

# Reader, Writer, Librarian— All Together Now

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Sue Ellen Bridgers

Writers remember their childhood libraries the same way they remember relatives or houses or special holidays. They feel that their early contact with books, especially with rooms full of books, must have some significance to their lives—has, in some way, shaped them into what they have become.

I spent my childhood in a very small town in eastern North Carolina that did not have a library. What it did have were five narrow shelves in a concrete block community building. Once every two weeks, a local lady came down to the community building and watched over the books and us. The books were left by the bookmobile and every few months they disappeared and different books took their place.

Now and then, we arrived in time actually to get on the bookmobile. What a strange place that was, with the driver's lunch on the dashboard beside her stamp and pad, and the books wedged tightly in to keep the lurching old van from spilling them out. We stumbled over boxes of returned books and over each other, hunting the shelves frantically, without much knowledge of where or how to look.

The only real library I saw back then was in the basement of my grade school, a ridiculously unpleasant place, dark and crowded with dusty windows that looked out on the feet and legs of passersby. The only magic in that library was in the books themselves, and what limited magic that was. They were all so old.

We went down once a week during what was imaginatively called "Library Period"—thirty minutes while our grade teacher filed her nails or looked at a magazine. We looked for something to read.

There was the Bobbs-Merrill Childhood of Famous Americans Series, all of them orange with bold black type and silhouettes. I read every one of them. Who could resist titles like *Aleck Bell: Ingenious Boy*; *Jane Addams: Little Lame Girl*; *Kit Carson, Boy Trapper*? Not I. Those books were so genteel, so gloriously innocent. Their heroes and heroines would all grow up to be such perfect people. How I reveled in them, those stories in which the mundane events of childhood became the catalyst for adult action. But the truth is I can't remember reading anything else in that little library.

Even as a high school student, using a brighter, larger facility (above ground but still without a librarian) I didn't read books from the library. What I read were new books, purchased books, paperback books. My older sister and I were closest to heaven in a book store. In the fifties, paperback books were cheap, affordable to teenagers. For fifty cents we could buy two days in a different world and we did. But we bought hardback books, too. We liked the weight of words on crisp unsmudged paper, the feel of new binding, the variety of print. We liked the discovery of it. Our insatiable appetite for fiction seemed to us almost like a vice, for there was no adult to happily, enthusiastically direct our paths toward good books. There was no librarian to hold out Hemingway and say "Take this and be *In Another Country*." We found our way alone. Like compulsive eaters who learn to cook, we were compulsive readers who, by necessity, learned to choose.

Without much guidance other than excerpts in literature textbooks, we learned names—McCullers, Welty, Porter, Wolfe, Steinbeck, James Jones, O'Connor, Faulkner, Austen, Bronte, Wharton, Hardy, Drury, Michener. Why had no one told us? I wondered, and why was there no one to share this with? For we kept what we read ourselves. My sister and I passed books silently between us with little more than perfunctory acknowledgement of what the books meant to us, and yet books were the strongest bond between us during those years when sisters generally don't like each other. We learned about the world from what we read and so we knew, even then, that our visions must be similar, gleaned as they were from the same fields. Still I regret that there were so few words between us.

I regret also that I have no warm lasting memory of a librarian who guided me into the varied, incomparable world of literature by sharing what she knew with me. And so today I am always touched when I see a librarian at the card catalog with a child or hunting the shelves with her or holding out books to her and saying, "I think you'll like these." Just talking to her. The titles in a librarian's head may well be all a young person longs for and perhaps just a librarian's presence serves as a sign that there are adult people who love fiction and who are not embarrassed by the pleasure it gives them.

The pleasure of fiction can be embarrassing, especially I think to boys, and so I try not to be quite so abrupt with men who take pride in not reading fiction because they grew up considering it a frivolous pursuit. Now I can manage a little sympathy—I say to them how sorry I am—because I am convinced that the widened perception of the world and of ourselves that one achieves from reading fiction is as valuable as the knowledge acquired in a scientific journals, newspapers, and how-to books.

A world without fiction would be dreary indeed and I am fortunate that in my childhood my family provided what would have been otherwise lacking, for Mother bought books before we had our own resources. They were our most treasured belongings, respected but well used until the pages were soft, the bindings worn, the covers frayed. We gave and received books as gifts. No present delighted us more than a package just so in shape and weight that it could only be a book.

