

Washington University in St. Louis
Washington University Open Scholarship

Neureuther Book Collection Essay Competition

Student Contests & Competitions

4-17-2017

Our Books Are Important to Us

Meg Russell

Washington University in St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/nbcec>

Recommended Citation

Russell, Meg, "Our Books Are Important to Us" (2017). *Neureuther Book Collection Essay Competition*. 58.
<http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/nbcec/58>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Contests & Competitions at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Neureuther Book Collection Essay Competition by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.

I grew up in a family on a budget. For much of my childhood we lived in a small house purchased through a low-income mortgage program. During those years, we did not have clothes from department stores or extra cash for meals at restaurants. Instead, we wore hand-me-downs and ate textured-vegetable-protein that could be bought on the cheap from Food Lion. But we always had books. Cases and cases of books that were purchased, left over from my parents' youths, given to us as gifts, picked up at the annual library sale, or collected from the free book-bin at our neighborhood recycling center. When I was six and my sister nine, we counted the books that lined the walls of our home—2,761. That was fifteen years ago so I imagine that number has only grown.

Our books were important to us. They reminded us that although in some ways we had little, in others we had much. What we lacked in economic resources we made up for in imagination, curiosity, and the possibility of changing our situation through education. And we capitalized on that possibility. My parents excelled at university jobs that embraced their knowledge of history and literature, and my sister and I eventually left home to attend college.

I had to choose which books would accompany me upon that transition. Haphazardly and imperfectly, relying on memories of the feelings each book evoked in me, I selected the stories that mattered most. I have a small library now, nothing compared to that of my childhood. But I have with me the books that are entwined in my developing self-identity. They are the books I grew up with; they are books about young women growing up.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, stolen from my sister, is the book that made me realize that I actually *liked* to read. For much of my life, I read because my parents read and my sister read and there was nothing else to do around the house except join them. But on a night that I could not sleep and needed a way to pass the time, I met Francie. From the opening scene of her

collecting cans on the New York streets, I could feel Francie's character as if she were a part of my own body. During her lonely moments, I felt that I was her. In her hard-fought successes, I saw who I wanted to be—tenacious, imaginative, loving. Francie's passion for reading carried her from tenement-dweller to typist to university student. Well aware that the conditions of my life were easier than Francie's, but equally sure that our general trajectories were the same, I decided that books would be important to me too.

I read *Flight Behavior*, a surprising find on the grocery store book rack, the summer before starting college. Barbara Kingsolver has been my favorite author since I first picked up *The Bean Trees* in tenth-grade English class. Her writing feels familiar, which I suspect is because I, like her and some of her characters, grew up in the foothills of Appalachia and moved west in my young adulthood. There is a certain trusting relationship I have developed with Barbara Kingsolver, partly because she has yet to write a book I do not like and partly because her voice has always sounded so relevant to me, that allowed *Flight Behavior* to exert perhaps undue influence over the course of my life. Before spending 433 pages with Dellarobia Turnbow, my Francie-like grit had begun to fade. I was quite sure that I would rather stay home, take classes at my state school, and go to Irish dance practice than spend four years at Washington University, an institution that felt entirely foreign to me. But Dellarobia had stuck around in her hometown after high school and in the end, after many frustrated years, decided her life would be better if she moved to the city and enrolled at the university. So, I decided to skip those years of heartache and take a leap of faith. *Flight Behavior*, with its worn yellow binding, perches on my shelf reminding me each day why I came here, why I belong at this university that often feels so beyond my means.

I bought *Go Set a Watchman* a couple summers ago. My family was staying in a remote state park cabin for a week and, a few days in, I ran out of books. I took what my family considered the logical next step—I drove an hour and a half to the nearest town (Salina, Kansas) to find a bookstore. I was hesitant to buy this book, aware of the controversy surrounding its release, but the joint coffee shop-bookstore I found did not have a large selection so the decision was made for me. However, once in my possession, this story granted me immeasurable comfort. The slight incongruities between Harper Lee's iterations of Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman* exemplified to me how our lives often turn out differently from how we imagined them. Yet, there is beauty in both the imagined and the reality. *Flight Behavior* had spurred me to leave known territory, which resulted, at times, in anxieties about living a life that did not feel like my own. *Go Set a Watchman* quelled those fears.

While my fiction collection helped me understand myself, my nonfiction section helped me understand the world around me. First there is *The Freedom Writers Diary*, a gift from my mother. I used to read this one during church. (When I was a toddler, my dad would bring me to Sunday Mass with a backpack of picture books and I guess I never kicked the habit.) I think of this book frequently as I prepare to pursue a career in teaching. I think of Mrs. Gruwell's desperate hope for her students. I think of the students' often challenged but never wavering will to improve their lives. Most of all, I think of how reading certain books, like *Zlata's Diary* and *The Diary of Anne Frank*, gave the students an anchor in the midst of uncertainty and adversity. I want that for my students too.

Sitting side by side are *I am Malala*, another gift from my mother, and *Desert Flower*, purchased for fifty cents from the annual library used book sale. Although I read the two books many years apart, they are arranged together because for me their stories intertwine. I was

reading *Desert Flower*, Somali-born activist Waris Dirie's memoir, on the day that Malala Yousafzai, a young Pakistani advocate for girls' education, was shot in the head. For me, that day and many that followed were steeped in indignation. While many books I had read before then had made me feel close to their characters, this time I was struck by how far away I was. These were stories I could not imagine. Malala's love of books brought her near death, Waris's work to change her life circumstances led to painful backlash. Over the years, my understanding of these women's struggles has been developed, complicated, and challenged by anthropology classes, current events, and the experience that comes with increasing age. Nonetheless, those books remain on my shelf and remind me every time I walk by that the world is very big and I have a great deal to learn.

Next to those two books, however, is one that brings me home: *The Word for Pen*, written by my mother. It is a memoir about growing up while her father, an English professor who loved to read more than almost anything else, was dying. My mom never had this book published. As a Christmas gift for her one year, my dad and I used an online service to print a few dozen copies. Nonetheless, this is the most important book on my shelf. It is how I learned about my mother's childhood, her family, her thoughtful views on life and death. My mother's mother is now in hospice and her caregivers have all read the book. Through it, they have come to know the vibrant life of a woman who is now frail and forgetful.

I often walk home from class or work after it has gotten dark, especially in the winter when the days are awfully short. Those are my lonely moments. But then I unlock my door, walk upstairs, drop my backpack on the floor, turn on the light, and look over at my bookshelf where Francie, Dellarobia, Scout, Mrs. Gruwell, Malala, Waris, and my mother are waiting for me. And I am not alone.

Bibliography

Dirie, Waris, and Cathleen Miller. *Desert Flower: The Extraordinary Life of a Desert Nomad*.

New York: Virago, 1999. Print.

Gruwell, Erin. *The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to*

Change Themselves and the World around Them. New York: Broadway, 1999. Print.

Kingsolver, Barbara. *Flight Behavior: A Novel*. New York: Harper, 2012. Print.

Lee, Harper. *Go Set a Watchman: A Novel*. New York: HarperCollins, 2015. Print.

Russell, Lucy S. *The Word For Pen*. Charlottesville: n.p., 2009. Print.

Smith, Betty. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. New York: Harper, 1943. Print.

Yousafzai, Malala. *I Am Malala: The Story of the Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was*

Shot by the Taliban. N.p.: Little Brown &, 2013. Print.