

A World of Words



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"We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospection." *Anais Nin*

The winter I was five, my father plugged our television up in the garage so my nine-year-old brother Joshua and I would be encouraged to read more of the Old Testament and watch less TV. Despite the cold, Joshua and I tugged on the layers and went out into the garage where we huddled together to watch "Saved By the Bell" and "Little House on the Prairie." One morning at breakfast, after my father caught us singing the "Saved By the Bell" theme song into our spoons, we came home from school to a square of dust where the boxy television had once set.

After we lost the television, I longed for the words in books to transport me into a world resembling Bayside High School and Walnut Grove. But what I eventually found there was even better than the drama played out between Laura Ingalls and Nellie Oleson. I became so engrossed in my world between the pages I spent the long, lazy days of summer curled up with my Grandmother Charlotte's orange afghan, reading until sunlight slid into shadow. At the bottom of my bed, but still within reaching distance, I kept a toppled pile of backup books: *The Boxcar Children, The American Girls, Mandie Mysteries, and The Baby-Sitter's Club.*

Once my mother discovered my appetite for books was not fed by the prizes offered through the Gorham-MacBane Public Library's summer reading program, she began reading her Janette Oke books to me like a bedtime story, and at eight-years-old, I was introduced to the religious genre called Inspirational Romance. When my mother began reading *A Gown of Spanish Lace*, I became so consumed with finding out if the romantically involved hero and heroine were actually brother and sister, I waited until everyone went to sleep, tiptoed into my parents' bedroom, and snatched the novel from my mother's nightstand. In the bedroom I shared with my brother, I tented the sheets over my head and devoured the last few chapters by the illumination of Joshua's Swiss Army flashlight. Soon, my late night reading habits

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transporting me so deeply into another world I was unable to fully separate it from my own. The night I finished the final book in the *Anne of Green Gables* series and learned Anne's son Walter had been killed fighting in World War I, I sobbed into my pillow as if mourning the loss of my own child.

Mrs. Stacy Stumph, my second grade teacher at South Haven Christian School, had huge doe eyes and brown hair that would ripple across her back as she scrolled her cursive on to the chalkboard. She always smiled at our class even after the day Trent Barnt found out Jill Byramm wore a training bra and started chasing her during recess. Perhaps Mrs. Stumph smiled because she was newly married to a huge and handsome man named Curt who had an exotic accent and was from a land called Canada where policemen wore red wool coats and rode horses. After weighing these facts composing our new teacher, our second grade class decided we should like her. But it wasn't until Mrs. Stumph dressed up as the Little Mermaid for teacher costume day we concluded we had the best teacher in the state of Tennessee.

Because of South Haven's strict dress code, the only way Mrs. Stumph could wear the Little Mermaid costume and still keep her teaching position was to place a skin-colored turtleneck beneath the bikini top. Despite this setback, the morning of the teacher's costume competition, Mrs. Stumph carefully waddled her way in her hand-stitched mermaid's tail to the center of the gymnasium floor and plopped down on to the beige beach towel she had artfully arranged with sea shells and star fish. While the judges wove their way through the maze of teachers dressed as historical figures and Bible characters, they came upon our teacher, the Little Mermaid. Periodically slapping her shimmering green tail on to the gym floor like a beached Flipper, Mrs. Stumph clasped a picture of her Canadian prince charming to her bosom, closed her eyes, and began belting the lyrics to "Part of Your World." Benjamin Franklin and Moses did not stand a chance. Thirty minutes later, Mrs. Stumph was declared the winner.

From that day on, Mrs. Stumph became everyone's favorite teacher, but she was my personal hero. Every word she uttered and every suggestion she made held the magic ingredient that could transform me into a princess just like her. But right when I felt Mrs. Stumph was about to acknowledge me as her royal heir, our class turned into a bird caste system where we were stratified according to our reading abilities. The levels went from the Cardinals, the Blue Jays, the Finches, and the Sparrows--I was placed among the Sparrows.

My seven-year-old heart was broken. I felt my beloved Mrs. Stacy Stumph had cast me from her kingdom to place me among the cinders. Bitter with resentment, I spent the ten o'clock hour covered in my desk while listening to the Cardinal reading group chirping out words from the books our bird group was not allowed to read.

When it was the Sparrows turn to enter the reading circle, I got out of my desk and plodded toward the elf-sized yellow chairs as if I was headed toward a lice check. As our group croaked out the words from our baby books, I imagined Titus Naive, Jessi Buck, and Elyse Gragg at their desks where they read sea adventure novels and shook their heads at us in pity.

A few weeks passed while I listened to the Cardinal reading group, and then I could not take it any more. Tucking my head under my arm in shame, I felt the prick of hot tears and

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watched as they slid down my freckled nose and splattered the desk. I spent the rest of the hour in that position, tracing my tears into the wood grain while wishing Mrs. Stumph would notice me. At lunch time, while the rest of the class went to get jungle juice and lemonade cartons from the meal cart, she called me up to her desk.