I wish I could remember the first story I ever heard. I'm sure it was either a Bible story or a fairy tale. Mother read to us daily with good humor and patience because she enjoyed those moments of escape as much as we did. Never mind that our escape route become familiar, even memorized territory. There was such pleasure in knowing the next phrase. There was comfort in the shapes of the letters from which Mother drew those memorable words. There was a Pooh-ism for almost every circumstance in a child's life and stuck in my memory forever are the rhythmic phrases of *When We Were Very Young* and *Now We Are Six*.

My favorite Bible stories were Old Testament ones—the stories of David, his friendship with Jonathan, how he danced before the Ark, the tragedy of Absalom. Then the story of Abraham, of Jacob and Esau, of Ruth, of Joseph and his brothers—all stories of family and of separation. I was both fascinated and terrified by the theme of separation. Those stories defined a child's anxieties and yet they comforted me as well. At least they confirmed my fears rather than ignored them and also they expressed my need for some power beyond human existence. The God of the Old Testament is an image worthy of ear but my child's mind overlooked His wrath, His impatience, His punishments, and rested expectantly and gratefully on His powerful justice and His unwavering commitment to the world He had created.

Of all the secular stories told me, there were two I did not want to hear and still do not like: *The Three Little Pigs* and *The Little Rabbit Who Wanted Red Wings*. They are both separation stories and I suppose that what they lack is God. Mother says she used to start reading *The Three Little Pigs* with bets among the family members on how far she would get before I broke into sobs. It was always about the third line, when the little pigs decide to leave their mother and go out into the big world alone.

I was even more afraid of *The Little Rabbit Who Wanted Red Wings*, so terrified, in fact, that I was struck dumb with fear at the first words, and never cried at all. I would listen breathlessly to the horrible circumstances that surrounded not being recognized by one's own mother. It was too horrendous a fear to ever admit, but for many years I did not make a wish, trying to avoid the foolish vanity that got the little rabbit into such terrible trouble.

It is safe to say that my early reading taste is now reflected in what I write. I don't write about people alone. If I have a theme (and I'm not much interested in having one), it is the idea of interdependence, the inherent need human beings have for support, affection, bonding with each other. Interdependence is a difficult concept for young people to deal with. Their need to break away is at war with their need to stay close. But so many books for young adults deal with the alienation theme that I think there is room for a view of families who are making it together: parents who are basically sympathetic and loving toward their children but who have their own lives and interests; young people who make their own decisions and mistakes but who also rely in part on the strength and comfort their families can give them; grandparents and other close relatives who provide a bridge into the past while also offering the wisdom that comes with maturity.

Because I see our kinship with each other as the key to what we are, I write about families. The family is where relationships are most clearly focused and defined. It is where we are most vulnerable but also where we are most at home. Beyond the family, there is its natural extension—the community, and not just the physical community, but that spirit that infuses people with a common life that is supportive, challenging and valuable. People make family. They make community. They also make books. The people who frequent my pages and with whom I establish mental and emotional links are the real pleasures of my writing world. Given time and space, these characters become real, breathing on the page, flexing their muscles and minds so that eventually they tell their own stories. I identify their difficulties, their passions, their zest for life. I provide the work force and they, for their part, provide the story itself.

The work is one of grudging admiration because I have no characters for whom I am completely unsympathetic. Sometimes they may start out unsavory and tarnished—surely it would be unrealistic to make anyone perfect. Still the nagging question of "why" hounds, pushing me deeper into their anger and their prejudices until I discover their motivation. They become sad, and perhaps pathetic, but never truly villainous.

The people, then, are the crucial elements. If the writing is hesitant and lifeless, I know they are rebelling against what I'm attempting to make true about them. Sometimes they refuse me altogether, as did Maggie in *Home Before Dark*. She evolved from an awkward, prudish spinster into a warm, loving woman against my will. She did what was right for her, turning the tide of the story with her. I will always be grateful to her for her foresight and her hidden spirit I was so hesitant to unfold.

