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The Kindred Spirits of my Dusty Upper Shelf

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Wendy V. Xin

Carl Neureuther Book Collection Competition – Undergraduate Category

April 3rd, 2006

THE KINDRED SPIRITS OF MY DUSTY UPPER SHELF

I am a collector by nature. Growing up in a small urban apartment, my drawers were always filled with toy cars that I thought I could never part with, my closets with stuffed animals of every shape, condition and expression, and my shelves with books of every kind. From fantasy to science fiction to mystery to history, I regard them as my most cherished possessions. The toy cars and stuffed animals have made their way slowly into the hands of other gleeful children or into the wastebasket, usually without my knowledge and with the determined triumph of my meticulous mother. However, my books remain on their shelves, preserved upon their pedestal and content to be taken down and read every once in a while. Dusting off their covers and turning their pages, I am transported to worlds that I have visited so often, yet never seem to tire of. Upon the arrival of my most precious books through the post, I tore open the envelope and received them much as I would a visitor from a distant time and land. Indeed, they are my kindred spirits, traveling across both memories and miles from the dusty upper shelves of my childhood.

Throughout the years, I have accumulated endless volumes of children's literature, infinitely dear to me because they have been my constant companions and faithful entertainers through lonely days, sunny mornings and stormy nights. In them I see reflected my dreams and my hopes, my childhood and my upbringing. My collection, though ranging from classic picture books to relatively unknown chapter books, seems to have become a part of my journey through life as much as my friends and family have been. They beckon towards me, whether I am a wide-eyed wondering child or a weary collegiate wanderer, into adventures and voyages involving lions that speak, witches with square feet and bald heads, cities crowned with emeralds and enchanted castles that float in the air. I have never been to

Monet's garden, nor have I had sisters, nor have I traveled in a tollbooth or ridden on the Polar Express. Despite all of this, I feel as though I have experienced more than I could ever have imagined and imagine, now, more than I ever dreamed because of my treasured, ever-obliging books.

During my elementary and middle school years, my mother would have me wait for her in the public library after classes ended, with the hope that I would improve my English language skills if not by reading, then by osmosis at the very least. Among the stacks and stacks of novels, biographies, histories and mysteries, I stumbled upon my earnest passion for reading and fanned this spark of interest with pages upon pages of printed words, until this tiny spark became the consuming flame of a lifelong obsession with literature. To my books, I owe immeasurable gratitude and profound appreciation. Beginning with picture books, then chapter books and finally to novels, I can smilingly remember the glances of astonishment I received from librarians and library patrons in witnessing the peculiarity of a small Chinese girl submerged under a colossal mound of books. I should have explained to them then that I was simply relishing in the particular aroma of each genre in an attempt to hone my literary preferences, though perhaps I derived some enjoyment from the bewilderment I caused. As I grew older and stronger, my pile only increased, spilling into every corner and aspect of my life. When I finally acquired my driver's license (after two unsuccessful attempts), my first trip was to the nearest library to make use of my library card. Sometimes, my mother's colleagues would tease that I devoured these books much like a ravenous child consumed candy. Indeed, I prefer my old tattered picture books to anything else anyone could offer me (unless it is an additional tattered book), because they have accompanied me from the beginning and have never faltered in providing me with a childlike pleasure.

I must quote the incredible insight of Helen Keller in stating that "Literature is my Utopia." At times when circumstances are uncertain and there is so much chaos and noise

about me, my books act as my refuge for peace and for counsel. Although I have matured and changed, these familiar characters, whom I may call my friends and kindred spirits, continue as they have always been, ageless and timeless. It is to them I return when seeking the unassuming innocence that characterized my childhood. In a way, these children's books have immortalized the youthful escapades and exploits of my own life, becoming as much connected to me as I am to them. I have read Ella Enchanted more times than I can count, and still I never cease to be amazed at its endearing purity and unassuming simplicity. Ella did enchant me, teaching me the importance of defying expectations and asserting one's individuality despite obstacles and obstructions. Josephine March demonstrated to me the magnitude of the world's possibilities; Anne, the perpetual wonder of growing up, and Emily, the marvel of writing. Above all, each book in my collection has contributed its share in convincing me that there is heroism, valor and magic to be unearthed on the passage along our own unique yellow brick roads.

The collection that I now have has been the product of endless forages through the unknown, uncharted terrain of the used book sale. Boxes upon boxes of dusty, long forgotten books would accumulate in the basement of a nearby library, having soaked up years of memories, crumbling under the fervent flipping of countless scores of readers. On the anticipated day, these books would be unleashed into the eager hands of bibliophiles, and I would be waiting impatiently among people that I fondly recognized as sharing my delight for literature and for reading, these kindred spirits of a different grain. Hardly believing that a large brown paper bag of books could only cost three dollars, I would snatch up hardcovers, paperbacks and books without covers; titles that I knew, titles that I had never heard of and titles that interested me at a glance. Feeling much like Mary Lennox when she discovered the secret garden or like Alice when she tumbled through the rabbit hole to Wonderland, I would depart from my blissful period of treasure hunting with a contented feeling; a feeling that I

will forever identify with the sensation and fascination of exploring life through pages of written material. In a way, my books have allowed me to hold this vast, immeasurable, infinite world in the palm of my hands, opening my eyes and illuminating my mind.

My children's literature collection boasts of my most eclectic group of friends; it is composed of writers, princess brides, ogres, wizards, orphans, dreamers, chocolate lovers, friendly giants, thief lords, wishing trees, hobbits, borrowers and twits. They have taught me to dream continually, to write one's troubles into thin air, to explore courageously and to learn and read unfalteringly and unfailingly, always with youthful, unconcerned pleasure. As an English major emerging from a family of scientists and mathematicians, I am regarded as somewhat of a hydra, sprouting heads that, peculiarly, prattle on about novels and words rather than calculate derivatives and scientific formulas. Thus, it has entirely been my childhood books that have laid the foundation for my lifelong pursuit of literature and have given me direction, inspiration and most importantly, a sense of imagination. Bestowing me with these precious gifts, I can do no more to honor them than through a piece of writing that I sincerely hope does justice to my teachers, my friends, my companions: my books.

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