

In Praise of Reading

By Lucy Lee, M.A.L.S. '85, C.A.S. '03

It's hard to top the childhood experience of cuddling in a parent's warm lap hearing "Goodnight room, goodnight moon, goodnight cow jumping over the moon," or the adventures of curious George, Clifford the big red dog, Peter Rabbit, and the owl and the pussycat. Why is it that babies coo and toddlers clap their hands at the pictures and antics of these human-infused animals? Early Childhood Educators have learned answers, I'm sure, but, to me, it's just part of the magic of reading.

Reading has always been an important part of my life. Even though my father put in long days at the family hardware store, he read to us four children at bedtime. Once we were tucked in, he headed to the wing chair in the den with his own book—one of Douglas Southall Freeman's red, multi-volume tomes on Robert E. Lee or a biography of Thomas Jefferson. These heroes reinforced his belief that Virginia was the source of all that was noble.

Mother was the COO of the household. A copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *John Brown's Body* waited on an end table by the sofa in case she had a few unscheduled minutes. She took us downtown to the public library on a regular basis and saw that we received special books as birthday and Christmas gifts. I still have the illustrated editions of *Little Women*, *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys* in their individual cases along with my all-time favorite, *The Secret Garden*.

Since we lived in the hinterlands of Southside Virginia, Mother subscribed to the Metropolitan Museum's art history program for children. Once a month we received a booklet on a particular artist with stick-on pictures of his (probably no hers) work. Mother's excitement as she led us through the monthly explorations was as stimulating as the art work itself.

One rainy day she asked me to go to the attic with her. Dodging sleds, boxes of Christmas decorations and trunks of out-of-season clothes, she stopped at a small, dusty box tied up with string. Inside were her faded, musty smelling copies of *Rose in Bloom*, *Eight Cousins*, *Under the Lilacs* and other Alcott treasures. I loved each of these books in its own right, but they became favorites because Mother and I could talk about them.

On days that I walked down to my grandparents' house, I usually found Granny in the library, sunk into the down cushions of the sofa, surrounded by her needlepoint pillows. She would be reading her latest Book-of-the-Month Club selection or, perhaps, rereading *Gone with the Wind*. Once we caught up on each other's news, she offered to read *Winnie the Pooh* to me. I was not a Milne fan, but Granny enjoyed his books so much, I pretended that I did.

The reading habit my family fostered stuck with all of us. My two brothers, an attorney and an English teacher, spend much of their non-working hours reading. They are both devotees of Faulkner, in particular, and have attended the annual Faulkner conference in Oxford, Mississippi, even though it's held in sweat-dripping July. Their wives, too, are readers with whom I often exchange books.

Even when my sister had three young children and a full-time librarian job, she ended each day with a book in hand. As the children grew older, she retired to her bed shortly after supper with the latest P.D. James or Ellen Gilchrist. She let it be known that she was available for consultation, but she wasn't leaving the bed or her book. Fortunately, her husband, also a reader, understood.

I have made a career of reading—attending literary conferences, taking classes at nearby Hollins University, reviewing books for “The Roanoke Times,” attending bookWomen’s reading retreats.

Jim, my accountant husband, was not a reader when I met him, but he quickly realized that joining our family meant becoming a reader. He supplemented his heavy professional reading with mysteries, biographies and other non-fiction. He has first editions of every John Grisham book and will not even discuss selling them on E-bay. He likes seeing them all lined up, in pristine condition, on his shelves—a convert, for sure.

Our daughters were read to from birth—literally. Since my repertoire of baby talk was limited, I packed a copy of *Goodnight Moon* and *Mother Goose* with my nightgown when I went to the hospital for the first birth. By toddlerhood, we had new favorites—*The Story of Ferdinand* and *Are You My Mother?* Once Elizabeth could read, Laura Ingalls Wilder’s and Judy Blume’s books were among those she chose.

Her interest in pleasure reading, however, dwindled by high school. At each parent-teacher conference I agonized with the English teacher as to why this top student didn't enjoy reading. We pushed as much as we dared, but she didn't return to pleasure reading until college. Strangely, Elizabeth is now an art history professor and has read more books than I've ever laid eyes on. She spends the first half of each day that she's not teaching holed up in her office reading.

Brady, our younger daughter, was a consistent reader, but my Alcotts didn't appeal to her. She chose non-fiction books that spoke to her interest in animals, the environment and far-away lands—*Cry of the Kalahari*, *Prejudice Against Nature*, international wildlife books, and anything by Jane Goodall. She became a Peace and Global Studies major and received a master's in conflict analysis. Her work was with an anti-landmine organization and, later, USAID, focusing on ethnic warfare. Finally, burned out on the inhumanity of humans, she began volunteering at wildlife centers and is now a naturalist. In retrospect, her studies and her work could have been predicted from her early reading.

I have formed several friendships through books. When Kurt and I discovered a mutual love of Walker Percy's work, we became friends; Robertson Davies was the bond with Libba. Later, when Libba and her husband renovated an old house, they built floor to ceiling book cases around the dining room. Soon, they called the carpenters back. They needed more book shelves—in the living room, the kitchen and a half-bath.

Thinking that sounded excessive, I looked around our house. The only rooms that didn't have books were the dining room and the bath rooms. The wall of floor to ceiling book shelves in the living room hold biographies, essays, religion and women's history on one half and fiction on the other. The den has a small, free-standing case of To-Read books, the kitchen several shelves of cookbooks. I keep *A Room of One's Own*, *The Owl and the Pussycat*, *Fair and Tender Ladies*, biographies of the artists

Vanessa Bell and Paula Modershon-Becker—on a chest in my bedroom. Who knows when I might wake up with an urge to reread something of worth?

In 1998, five women friends and I began a book group. Initially we read Booker Prize winners, but the first few were so grim we switched to literary fiction in general and occasional non-fiction. A few years ago we took a break from the serious and read *A Round-Heeled Woman* by Jane Juska. Ms. Juska, a real-life English teacher, placed a personal ad in “The New York Review of Books” which read: “Before I turn 67—next March—I would like to have a lot of sex with a man I like. If you want to talk first, Trollope works for me.” The book was about her ensuing dating experiences.

Within a year, the only unmarried woman in our book group announced that she was leaving town to join her husband-to-be whom she had met online. Never underestimate the power of a well-timed book.

Aside from enhancing bonds with family and friends, reading is therapeutic. Every now and then when life seems too heavy, I settle in with a good book and stay put until the mood passes. There’s a remedy for every need: an aesthetic high--Virginia Woolf, a good laugh--Anne Lamott, a new friend--Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a familiar voice--Eudora Welty, an unfamiliar one--Zora Neale Hurston, a great love story--Emily Bronte, or just an all-around good read--Anne Tyler. When time is a factor, there’s always a short story by Alice Munro or a personal essay by Anna Quindlen or Molly Ivins. If one dare ask for anything more, it might be a snowy day, an overstuffed chair and an afghan.

Compared to other pursuits, reading remains a superior activity. It can be done almost anywhere: on the beach, in airplanes, at doctors’ offices, in bed, waiting in line at the DMV or the carwash. A book is the most portable of hobbies, fitting nicely into a purse, a diaper bag or a backpack. Reading does not require special equipment, clothing (no spandex!) or shoes, a partner or reservations. It requires a book and a reader. The rest is magic.