My responsibility to Maggie and to all my characters is to tell their stories as honestly and as movingly as I can. When I fail, the disappointment is intense. When I succeed, the joy is boundless. This obligation to write the truth as clearly as possible is not to be taken lightly. After her first book, a writer does not live happily ever after. There is the challenge to write better, or at least as well as you did the last time, to evaluate more critically, to use the craft of writing more fully. Such expectations. Such fears. The only solution is to face the page as bravely and as conscientiously as you can, intent on pleasing yourself and no one else. Circled by new and cunning outside influences, you have to work harder, dig deeper, give up more and more to reach the place where you are instinctively creative.

I realize that I am alluding to the idea that a writer must write to satisfy herself and no one else. That is a risky business, but it is also an honorable approach to writing. The writer who is motivated to satisfy herself rather than to be a commercial success is always hopeful that there are a few people out there who will be pleased or moved by what pleases or moves her.

Obviously then, books like *Home Before Dark* and *All Together Now* please me. But they are not the kind of books I generally read. Among the writers to whom I return are Thomas Hardy, Eudora Welty, Virginia Woolf, and Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa*. I certainly don't write like any of them. I can't. But it is not really a matter of succumbing to my limitations. Instead, I think about what there is for me to do, what is available to me. I think about what mood and memory, my own sensibility and ability bring to me. Then I push against it, reach deep into it, stretch it out, make music of the words it offers. I explore a life that is waiting within my own knowledge. The possibilities of that approach of fiction seem to me somehow boundless. Each year I go deeper. Each year I have experienced more, acquired more skill, more craftsmanship. So, like you, I read what interests me, what reads well to me, what opens a new landscape of existence or moves closer to my own experience. But I write with my own tools and with my own rhythm, these stories of people involved in family, in community, and in discovery.

My interest and concern for family and community very much affected the writing of *Home Before Dark*. The specific idea for it came one hot summer afternoon when my husband, our children and I were traveling eastward toward my hometown for the weekend. It is a very long trip and we were hot, tired, and irritable. After hours on the highway, we finally turned off onto a narrow asphalt farm road straight into my town and suddenly the world was quiet and cool. We drove through woods, past familiar farms, houses we knew. We saw how things had changed in three months, noticed how crops were doing, who was ahead in their tobacco priming, whose corn was late. In the car, there was a sense of our being "almost there." We were quiet, like the audience during an overture. We were anticipating comfort, the familiarity of the place I know best in the world, the graciousness and affection of family, the "wholeness" of homecoming. And then, I suddenly thought, "What if I were not expected? What if I didn't know what awaited me there? What if everything had changed?"

And so there in the car, James Earl, Mae, and Stella Willis appeared. That whole weekend I pondered their predicament. I thought especially about how the town would react to a returning son who was coming home, his scraggly brood behind him. A failure.

One of the immediate questions I faced was, where did the Willises come from? The answer was Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, but actually they grew out of my recollection of migrant children who would spend a few weeks in our school in the dead of winter. They were silent children, slow academically but quick of eye as if they were absorbing things unseen by the rest of us. They always seemed older than we. I remember one migrant girl in particular because she was quite lovely looking and had an old-fashioned romantic name. How I wished I could bridge the gap between us, but she was gone as quickly and as mysteriously as she'd come. I found her again in Stella. And having found her, I was very hesitant to let her go; and so the focus of the story shifted more and more toward the Willises as a family and there it remained.

Although a book has to rest in part on thematic center and on a conflict between two forces, I believe the power of writing, its real glory and influence comes from the people in it. I hesitate to even call them "characters" because the word suggests too much the technical aspect of writing and what I am talking about are people, people alive on the page and in the imagination, people you recognize in friends and relatives and in strangers on the street.

For me, Casey Flanagan is a person. What happens in the summer of 1951 is not meaningful just because it happened, but because it happened to her and to the other Flanagans who play a part in *All Together Now*; to Dwayne Pickens who can be Casey's friend because, although he is physically grown, he has the mind of a child; and to Pansy and Hazard, a couple in their fifties who, after twenty-five years of courtship, marry and then separate on their honeymoon.

How I ached for them! How I wanted to bring them around before it was too late. They barely made it, you know. There was a moment when Pansy said to me, "No matter what you do, I will never take him back." I thought all was lost.

