

By Jessica Hendrickson for the University of Minnesota First-Year Writing Program under the Department of Writing Studies

The Rollercoaster of Literacy

My love for reading and writing burned bright during my childhood, but like every flame, it did not burn forever. Up until I began high school, reading and writing were hobbies of mine that served as blissful escapes from a harsh reality. The aftermath of the separation of my parents and my sister's death was ground zero, and I was trying to cross those troubled waters before I was allowed to cross the street. After growing from three feet tall to five and transitioning into high school, my books with tattered spines and marked pages went from being hidden under my pillow to collecting dust in a bookshelf. Passion once filled my heart for the turning of a crisp page that uncovered the ideals of a different world. This passion eventually deteriorated as I was assigned readings that were difficult, time consuming, and ultimately as dull as a rock. The alternative world within the academic texts was not one that I felt was worth escaping into. Over time, the bright-eyed little girl holding dozens of books at the library checkout grew into a high school student who couldn't bear the thought of wasting valuable time reading from pages that held no value to her.

On my weekly trip to the Fargo Public Library in my early elementary school days, my little hands were holding a pile of chapter books stacked to my chin. The pile contained everything from short *Junie B. Jones* books to long *A Series of Unfortunate Events* books to gossip-packed *J-14* magazines. Once I was ready to checkout, I approached my dad and he looked at me with somewhat sympathetic and somewhat adoring eyes. He informed me that I wasn't able to check out that many books at one time. He said that even if it were allowed, it wasn't possible for me to get through that many words before our next trip to the library. I usually had no problem getting what I wanted from my dad, which was clear as I suckered him into buying me a new book light. It was one of the perks of being his only child, I suppose. That

being said, I was kind of insulted by his inability to bend the rules for me and his lack of faith in my reading speed. Although, I knew better than to give my dad a hard time, so I bit my tongue and reluctantly accepted the injustice that was being bestowed upon me. With a heavy head, I made my way to indecisively put some of my picks back. I sat on my knees in front of a bookshelf with each book spread out on the floor in front of me. I carefully studied the words, faces, and graphics that were unique to each one. The letters and pictures that lived on every cover sparked my mind to consider the endless possibilities of what could be inside each of them. Was I to deny myself the opportunity to read about Junie B. Jones's experiences on the "stupid smelly bus" or to find out why she was "almost" a flower girl? Or would I have been better served to read about Violet, Klaus, and Sunny's journey through *The Austere Academy* and *The Vile Village*? My eight-year-old brain even pulled for the magazines that detailed Hilary Duff's heartbreak and what it took for girls to be Zac Efron's type. More importantly, I could not pass up the magazine's five foot tall poster of Dylan Sprouse that was destined to hang on my bedroom wall.

All of these possibilities rushed through my head like wildfire as I said my goodbyes to some characters that I wouldn't have the pleasure of meeting that week. Soon enough, my little hand reached up for my dad's large, callused one and we headed back to our two bedroom apartment. My mind was soon drawn to his famous spaghetti that we were going to have for dinner that night, along with my new good reads that were shuffling around in my bright pink backpack. Little did he know that I would be up past my bedtime hiding under the covers with my new book light and a new world to dive into. Good one, Dad.

Over dramatic responses to instances like this one happened very often in my childhood when it came to my experiences with reading and writing. As I made my way through

elementary school, I had it in me to lay on the couch for an entire day reading *Junie B. Jones* *Jingle Bells Batman Smells!* or *The Tale of Despereaux*. I felt a sense of accomplishment as I read, as if each page were a leg in a relay race and the more pages that I turned the closer I was getting to winning a prize. To me, the prize obtained from reaching the end of a novel was knowing the entirety of its plot, and being able to analyze it from all angles.

Not only did reading provide me with a rewarding hobby, it gave me the ability to escape the problems in my own life and live in the fantasy worlds of characters dealing with their own, more complicated problems. Growing up through the nasty separation of my parents entailed many slammed doors, shouting phone calls, and nightmares. Before I was old enough to choose how much of my dinner I had to finish before leaving the table, I had to choose which parent I would spend each holiday with and which parent would be denied that right. Meanwhile, as I sat at the kitchen table doing my homework, I listened through the drywall as my mother cried out for the lost soul of her daughter, my sister, who was taken by Cerebral Palsy far too soon. This was a pretty typical afternoon.

