

A WRITER'S EDUCATION

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I am an unrepentant reader. The episode of the Twilight Zone which most affected me was the one called "Time Enough at Last," where, after the detonation of an H-bomb leaves him completely alone in a devastated world, harried booklover Burgess Meredith breaks his glasses upon finding the Public Library. The tragedy of that was heartbreaking, and one I completely understood, even as young as I was when I saw it.

I remember once telling my boss that I would rather read than do anything else, with the exception of writing, and he told me he preferred to live life rather than read about it.

Now, this offended me on many levels. First, it made me feel guilty for indulging in one of my greatest pleasures, though for me, reading is not only that. It is a solace and an education and a way of experiencing things I would never have experienced otherwise. To walk for a few hours in someone else's shoes, to have insight into the greatest minds of our time or any other time, to live vicariously through both the deadliest and most sublime experiences.... I don't know about you, but I think I would rather read about experiencing a cobra bite or a bear attack than actually experience those things for myself.

But my bosses' comment also made me realize just how precious to me are the memories I've got from reading. When I needed solace and familiarity, books were where I went. When it seemed that life was ready to bowl me over, the quiet comfort of a story balanced and sustained me. Even as a child, I was a voracious reader. So much so that my mother had to beg me to go outside and play, and I ruined my back by the time I was twelve, reading hour after hour in an

old, beat-up recliner.

My family moved from Columbus, Ohio to Olympia when I was eleven. The library there became the heart of my existence, as did a bookstore that sold used books for a dime from a dingy back room. Norah Lofts, Victoria Holt, Mary Stewart ... those were the writers who sustained me. I was unhappy here; I missed my friends and I was not good at making new ones. When my parents divorced two years later, I immersed myself in books. My father had built a chair designed to help my back—made of plywood and shag carpeting, and I couldn't sit in it for long without my butt falling asleep. But this seemed a small price to pay. I went to the library once a week. This was before things were computerized, of course, and I would come up to the desk with fifteen to twenty books, all of which had to be stamped and carded. When I got home, I would set them by the side of that plywood chair and read one after another, piling them at the other side when I was finished. Then, the following week, I would return them and pick out fifteen more. My father grew so worried over me that he signed me up for a pottery class, which I obediently went to, though I hated it. Where I wanted to be was within the pages of a book.

I knew that library like the back of my hand. I knew where E.B. Nesbitt was, and Lloyd Alexander. Taylor Caldwell, Anya Seton and Phillippa Carr, and Susan Howatch, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Carol Ryrie Brink. I found the section on British history and read every book on Henry VIII's six wives. From there I went on to the Stuarts and then the Plantagenets. I read Dumas and Poe and Heinlein, Bradbury and Burroughs.

As a dedicated reader, it seemed natural that I would write stories as well. I knew I wanted to be a writer when I was six—that, or a drum majorette. But since I had no talent at all when it came to twirling the baton—and believe me, I tried—a writer it was.

By the time I was in second grade, I was assigning myself reading tasks: for example, on my self-imposed "Ocean" week, I checked out all the books I could find on the ocean and read them. There was Dinosaur week, Desert week, African Savannah Week, Space Week and Horse week, among others.

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The unfortunate byproduct of all these "weeks" was that I believed there was nothing I didn't know--a trait most especially irritating to my family. I think they take a rather too-vicious pleasure in finding me wrong, but as an adult I've learned to take it with a kind of begrudging and resentful grace.

I wrote the first story I remember in fourth grade, though I know there must have been others before that. It was called "The Horse from Outer Space." This was about the time of the moon landing, so astronauts and space travel were on everyone's mind. Unfortunately I remember nothing about the story except that I illustrated it with a horse wearing a space helmet that looked curiously like a fishbowl. I hated Sunday school, and soon talked my parents into taking me into the regular service, where I would steal the offering envelopes from the rack in front of me and write stories furtively on them with the short little pencils meant to mark in the amount of one's contribution to the plate.

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During my grade school years and junior high, I wrote constantly--rewriting novels I'd read, writing stories of my own, honing my craft, though I never thought of it that way. Rather I was entertaining myself--I was writing the stories I wanted to read. In high school I was nurtured by a wonderful English teacher, who arranged for the school to send me to Centrum in Port Townsend for a week-long poetry seminar, and who also arranged for me to meet once a month with a local published author. I would go to this writer's house and sit at her kitchen table while

she served me tea and often some kind of cake, and gave me writing assignments that I recognize now to have been absolutely seminal to my education as a writer. She critiqued and edited, and although I thought she hated everything I did, I realize now how much she taught me, and how fair and even-handed she was while still telling me truths I needed to hear.