“Jolina, is everything all right?”

Shaking my head, I swiped my nose with the sleeve of my sweater and murmured, “I don’t want to read with the Sparrows no more.”

“Do you want to read with the Finches then?” Mrs. Stumph asked, taking a sip of something hot that smelled like peppermints. “Maybe we could give you some extra reading to try over the weekend.”

“No, Mrs. Stumph, I want to read in the Cardinal group.”

Mrs. Stumph clucked her tongue and then touched my cheek. “That’s a big jump, Jolina. If you give yourself some time with your group, you will move up--it just takes some students a little longer than others to get there.” Glancing down at my scuffed saddle shoes, I felt the sting of another tear. “I just want to read like Titus, Jessi, and Elyse read. Why’s it easy for them and hard for me?”

The tear trickled down my cheek. With the pad of her pointer finger, Mrs. Stumph gently brushed it away, winked, and whispered, “All right, let’s see what we can do.”

The first “real” book Mrs. Stumph let me loan from the classroom’s library was *Lassie Come Home*. Even though I was daunted by the 264 pages crammed with words I hadn’t even heard the Cardinal group say, I took the book home, curled up on the couch, and haltingly read through each page with my finger trailing under every line.

When I finished that book, Mrs. Stumph let me borrow another. After that, she let me take out two at a time. Soon, I found I didn’t even need my finger to help loop the letters into words and the words into sentences and the sentences into a story. When I read, my conscious mind fell away as the words erupted worlds inside my head I hadn’t thought possible to dream.

At South Haven Christian School where I attended from K-5 through 12, we were not allowed to read anything containing profanity or the hint of a suggestive scene. My mother also thought I should only read books written by Janette Oke and Beverly Lewis--everything else was needless trash being dumped into my mind. Regardless of what the authoritative voices in my life were proclaiming, my hunger for books could not be satiated through the Inspirational Romance section of the Gorham-MacBane Public Library. Like some teenagers smuggle drugs, alcohol, or dirty magazines into their room, I tucked *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, *House of Sand and Fog*, and *The English Patient* into the lining of my coat. I stashed paperback versions of *Snow Falling on Cedars*, *A is for Alibi*, and *The Horse Whisperer* into the extra compartments of my purse and book bag. Later, when I was alone, what I read in those contraband books gave me an education far surpassing anything my straight-laced teachers taught about love, literature, and biology.

When I became older and was faced with more trials than becoming a Cardinal and the

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television's disappearance, any comfort I found came through the world of reading. The night I learned we were being driven from the camp where my parents were caretakers, I read *I Capture the Castel* until my worry surrendered to sleep. After the fights my mother and I charged into with our tongues wielded like weapons, I burrowed myself into *The Smoke Jumper* with the same desperation as Brer Rabbit diving into the briar patch. In 11th grade, after hearing Harris Gibson say nuns were more amorous than me, I ate off-brand chocolate yogurt straight from the carton and read *Songs of a Humpback Whale* until my adolescent angst eased.

My best friend Misty Boyd gave me a tattered volume of Shakespeare's poetry and plays for high school graduation. A few weeks before I left for college in Kentucky, Misty and I went to Moss-Wright Park with my Shakespeare books, scaled the gnarled branches of an ancient oak, and acted out the less risqué parts of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* while using the t-ball team as our audience.

During my freshman year of college, I became infatuated with a lanky Senior who spouted philosophical poetry and U2 lyrics as if they were synonymous. After he graduated, I fanned any feelings for him by reading Shakespeare's "Sonnet 116" and Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*. When I finally accepted the fact he wasn't coming back, I read *Sense and Sensibility* and hoped I would become more Elinor and less Marianne. My sophomore year, when my brother Joshua sank into substance abuse, I read *A Million Little Pieces* in an attempt to compose the fraying fragments of my family.

Misty, who'd been my best friend since I was three, was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma a few months later. Reading through the startling statistics in *Chemotherapy and Radiation for Dummies* did not phase me, but when I finished *My Sister's Keeper*, I curled up like a comma on my bedroom floor and wailed until my mother came and rocked me as a child. That summer, my first tangible taste of love made me feel I could identify with all the heroines composing Jane Austen's perfect world. Within a month, I had gluttonously consumed *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Mansfield Park*. But when my closest college friend Madison died from a heart attack 13 days after I was a bridesmaid in her wedding and 11 days before her 22nd birthday, I immersed myself into darker, death-consumed literature such as those composed by Poe and Plath.

My junior and senior year any books I read pertained only to the attainment of my degree as I struggled to find my place among the pages of the past. It wasn't until after graduation I realized I could not live my life being transported into a world of words if I was unable to embrace the world in front of me. I then understood that if I could capture the people and the places composing my world, when they were lost, through the creation of my own words I might find them again.