The wailing never seemed to come to a halt like it should have, nor did the depression or bipolar mood swings. My mother, my rock, who at the time I viewed as a mountain, came crashing down in shambles right in front of my eyes. Before the age of six years old, I learned two very valuable lessons. I learned to not draw attention to my mom's daily outburst, and I learned that life can be very cruel and unfair to some people. When my life got too ugly for my eyes to bear, I picked up a book and looked through the eyes of somebody else for awhile. This burning curiosity and hunger for a window into a life other than my own is what made it nearly impossible for me to decide between which fictional lives I was going to sink my teeth into next. The events I read about in books got me thinking about all of the possible plans that the universe

could have in store for my future, which made it easier to shake off what was happening in the present. “Maybe one day I’ll be a rockstar or a ballerina or a doctor,” I thought to myself in awe.

It wasn’t until the third grade that I stumbled upon a new way to get lost in the stories involving people and places in which I was not familiar. At the beginning of the school year, my teacher introduced the idea of short stories, and more importantly, that we were going to have many opportunities to write our own in her class. She said that there would be several blocks of time per week designated to writing stories of our own choosing, which would each eventually be revised and published for the entire class to read. After the rough draft of a story was complete, we turned it in for revisions from our teacher, which we would then correct upon return and resubmit it for publishing. By publishing, I mean neatly writing the story out on blank paper and picking from the many choices of laminated book covers that she had available at the time.

I found that it was the book covers themselves that inspired my dozens of stories, such as those shaped as a castle or a basketball which lead to paragraphs detailing the corruption in a royal family and the obstacles facing an upcoming basketball star. I was praised for the grammatical correctness, creativity, and visual appeal of my short writings and like any child, the encouragement added fuel to my fire. This newfound excitement I felt for writing lead me to doodle story ideas during class and even keep a journal, an informal collection of pages detailing my latest crush and what I had for lunch each day. I found myself in a safe place when I was writing, and that was exactly what I needed as a little girl growing up in a broken home. But just as most good things do, this eventually came to an end. The love I had in my heart for the fantasies I could indulge in with a pencil and paper was tragically short lived. To my own surprise, this was at the hands of my later education.

Once I entered high school, my love for reading and writing quickly faded away. I was now being asked to read fact-spitting historical texts, mind boggling Shakespeare works, and other novels that were completely outside of most students' interests, including my own. Believe it or not, the treachery got worse. After I would spend hours combing through the bland pages of *Hamlet*, *Purple Hibiscus*, and my AP European History textbook, I was forced to write long formal papers about what I had read and experience the crippling dullness all over again. It was rare that a somewhat enjoyable book, such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, was assigned, so most of my experiences in english class were tedious and downright miserable. Soon enough, I found out that most students opted out of these negative feelings by never looking past the front cover of an assigned novel. With chapter summaries available in the dark corners of the internet, it became relatively easy to have a decent idea of what went on in a book without putting yourself through the pain of actually reading it.

To my own surprise, I became one of those students. I hadn't ever been one to take the easy way out, but with other schoolwork and responsibilities pertaining to sports and work piling up, I felt no need to add another stressor to my life. When a book was assigned to read in english class, it would usually rot in the darkness of my locker under my gym shoes and a mountain of granola bar wrappers. When the time came for a test or assignment related to the reading, I would find sources online that summarized the chapters in a way that would give me a decent idea of what went on in the story. I know that my eight-year-old self would have been distraught and disappointed by my actions, because I had once been the little girl who couldn't get enough of reading stories. I had been the child who was always up past her bedtime under the covers with a novel in one hand and a book light in the other, escaping into an alternate reality. I had always been the student who put her heart and soul into everything she did, especially when it

came to something she was passionate about. Reading and writing were hobbies that I once had a deep passion for, but like I said before, every good thing must come to an end.

The little girl holding the pile of books as tall as Mount Everest would have never foreseen that her passion for writing her own stories and her hunger for the insight into the stories of others could have dwindled away. In the mind of an eight-year-old girl, no spark that bright could ever dim. It wasn't until later in my school career that I realized how untrue and naive that this belief really was. Just as my parents' love and my sister's life had to come to an end, so does every flame. As soon as reading and writing shifted from joy inducing hobbies to nuisances of homework assignments, I knew that my flame had burned to the end of its wick, and as unfortunate as it is, I have yet to find a way to rekindle my fire.