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I was not open to such honesty then, nor was I when I attended Western Washington University, intending to be an English major. I was eighteen, proud, a know-it-all with the kind of hubris only a teenager can possess. I was used to writing a paper the night before and getting an A, and when I received a D on my first composition at Western, I promptly decided the English program there was subpar—not of course, that I was subpar—and decided to pursue a major in Broadcast Communications instead.

Sometimes the roads you take to pursue your dreams are circuitous, and sometimes you don't even realize you're on those roads. Because I learned more about writing from Broadcasting than I ever learned from a creative writing course. More than that, I learned things about the world I never would have learned otherwise. Working in TV news exposed me to many, many situations, some of them dangerous, some joyous, some heartwrenching, some victorious. Every one of them was a learning experience. As a privileged middle class white girl, my exposure to different walks of life and different ways of living had been severely limited. Television news showed me possibilities and emotional truths I never would have experienced otherwise.

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But after four years in TV news, I also knew that what I wanted to be above all things was a writer, and working 20-40 hours a week overtime meant I had no time to write. So I quit a lucrative job and took a position as a waitress, and there, again, learned something about myself

and other people that was invaluable.

All these roads ... leading to the place I was supposed to be, though I didn't know it. I took other jobs and though some of them lasted for years, I never thought of them as anything but temporary. I was going to be a writer, and I spent my free time writing—even if that meant giving up some of the things that single women do. My friends learned to love me even if I didn't party with them every weekend, and my boyfriend—and later husband—learned to accept that I wanted more for myself, and that I wanted it enough to sacrifice a movie or dinner out. My grandmother suggested I join a writing group, and so I went to the library and looked up associations of Northwest Writers and joined. I spent hours in the library researching, and I wrote, and found agents, and submitted and was rejected. Five full manuscripts were written, submitted, rejected. But I kept going and I never gave up. A few years ago, I saw an interview with Bob Dylan, where he said he never doubted that he would make it in music, that he always felt he was special, that he had a destiny, and I understood what he meant because I'd felt that too. Maybe we all do. I once told a friend of mine that I was not a risk-taker, and after she finished staring at me in shocked surprise, she told me I was—most people never did what I did. Most people never tried for more. But I had been raised on a steady diet of stories about unforgettable people who took their destinies into their own hands, and I knew that for me there was no other choice. I loved writing above everything else, and once I realized I had a passion many people never felt, I knew I had an obligation to try to succeed at it, that I owed it to God or the universe or myself or whatever.

To reach that dream, reading became my ladder. But now I was not just a reader thirsty for entertainment, I was a writer, and one of historical fiction, no less, where it was mandatory

that I do research. Luckily, I loved it. But it makes me nervous sometimes to think of what anyone glancing at my library record must see: I've checked out books on poisons, cult religions, opium, absinthe, insanity, asylums, prisons, sexual dysfunction, outlaws, hysteria, prostitution, murder, hauntings, voodoo, spiritualism, mesmerism and exorcism. This is only the tip of the iceberg, I assure you.

The reverence and elation I feel when I find the perfect research book, or when I open some 1889 phone directory or a little known published memoir is hard to describe. To read the words written by someone who lived one hundred years ago, to truly see how little the world has changed even though everything has changed—it puts one's life into perspective.

Now I do a great deal of research online, where primary sources are now readily available, and although this is invaluable to me, I'll admit I miss the browsing I used to do, where serendipity played such a large part in discovering a book I didn't know to look for—for example, while trolling the arts section at Seattle Public, I found a book on Delmonico's—an old and famous restaurant in New York City. It never occurred to me there would be a book about it, and when your job is to describe something so people can see it in their mind's eye, to find a book like that is an indescribable treat.

Once, in the UW Library of Health Sciences, I found an 1865 surgical manual. I read it cover to cover. I actually know how to amputate my own leg—my only concern is whether or not I could stay conscious long enough to do so.

One of the first novels I wrote was set during the California Gold Rush of 1849. Its genesis was a book I found in a bargain bin at a library booksale about the Gold Rush. While doing research at Seattle Public Library, I found a memoir written in 1852 by a man who went to

California via the Isthmus of Panama. In the 19th Century, people used to routinely keep diaries of their journeys and adventures, and then self-publish when they arrived home, and give the books as gifts to relatives and friends. This was one such memoir. It led directly to the writing of my first published book: *A Candle in the Dark*, which was set during the journey to the gold rush via the Isthmus of Panama. Though I had known through my other research that it was one of three routes taken to the Gold Fields, that book brought the journey alive for me in a way nothing else had done.

In my research on mental illness in the 19th Century, I stumbled upon a line in a book that noted that doctors during that time would manually bring women to orgasm to relieve symptoms of hysteria, or neurasthenia. It was a throw-away notation, but it was so startling that it sent me down a whole other avenue of research, one which involved reading scientific journals and case studies that dumped me deeper into 19th century thought and culture than I had ever gone before.

