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No Mere Reader: A Collection of Memories

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No Mere Reader: A Collection of Memories

It is almost fall at home in Utah, but in southern California, mid-September is still warm and full of sunshine. I am eight years old, gangly already, and incessantly curious about the world around me. I am particularly curious of the room in Grandpa's house in California, a room off-limits to children like me on previous visits – but not this time. This time, I enter the room – and I am amazed: books surround me, more books than I have seen anywhere outside of a library. Big books, small books, books of all colors; very old books, and very new books. Dad tells me these were Grandpa's books. Were, and always will be, in some way: after we bury Grandpa's ashes, the books come home with us to stay.

Before Grandpa's death, I didn't know that people collected books. My books came from the school library, where I was just discovering books without pictures for the first time. I'd fallen in love with stories for the journeys the stories took me on, the places and people I learned about. The year that Grandpa died, I began a love affair with books that I hope will last forever. I also began a book collecting habit that reflects the many journeys of my life and my eclectic reading tastes. My book collection is the story of me, a map to places I have been and things and people I have loved.

The first books I claimed for my collection came from Grandpa's: the twin 1943 Random House editions of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, complete with wood engravings. These were the first of Grandpa's books to catch my eye because the cover of *Jane Eyre* shows solemn young girls, eyes downcast, walking two by two across a cobblestone path. *A book about girls!* I thought excitedly when I discovered it a few years after his death. We had just moved again, into a house with a room of built-in shelves, where I would spend the next two years looking at the books on the shelves again and again. By the time I started high school, I'd pilfered both the

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Random House editions to house in my own room. Today they still sit side by side on book shelves in my own home.

Dad played another big role in shaping my book collection early on, sharing books with me that he thought I would like. He bought me L.M. Montgomery's *Emily of New Moon* the year I was ten, a gift when my little brother was born. I have no idea how he thought of that book, but in the years since he's demonstrated more than once that he has an uncanny ability to find books he thinks I would like. His taste is spot-on, even though I haven't lived at home for more than a decade now. It was also thanks to Dad that I've become an avid Ray Bradbury collector. Sometime in middle school, Dad bought me a paperback copy of Bradbury's *Dandelion Wine*. I was a skeptic: science fiction? Watching *Star Trek: The Next Generation* with him was all well and good, but I wasn't sure how I felt about reading that genre. Eventually, though, I caught on, which makes me the third generation of Bradbury readers in my family after Dad and Grandpa. These books are some of my favorites, representing a legacy of love for the written word and exploring worlds and possibilities.

Most of my books, though, are ones I discovered on my own. Many are titles I borrowed from friends or the library once upon a time before purchasing my own copy much later. My paperback copies of EL Konigsburg's *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* and Ellen Raskin's *The Westing Game* are two such books. These were two of my favorites when I was young, and somewhere in my mid-twenties I devoted a significant amount of time and funds to getting copies of those and other books. My collection of *Trixie Belden* mysteries fits in this category as well. These days, those books seem to be gathering dust hidden away on the bottom shelves of my bookcases, but someday I hope to resume my search: all of my *Trixie Belden* books are garage sale or antique shop finds. It would be fun to go treasure hunting again

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and to begin rediscovering the child in me who loved to solve a good mystery. It is my curiosity and drive to find answers to unsolved questions, after all, that led me to pursue a PhD.

Given my fondness for books, it may be no surprise that I've developed a habit of acquiring books as souvenirs when I travel. I began this practice on spring break my first year of college, when my cousin and I road tripped to Florida and visited the Keys. Although I didn't quite appreciate Ernest Hemingway at the time, I picked up a copy of *A Moveable Feast* from a small bookshop on Key West. When I opened it yesterday, I discovered a postcard I'd purchased still sitting inside the cover. A few years later, I visited Scotland while working as a nanny and continued my souvenir-book tradition with a UK edition of Neil Gaiman's *Stardust*. Most recently, I picked up a history of a prominent New Orleans woman while on vacation in that city. What may be most remarkable, however, is that my fondness for books is so well-known that friends and family routinely bring me books as souvenirs from their travels as well. I have a book on Alaskan women's history and the gold rush, a copy of L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* purchased on Prince Edward Island, Canada, and even a Latin edition of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (aka *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* in the US) from friends who visited England several years ago.

There is no one easy way to characterize my book collection. If you came to visit me and asked to see my books, you might laugh a bit at the strange shelving arrangements: my five bookcases are full to the brim and overflowing, which means I've learned to stack books in odd piles, one in front of the other, just to fit everything in. If you asked to see my favorite books, that would take awhile. Do I point out Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*, with its poetic visions of past and future? Do I share Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife*, full of beauty and strangeness? Would you laugh at my complete set of Lemony Snicket's children's

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books, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, which I shared excitedly with my younger siblings, or the copies of *American Girl* historical fiction books that may just be the key to understanding why I love women's history so much? Would you understand how Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* books remind me of my family and how we moved around the country time and again? Would you want to hear about the history books that captured my mind and inspired me in the past few years, like Major General Jeanne Holm's *Women in the Military: An Unfinished Revolution*? Could we sit and talk about Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* and other books we've each loved for hours?

It may be a hodge-podge collection of titles, but these books are my memories. Picking up my copy of JRR Tolkien's *Fellowship of the Ring*, for example, reminds me of when I was 15, the summer we moved from Montana to Missouri. I got halfway through that book then, but it would be another year or two before I completed the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy because I wanted to own them all and couldn't afford to buy them in the editions I wanted. Even today, this is the book of the trilogy I remember best. I never did get those matching editions.

If you want to know who I am, let me show you my books. Let me share the stories – not just the ones inside the pages, but the stories my books tell about me.

*'There are no mere readers,' said the old man.
'You are either out of a library or safely in.'*¹

¹ Ray Bradbury, "The F. Scott/Tolstoy/Ahab Accumulator," in *One More for the Road* (NY: William Morrow, 2002), 247.

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