, Narcissus and Goldmund, Steppenwolf, Demian, The Journey to the East, and others. Hesse was revered by many young college students, because he dealt with the timeless and universal themes of people searching for meaning and purpose in life, falling in love and struggling with relationships, innocence v. experience, spirituality, creativity and art, nature and poetry. For me, Hesse beautifully captured the concurrent beauty and mysteriousness -- and often tragedy -- of reality itself. Later, Joseph Campbell’s The Power of Myth taught me much about the need for human beings to appreciate storytelling and understand the classic myths of heroes, gods, and goddesses from the many cultures of the world. This tied in well with my study of Carl Jung’s theory of the ‘collective unconscious,’ and how certain types of ancient legends have universal resonance, and can then provide hints of enlightenment.

Reading Hesse and Campbell led me into the deepest book realms of the paranormal, dream analysis, the lost arts of the occult, meditation, alchemical magic, mysterious prophecies, the theory of time travel, secret societies, ‘ancient astronauts,’ theosophy, Rudolf Steiner, Graham Hancock, and Eastern religions. I read the Bible cover-to-cover, explored the Koran, studied the Chinese Book of Tao and the I Ching, and perused the Book of Mormon and the Hindu Bhagavad-Gita. I was certain that somewhere hidden on the globe was a rare book that had all the answers to the mysteries of life! I searched like a man possessed! But I never found it. Books that claimed to know the secret made no sense when read – perhaps because they attempted to explain the unexplainable, using words for which no accurate words even existed.

Making my first trip overseas, in 1975 ( a whirlwind 8-week, 12 European country adventure), was an epiphany! It changed my perceptions of the world in a profound and marvelous way. In addition to that evolution, my reading took off into another level: I discovered two new authors, Irving Stone and James A. Michener, both of which would become favorites of mine.

Irving Stone wrote biographical fiction, but only after many months or even years of careful research. He would actually move (with his wife and editor, Jean) to the foreign country of his subject and live there, absorbing the very atmosphere and all the knowledge of the area. Stone penned Lust for Life (about Vincent Van Gogh), The Agony and the Ecstasy (Michelangelo), Sailor on Horseback (Jack London), The Origin (Charles Darwin), The Greek Treasure (Heinrich Schliemann), The Passions of the Mind (Sigmund Freud), and several other impressive books. When I initially arrived in Vienna in 1975, I had just finished Stone’s excellent book on Freud. Remembering the address -- Berggasse 19 -- of the famous psychoanalyst from my reading, I excitedly walked there, for it had since been made into a public museum. I was stunned to find that all of the details and descriptions from Stone’s novel were completely accurate! I instinctively knew my way around, and knew what to look for, just from reading a book. Amazing. The novel truly came alive! In 1986, Irving Stone was the first author I ever wrote to. Imagine my surprise and delight when I received an autographed letter from him in reply, inscribed to “My friend…”

That same summer, while in Copenhagen, I entered a bookstore, desirous of the thickest, most interesting paperback book I could find. I stumbled upon James A. Michener’s The Source – more than 1000 pages long, about the history of the Jewish people told through artifacts found in a fictitious archeological dig in Israel. I had struck literary gold! This book subsequently addicted me to everything the man wrote: Centennial, Hawaii, Alaska, Space, Journey, Texas, Chesapeake, The Covenant, Caravans, Poland, The Novel, and many others. Like Irving Stone, Michener worked and lived all over the world when doing his exhaustive book researches. Each book both entertained and informed me -- with history and culture, interesting characters and intricate plots. I have read every one several times! As with Stone, I also wrote to Michener, and received a personal, signed reply. Michener never used a computer, preferring to write instead by using a vintage typewriter with only his two index fingers – which eventually became crooked and bent due to his pounding on the keys millions of times for fifty years! When he set up semi-permanent residence in Austin, Texas with his Japanese wife, Mari, I later happened to be traveling through that city. I went to his house and sat outside in my rental car on the street for an hour, trying to decide if I should go up and knock on his door and simply thank him for his wonderful works, then leave. But what if I interrupted his thoughts as he was toiling over yet another massive best-seller? (I feared a repeat of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s infamous interruption, which made him forget the rest of his landmark “Kublai Khan” poem!) Finally, I went up to his door and rang the doorbell. But no one was home! After the great man died in 1997 at age 90, I respectfully visited his grave during another trip to Austin, and thanked him posthumously.

Because I needed money for college, I had to leave NIU for a year and work full-time from 1970-71 at Kroch’s & Brentano’s book store on Wabash Avenue in downtown Chicago, the largest such in the city. I was an assistant manager in their impressive Business-Technical-Scientific Department. Here I learned the commercial side of the book business. This experience likewise deepened my appreciation of those authors writing such books and the various techniques necessary for getting them out to the public for purchase.