That led to the writing of "*An Inconvenient Wife*," but it also sent me on a journey of self-discovery, and showed me an aspect of women's history that I never knew existed, nor—as I have discovered in many autographings and speaking engagements since—do most women.

I had known something of women's history before then, certainly. I knew of suffragettes and the Equal Rights Amendment—which of us growing up in the 70's did not? But for me, as for most women, history consisted of the doings of men: discoveries of new worlds and trade routes, wars and the buildings of cities.

In the writing of "*Susannah Morrow*," a book set during the Salem Witch Trials, I had discovered that women of that time, particularly Puritan women, had a great deal of power. The

Puritans left England to come to America in search of their utopia, what they called “a city on a hill,” where they could pursue their ideology in peace, and they recognized women as equal partners in that ideology. A woman could own her own property—it did not pass into her husband's hands upon marriage, but remained hers to do with as she would. She could make and sign contracts; she had control over her children; she could run a business. Marriages were not religiously based, but were civil contracts, subject to dissolution if either party did not live up their part of the contract.

But this was not true throughout the world, and it was not true in later centuries. This kind of power was to become threatening, and since society tends to disenfranchise those who imperil or question that status quo, when the rest of the world came knocking at Salem Village's door, it turned these women into enemies. It is no coincidence that of the hundreds of people accused during the Salem Witch Trials, most were women, nor that of the 20 people who were put to death, thirteen were women, and most of them had some kind of social or economic clout in Salem Village.

During later centuries, women became chattel owned part and parcel by their husbands, who had the power to do whatever he liked with her or her possessions, who had complete control over her children, including sole custody in the case of the rare divorce or separation. They could institutionalize a woman without her consent, and have complete access to her dowry or property.

By the 19th Century, women were disenfranchised and powerless. After Darwin's “Origin of Species” was published in 1859, social scientists like Herbert Spencer applied Darwin's theories to mankind. He posited, along with other scientists and medical practioners of the time,

that because women had smaller brains, they had less intelligence. Because their entire physiology was based upon the production of children, they were lower on the evolutionary scale than men. After all, most of their blood and energy must go to support their uterus and ovaries, and there would be little left over to support their brains. Any mental stimulation, therefore, must lead inevitably to disease and dysfunction. Women were discouraged from pursuing an education beyond needlepoint, French, painting and “the gentle arts,” and encouraged to become the angels of the house—to dedicate her life to household management, raising children, and providing a haven of peace and comfort for her harried husband.

As the 1800s went on, women, particularly those of the middle and upper classes, suffered hysteria and what was called “neurasthenia” in droves. Today, we might call it an epidemic of boredom. Women’s literature of the 1840s and 50s—that is, novels written by women for women—is striking for the level of its anger towards society. In Charlotte Chesbro’s novel, “Children of Light,” she wrote: “But here I am, only a woman—a housewife... to be kept in my “proper sphere” and “place,” and never to strike an inch out of it in any direction for fear that all creation would turn against me and hunt me down as they would a wild beast.”

In the mid 19th century, in Hydesville, New York, young Margaret and Kate Fox began hearing rapping noises that they interpreted as being messages from the spirit world. The movement they began, called “Spiritualism,” spread throughout the U.S. and Europe, and gave rise to seances and trance lecturers and faith healing. What most people think of when they hear the word Spiritualism is speaking with spirits through seances, and though spiritualism was that, it was also very much more. It was a philosophy that believed in Free Love—which was the theory that marriages should be based on equality and affinity, where love was the reason for marriage

and not arrangement or coercion or necessity (therefore “free”), and that women should have equal say in their lives. This was an outrageous theory at the time, and some would say it still is today. Spiritualists also believed in equality for women, woman suffrage, and women’s dress reform at a time when corsets and constricting clothing was the rule. Within the organized movement, women were acknowledged leaders, and many woman’s rights activists were also spiritualists. In short, it was a philosophy that had a profound impact on women’s lives, and also played a big part in advancing women politically, socially and culturally. To reduce Spiritualism to “spirit rapping” was to do it a huge disservice, but that, of course, was what society did, just as it reinterpreted “free love” to mean orgies and immoral behavior—all in an attempt, once again, to keep women in their place and to keep them from upsetting the status quo.

In 1883, women in Washington Territory were given the vote—far ahead of their sisters in other states or territories. Immediately, women took up the call for reform with a People’s Reform Party dedicated to Prohibition and cleaning up the area of vice and decadence in Seattle known as the Lava Beds. Women’s rights activist Abigail Scott Duniway warned women not to use a cudgel in voting reform, afraid that too zealous pursuit of those mandates might make the legislature rethink the “favor” it had done women by allowing them the vote. But the women in Seattle persisted, and the People’s Reform ticket was voted through. Things changed. Reform began.

