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Policy in Prose, and More: A Love Affair with Foreign Affairs

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Shannon Petry

Carl Neureuther 2008 Book Collection Competition – Undergraduate Division

Policy in prose, and more: A love affair with foreign affairs

My grandmother lives in Ste. Genevieve, Missouri, a small town about an hour south of St. Louis that is mostly known for its wineries and for being the home of the first brick building west of the Mississippi. I grew up in Kalamazoo, Michigan, which is mostly known for its funny name. When I was little, my family and I would make the eight-hour drive to Ste. Genevieve several times a year, and to me it was like traveling to another world. Everyone honked when they passed each other on the road; when we went out to eat, my grandmother would purposely sit at the table closest to the door so she could greet each new arrival by name (and, of course, show off her grandchildren); and you could walk from my grandmother's house to any place you wanted to go in town in less than 10 minutes.

I took frequent advantage of this proximity, eschewing the musty wine stores and the Old Brick and turning my feet instead to the county library, located in a storefront in the historic 'downtown.' I thought it was the best library ever: besides the usual book lending, this one sold books with low circulation at the bargain rate of ten cents per paperback and a quarter per hardcover. One year they raised prices—to 25 and 50 cents apiece, respectively—and my parents agreed to adjust my book allowance accordingly. Incidentally, this is also how I first encountered the effects of inflation: America's Consumer Price Index monitors the prices of a basket of essential goods, everything from bubble gum to basic clothing; I too had a basket. Of essential books.

I would buy their books by the armload, spending hours rifling through the shelves in search of new favorites. While there were usually a couple of Nancy Drew mysteries amongst the bunch—I was in elementary school, after all—I was really on the hunt for history. Anything involving the Civil War or World War II was sure to be selected. For a while, my parents tried to protect me from the disturbing stories those books often told; my mom, especially, was upset when I started having nightmares about the Holocaust. But her concern just pushed me deeper into the genre.

One year, an especially fat book caught my eye. It had presence on the bookshelf; its blue-and-white dust jacket had a title stamped in authoritative capital letters. It Doesn't Take a Hero: The Autobiography of General H. Norman Schwarzkopf. I'd never heard of this person, but it didn't matter. I had to have it. My family chuckled at the disconcerting sight of a tiny child carting around this monster volume, but I didn't care. On the drive back to Michigan, I immersed myself in what turned out to be the tale of the senior U.S. Army officer in the Middle East during the Persian Gulf War. The book opened with stories from Schwarzkopf's childhood in Iran, watching his father interact with sheiks and princes and shaping U.S. policy in the region.

Soon, I was well on my way to knowing the book by heart. This life of adventure leapt off the pages; my days in southwest Michigan were routine, predictable, easy in comparison. My mother, like Schwarzkopf, was an Army brat and had grown up in a very different environment than my own: she once counted that she'd moved 27 times by the time she was married at 24. I grew up feeling lopsided and slightly envious, inclined to discount the value of my father's stable Ste. Genevieve roots as I stared wide-eyed at the many souvenirs my mother had wedged into a hanging 'memory box.' All I could do was imagine such experiences, living vicariously through the protagonists of my favorite history and historical fiction books.

At age 13, some years after I had first read Schwarzkopf's book, my own autobiography added an interesting chapter. My father's job took my family to Milan, Italy for two years. My excitement was beyond words (although I have to admit it was tempered by some harsh realities, including the moment when I learned I would be allowed to ship over just one shelf's worth of my painstakingly-constructed book collection). This turning point in my personal life was soon echoed by a shift in my taste in books. Initially, I looked at Europe through the lens of my American expatriate status. To learn about how Americans had historically interacted with Europeans—a daily part of my life at my international school—I read Henry Kissinger's Diplomacy and, later, Madeleine Albright's fantastic memoir Madam Secretary. But as I grew more comfortable with my surroundings, I was intrigued by the newness of this "Other" (Edward Saïd's Orientalism was another

part of my literary self-education) and started considering Europe on its own merits. I realized I was most interested in Europe as Europe; not as it was seen in comparison to the U.S., but rather how people across its multinational community were developing an understanding of their future as citizens of the European Union. Today, I can trace my interest in European politics and diplomacy to the formative time I spent in Milan, and the formative books I collected there. While it's somewhat ironic that I discovered these English-language books while living in an Italian-speaking country, they turned out to be my link to an America that I was missing more than I had expected.

As an undergraduate, I've studied political science, continued to learn Italian, and have taken up French; all three of these interests have meant a boom in the number and an evolution in the type of books I collect. During the summer and semester I spent in France, I trawled the Gibert Jeune bookshops for books in French that touched on my fascination with foreign policy through the centuries. I read classics like Montesquieu's Lettres persanes, an epistolary novel that recounts the story of two Persian nobles who traveled to France in the early 1700s. Today, scholars debate the veracity of Montesquieu's sources—were certain towns or people really there when Montesquieu said they were?—but as the French say, *peu m'importe*. These fictional *lettres* were like an old-fashioned blog, allowing Usbek and Rica to communicate with their friends back home and marvel at cultural differences during their time in Paris, just as I communicated with mine back in St. Louis.

Back in the U.S., I spent a summer interning at a pharmaceutical company, where the fact that I spent my lunch breaks talking about foreign countries became evident when my boss presented me with a leaving present he knew I'd love: a subscription to *Foreign Affairs* magazine. While, strictly speaking, the articles in *Foreign Affairs* don't qualify as books, the arrival of each edition recalls the excitement I used to feel when walking into that library in Ste. Genevieve, confronted with the unknown. On the day they land in my campus mailbox, you'll find me clutching my copy in Bear's Den, reading about the European Union or the U.S. presidential candidates' foreign policy positions as I wait in line for my turkey sandwich. To me, the articles are like potential books: in all likelihood, these scholars will continue their studies and will one day publish a real, hardcover book

on the subject (which will then be reviewed in *Foreign Affairs...*). Reading their articles is like the literary equivalent of saying “I knew you when.” They’re all in my dorm room, lined up on my bookshelf just like their more traditional counterparts.

More than any other influence, the blended knowledge from all of these books has shaped the person I am today and helped me decide the career I want to pursue in the future. Fittingly, I hope to work one day for the U.S. Department of State, serving as a diplomat and living all over the world. I’ll take the wisdom of Schwarzkopf, Kissinger, and Albright with me every day as I go to work, and remember the lessons of my childhood readings about the Holocaust and other historical tragedies as I negotiate foreign policies. My books will accompany me on these travels, and it’s exciting to think about the new ones that will be continuously added as I explore each new place I live. When my mother moved around, she collected miniature paintings, little knick-knacks, and Christmas ornaments featuring local landmarks to remind herself of her adventures; my version of her memory box is, I’ve realized, my bookshelf.