And then Casey showed me the way. A twelve-year-old girl, grieving the inhumanity we must all be constantly alert against, said to her grandmother when they had watched Dwayne Pickens being taken away to an institution, "How could we let him go when we know him?" Not because saving him would be generous and nice, not because it was morally right, not even because they loved him, but simply because they knew him. This knowledge of him made his hurts, his losses, his joys, theirs. This is the shared experience of our up-right, thinking, reasoning, emotional lives as human beings. Our knowingness is our humanity.

And Pansy heard. Casey's words were the ones she'd been waiting for, and they pierced straight through her pride, her bitterness, her frustration, her pain, and she suddenly knew Hazard's hurts as well as she knew her own. It was a wonderful moment for me.

*All Together Now* was a satisfying book to write, not only because of the people in it but also because it is nostalgic. It was written out of affection for a time when life seemed easier, when the complexities seemed more in ourselves than in the events around us, when a little southern town could display the spirit of community as an extension of family, that most precious and painful place where each of us must live.

I remember such a time. In fact, I was only a little younger than Casey in 1951. I remember when Harry Truman fired General MacArthur. I remember the songs we sang, the evangelists on the radio, and those first snowy pictures on a living room television screen. I remember the throaty sound of Susan Hayward's voice and the fear of polio. I remember closing my eyes on a hot afternoon and seeing the sunlit glare of green on Ebbets Field although I never really got to see it.

But while I remember 1951, only one character with whom I peopled my story of that year really existed. The man on whom my retarded baseball player is based lived in Fort Smith, Arkansas, where my husband was growing up. The others, including Casey, are productions of what might have been. And now, because they have been captured within the boundaries of the printed page, they are. They exist, awaiting the vital emotional treasures of the reader's mind. As a writer I am faced with the constant dilemma of mind over matter, spirit over more mundane commitments, the day to day problems of creativity. The trials and errors of it amount to many lost pages, many deserted themes, much gnashing of teeth. I can think of few personal crises more devastating than the need to be creative when it is not accompanied by the ability. Every writer knows something of it. We never do as well as we'd like.

Writing makes us vulnerable—we risk exposing too much of ourselves. We risk not knowing enough, not seeing enough, not speaking clearly enough. We risk missing the thread-like connection between our creativity and the rest of the world. Writing makes your body ache, it strains inside your head, it jolts you with mind-bending insights that go absolutely nowhere.

Thomas Mann said that a writer is a person for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people. I agree with him. What we want to create is always far beyond what we actually get on the page. Our vision is always greater than our capabilities. And yet the functioning writer is trying. People ask me if I would write were I not published. I wrote *Home Before Dark* without any expectations for its publication, because it was waiting to be written and I wanted to read it. At this moment, I can't imagine not writing and yet I have always—since the first grade when my little poems began to appear in the school newspaper—had enough success, just enough to give me hope.

I think I would write anyway. I would not want to miss an opportunity "to part a curtain, that invisible shadow that falls between people," which Endora Welty imagined. I would not want to miss the chance to give a reader a moment outside herself where she can live another life, walk another way, explore the possibilities that reading presents. I wouldn't want to be without the solitary environment of writing because although it is necessarily private, it is never lonely. There are so many people there, so many stories waiting to be told, so much to recall and to envision. I would not want to miss opportunities like this one, to be with people who care about books.

"Tell me a story," a child says and what she is asking for is a vision of the world within her comprehension. She is asking not just for happy pictures but for sad ones as well. She wants to see King David dance for joy but also to hear his terrible cry at the death of his son. She wants "long ago and far away," but she wants here and now, too, in this city, this country, this place she already has some knowledge of.

The child wants the chance to let her mind make its own pictures from the words on a page. She wants to ponder, to remember, to be frightened a little, and to feel the satisfying warmth that comes when all is well. She wants an experience outside her own life but also a chance to recognize herself in other people. It is not only what she wants, it is what she is due.

All together—writers, publishers, teachers, parents, librarians—we owe it to her. All together we share the responsibility for what she can know and therefore for what she can become. When we limit her imaginary world, we also limit her real world. Our obligation is not to set the limit but to broaden the horizon. No matter where the story travels, into the past or the future, a fantasy world or next door, we must let her go. We should not expect a safe and easy journey, but be mindful of the experience reading brings: the chance to see, to imagine, to know.



Nikki Giovanni, principal speaker,  
banquet.