But the women of Seattle had reckoned without one crucial thing: the city coffers were filled through the fines it levied on Lava Bed businesses, prostitutes and gambling, and when reform took over, the treasury dwindled to almost nothing.

The next year, the People’s Reform party was voted out. The territorial legislature, as

Duniway had warned, was offended that the women of Seattle actually took action instead of simply being grateful and following the will of their menfolk. In 1887, the legislature changed the law back, and women in Washington Territory were denied suffrage until a constitutional amendment was passed in 1910.

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In my research, I have read hundreds of letters, journals and memoirs—daily, I read of women's hopes and dreams for themselves and their children. I read of their frustrations over their lack of control over their own lives—and I see how some found a way to live within those confines, and how some forever beat at their cages until they were free. I see what that freedom cost them—usually their place in society and their friendships and support groups, often their property and and their children and husbands, sometimes their lives. The things I've read about the women before us have been illuminating, frightening, sickening and inspiring. In a sense, being a reader has changed my life and given it a purpose I had never expected to find.

Because I have been a participant in these women's lives. Because I *know* them. Because I have read and learned so much about these women, I believe that I must live up to the promise these women of the past suffered and died for. I believe I would be failing them and what they stood for and what they survived if I failed to become the complete person they fought to allow me to be.

Women have always had the power to make or break society. When mining towns formed, it was women who came in and civilized them. They were the ones who insisted on the building of churches, or schools. They were the ones who began the relief societies and the charitable associations. Women have always been the true humanists in our world, and they have backed up their philosophy with action. It is women who remind society that it has the obligation

to be compassionate, to be merciful. It is we who have remade society over and over again, and who will continue to do so, whether we discover new worlds or are required to heal this one. It is our responsibility to raise children to be thinking, compassionate beings with a social conscience.

But in order to do that, we must live up to the obligation we have to ourselves. To pursue our own dreams, to take risks on our own behalf, to raise our daughters to do the same. We must remember what other women have sacrificed that we might be astronauts or scientists or presidents or writers who are unafraid to put our own name on the spine of a book rather than anonymous—as Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley did when she first published “Frankenstein”—a book largely thought to have been written by her husband, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. For fear of reprisal, and to get past the prejudice that kept women from publishing, all the Bronte sisters wrote under a male name. So did Mary Ann Evans when she wrote as George Eliot, and Aurora Dupin who wrote as Georges Sand. Margaret Fuller, in her book “Women in the Nineteenth Century,” wrote “if you ask me what offices [women] may fill, I reply--any. I do not care what case you put; let them be sea captains, if they will.” Mary Wollstonecraft, the mother of Mary Shelley, said, in “Vindication of the Rights of Women”: “Would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish (slave-ish) obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers—in a word, better citizens. We should then love them with true affection, because we should learn to respect ourselves.”

This is our mandate. This is the responsibility we have. To respect ourselves, to follow our dreams, whatever those are. To love ourselves and what we choose to pursue. To be mothers if we desire, or sea captains, if we will. It is telling society that it doesn't have the right to define

us, that we will define ourselves, that we will decide how we should be judged, that we will take the lives we have and make them the best we can—the best for us—because only by being happy and fulfilled ourselves can we make the lives of others the best they can be too. Only in that way can we support each other without jealousy or competition. Only then can we be true friends and better partners. Only then can we teach our children that they have as a mother a complex, rounded human being with her own needs and wants—and that they have the right not only to be that themselves, but to expect it from those whom they choose to be their own partners, to instill it in their own children. Why else are we here but to pursue the dreams we have, and to hope that those dreams somehow make the world better?

That is the legacy I feel is left to me by these women of the past, and why I feel I have no choice but to pursue my dream to the best of my ability, regardless of whatever risk that poses. Their voices are like ghosts in my head, joining with the voices of other women in my life who have taken up the yoke and gone after their dreams. My mother, who at 46, returned to college to get her nurses' degree. My sister, a breast cancer survivor who has taken control of her life at last. The women in my life who have mentored me and put their own energy toward my dream so I could succeed: my long-ago English teacher and the writer who served me cake and tea and told me to be better, my agents and my editors, my critique group, my best friend and fellow writer Kristin Hannah. And even that teacher at Western Washington University, whose name I forget, but who did me the greatest service of all by giving me a D on my first English composition paper and forcing me not just to blindly follow the path I thought had chosen me, but to actively *choose it*. I owe the person I am today to those women. I am the end product of centuries of dreams and hopes and wishes for the future. My dedication to reading has showed me how to

pursue the dreams that women in the past could not reach for themselves, and in doing so, I have found respect for myself and happiness. I encourage you to do the same. Thank you.

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