Next, I recall reading Education of a Wandering Man by acclaimed writer Louis L’Amour. Although best known for his impressive series of Western novels, L’Amour also wrote in other genres. In this particular autobiographical work, he chronicles the various jobs he had before being a writer, as he traveled around the United States looking for work during the Great Depression. What saved him from despair was visiting the public library in whatever town he happened to be in. There he would freely read and read and read between finding employment for a dollar here or there while on the move. His reading choices were enormous (and he lists many of them), for he wanted to fill any gap in his ever expanding mind. L’Amour basically educated himself in both classical fiction and non-fiction to the level of a post-college graduate! Only then did he feel that he was ready to write as a full-time career. Such an inspiration to everyone for self-taught, systematic learning!

As a teacher, I remember reading aloud to my fifth graders after lunch each day for 10-15 minutes. I used William J. Bennett’s anthology of interesting classical stories for young people, The Book of Virtues. My favorite oral story to tell was Homer’s The Odyssey, about the ten-year Trojan War and Odysseus’ wanderings and challenges in his further ten-year quest to return to his home island of Ithica and to his faithful wife, Penelope and his now-grown son, Telemachus. My students at this age were especially fond of hearing any stories about myths and legends, of Greek and Roman gods and goddesses, and of heroes and their quests, like King Arthur and Camelot or Percival and the Holy Grail.

Along with Ray Bradbury, Irving Stone, and James A. Michener, I would say that one of my other favorite writers is Paul Theroux. Although he has also penned many fiction works, I am most drawn to his wide-ranging travel books: The Great Railway Bazaar, Dark Star Safari, Ghost Train to the Eastern Star, The Old Patagonian Express, The Kingdom by the Sea, The Pillars of Hercules, and more. Each one has been savored multiple times!

Other outstanding authors I have enjoyed are: Daniel J. Boorstin (The Discoverers, The Creators, The Searchers); Edmund Morris (a trilogy on the life of Theodore Roosevelt, and Dutch, a biography of Ronald Reagan); James Clavell (Tai-Pan, Shogun); Jeffery Archer (Kane and Abel); Ken Follett (Pillars of the Earth, World Without End); Edward Rutherfurd (Sarum); Robert K. Massie (Nicholas and Alexandra); David McCullough (The Path Between the Seas); and Simon Winchester (Atlantic, The Perfectionists, Pacific). As you might guess, I adore biographies, history, historical fiction, and travel books!

More writers that happily grace the fourteen bulging bookcases presently in my house would include: Candice Millard (Destiny of the Republic); Helen Rappaport (The Last Days of the Romanovs); Erik Larson (The Devil in the White City); Pico Iyer (Video Night in Kathmandu); Eric Newby (The Big Red Train Ride); Ian Frazier (Great Plains, Travels in Siberia); Tony Horwitz (Confederates in the Attic); Jonathan Raban (Old Glory: An American Voyage); Michael Wood (In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great); and Philip Roth (Nemesis, Indignation). These fine authors can be read over and over.

I previously mentioned successfully writing to both Irving Stone and James A. Michener. Here are other writers who have graced me with personal replies, or whom I found and purchased their inscribed books when unearthed at used book sales: Herman Wouk (still with us at age 103!), Ray Bradbury, James Rollins, John Jakes, Ken Follett, Edward Rutherfurd, Paul Harvey (The Rest of the Story books), Lowell Thomas, Richard Halliburton, Michael Wood, William J. Bennett, Jeffery Archer, Paul Theroux, Daniel J. Boorstin, Wilbur Smith, Kevin Starr (series on California history), Robert K. Massie, Simon Winchester, Edmund Morris, and David McCullough (who sent me a very generous and kind four-page, hand-written reply!)

As I previously mentioned, one of my current jobs is as a part-time reference librarian at various public libraries. At Dixon Library, I have run an evening book club since 2010. As of now, we have discussed 110 books, one every month -- mostly fiction but some non-fiction too. It is a true delight to gather with other ardent readers, and to analyze both the writer’s finely crafted insights and how the experience of each book has affected my club members.

At age sixty-three, I myself began to write short stories in earnest. Most are fiction, in all genres (adventure, mystery, sci-fi, western, romance, horror, crime, fantasy, etc.), but some are true tales from my own life, or opinion pieces like what you are currently reading. This is my 68th entry. I hope to make it to 75 stories, whereby I can self-publish my third volume of collected stories. This has been a splendid creative outlet for me! Maybe I will even try for 100 written works?

Reading and writing are truly joyful for me. Whether in standard book form, as a theater play, as a poem, or as a movie or television script, the written word defies time itself, as its author’s thoughts, ideas, and feelings are preserved from the instant they are in print. I have visited almost every one of the world’s great libraries – vast cathedrals of mankind’s accumulated knowledge and experiences and stored information. They have inspired me with awe and reflection. The works still live and speak to us all! Plus, every person may freely contribute to this wondrous written progression during their lifetime, both for now and for future generations…

So how about you? What will YOU write one day for others to read?

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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