

## A WRITER'S EDUCATION OR HOW THE LIBRARY SAVED MY LIFE

By Megan Chance

Timberland Regional Library All-Staff Day, 2007

Copyright Megan Chance  
For use only with written permission

I am a self-professed library geek. I have spent a great deal of my life in libraries, and probably half of my life reading or listening to or watching the things I've checked out from them. 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, 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 to 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 and from the library. When I have not been able to buy the books I needed, the library was where I went. When I needed solace and familiarity, the library was where I went. When it seemed that life was ready to bowl me over, the quiet comfort of rows of books balanced and sustained me.

The first memory I have of visiting a library was when I was about two, when my mother was pregnant with my sister. It was a library in Columbus, Ohio, and we had gone to check out a book to answer my questions on how babies are born--a pattern that I have repeated whenever I needed answers to anything. Why go actually speak to an expert when there are books to tell you everything you need to know? When I was pregnant with my own daughters, I checked out every book I could find on pregnancy. When my oldest daughter began to ask questions about adolescence, I took her to the library to check out books (probably more than she wanted) on bodies and feelings. And in my usual obsessive/overboard way, when she asked questions about having a Bat Mitzvah (my husband is Jewish), I checked out books on Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism and Islam, and told her to read them before she made a decision on what religion she wished to establish herself in. (She was ten, and a bit overwhelmed, I think).

I remember the book my mother checked out on babies very well--I should, because I'm embarrassed to say we have it still. I am also happy to say that is not a habit I usually indulged in.

I paid a nickel for my first library card, again in Columbus Ohio, a library I remember well even though we moved to Washington State when I was eleven. I was very proud to have a card in my own name, but not so happy to pay the fines myself. I was, as you may have guessed by now, 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.

We moved here to Olympia when I was eleven. The library then was in an old building downtown that was later turned into a restaurant. It became the heart of my existence. 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 next 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. Mary Stewart; Taylor Caldwell, Norah Lofts, 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.

The unfortunate byproduct of all these “weeks” of course, 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 like 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 furtively on them with the short little pencils meant to mark in the amount of one's contribution to the plate.

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.

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 would have 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.

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. Last year, 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, libraries 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.

Without the library, the job I do would be impossible. 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. The fact that I'm allowed access to them at all is simply too wonderful to believe. 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, and it is an experience readily available at any library.

Recently I've been researching opera for a book I'm writing--I must admit to a lamentable lack of knowledge in that area. My children, who have been subject now to listening to *Lucia di Lammermoor* or *La Traviata* or *Don Giovanni* in the car for hours on end, have been groaning whenever I say I need to stop at the library to pick up another CD (at 10 and 12, I'm afraid their cultural music references revolve around High School Musical and Hannah Montana, and they seem unable to appreciate opera). But without that availability, I would never have been able to understand the passion of opera, and when one's heroine is an opera singer, understanding that passion is required. I can't afford to buy the sets, especially when I have so little idea of what's good. And I have discovered, much to my surprise, that I enjoy it a great deal, which is no small admission for someone who cut her teeth on The Who and David Bowie, and who listens now to Indie bands like Interpol or the Shins or the New Pornographers.

Currently, I do much of my research on line. There is so much available now, transcripts of trials and case studies and diaries... The University of Michigan and Cornell have a joint project called the Making Of America, where they've scanned in original documents from the 19th Century: books and periodicals that are searchable by subject and keyword. Through the Kitsap Regional Library, I have access to the historical New York Times, and through the UW Library and Seattle Public, access to pictures and maps of the historical Northwest. These have all been invaluable to me, though 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.

Libraries have been the source of some hidden and unexpected surprises—again, serendipity. Once, in the UW Library of Health Sciences, I found an 1865 surgical manual. After I checked it out, and they realized what they had, the book went out of general circulation, though it probably hadn't been checked out since about 1890. 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.

The UW Library was also the source of one of my greatest treasures: a lovely wooden card catalog cabinet. When the UW finally changed over their catalogs to computer, they sold these wonderful cabinets with all their little drawers and little subject frames, and I bought one for \$150.

The reason this is so wonderful is because of the way I do research. I still use the method I learned in 8th or 9th grade. I write notes on 3x5 index cards, marking the source in the upper corner, and then I file them all according to subject. Now, my eleventh published book comes out in June. I have written many more that weren't published. It boggles even my mind to think of how many of those 3x5 cards I have--thousands of them. And they fit beautifully in those little card catalog drawers. I love the idea of those

notes resting in drawers that once held the cards I rifled through. Of course, I live in horror of fire. I've thought of scanning them all into the computer, but the job is simply too massive.

I'm sure I'm not the only writer who has found inspiration in libraries, either. That "browsing" has a great deal to do with it. 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 practitioners 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 (and books that are generally available *only* in a library) —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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 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 their children and husbands, sometimes their lives. The things I've learned about the women before us have been illuminating, frightening, sickening and inspiring, and these things have changed my life..

As a woman, 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.

Once again, a book I found in the library led directly to a change in the way I thought about things. It showed me the obligation I had not just to myself, but to my children, and the world. To respect myself and to follow my dreams, whatever those are. To love myself and what I have chosen to pursue. I realized as I never had before the long line of women writers that I follow, that sacrificed to allow me to become an astronaut or scientist or president, or a writer unafraid to put her 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. In fear of reprisal, 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 when she 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 slave-ish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, 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."

Those books are in any library. They are the books that inspire me and make me a better writer and a better person. They are the books that have allowed me to define myself rather than allowing society to define me. They are the stories that have fed my soul and given me solace and made me want to tell stories of my own; they have pushed me to keep pursuing my dream, because why else are we here but to pursue the dreams we have, and to hope that those dreams somehow make the world better?

The library, and the secrets it holds and keeps for us—the history and thought of mankind, secrets that are available to anyone who wishes to look for them—has taught me more about myself and my world than any other single thing I can name. It has nurtured me through my triumphs and my sorrows. From those earliest days, when those fifteen or twenty books inspired in me hope and gave me a way to understand the world that had changed so much around me, to now, when libraries have enabled me to experience things I never could have known, because I don't live in the 19<sup>th</sup> C, or during the Salem Witch

Trials, or whenever, but I have learned that those lives can teach us a great deal about ourselves, where we come from and where we are going. The library has both given me dreams to pursue and the means to pursue them. It has enabled me to say to that long ago boss that just because we do not live an experience does not make it less valid. That is what empathy and compassion are for.

One of my greatest joys was two years ago, when I accompanied my daughter's 3<sup>rd</sup> grade class to the Poulsbo Library. There, one of her classmates found one of my books on the shelf, and opened it to show everyone my picture, and they were all so impressed. My book was in the library! I must be famous!! When I think that some day, some other young woman searching the shelves might discover Dickens and Dumas and Poe, or might be prowling the library looking for something to read and finding my book there, a new discovery to be made, a new experience to learn from and to share, I cannot help but hope that it might teach her something about the world and encourage her to pursue her dreams the way I have been encouraged to pursue mine. I hope that it might help her choose her life's course with passion and satisfaction, as I have done. Then I will truly be able to say that I have come full circle, and given back to the world some small measure of the joy that libraries have given me.

**For use only with written permission of Megan Chance**