

A Personal Literacy Statement

What do literacy, learning, reading, books and libraries mean to you? What are some of your earliest memories of books and reading? What is the value of literature in your life? Express your feelings about books. This exercise will hopefully provide some idea of how you feel about the topic of literacy. Have fun with it and plan to share it with the class.

Unlike many of my friends, I did not learn to read until I was taught to do so in the first grade. Once I started, though, you couldn't stop me. I became utterly enamored with books—the stories they could tell me, and the things I could learn from them. I read about dinosaurs; I devoured Joan Aiken; I was captivated by Gail Haley's setting of a traditional Ghanaian Anansi tale in *A Story, A Story*, and I was inspired by *Elmer, the Patchwork Elephant* (after whom our family dog was named). I started writing my own stories almost as soon as I started reading; my great-aunt gave me a blank book when I was seven, and I wrote a time-travel story about me and my friends.

I know my parents and especially my grandmother must have been reading to me before I entered the first grade, considering how quickly I took to books, but for some reason I don't remember specific situations. I remember my grandmother's voice reading *Down by the Meadow*, but other than the combination of "hearing" the text in her voice and "seeing" the illustrations, I don't remember the physical context. Was I in her lap? Was I sitting beside her? Was I sitting with my sisters on the floor at her feet? The recollection just isn't there. I do have a memory of being aware that I couldn't read yet, and looking out at highway signs when we were taking a trip and thinking about how I knew those marks represented words, but I didn't know what they said.

Our house was full of books, and both my parents read both for information (e.g., the newspaper) and for pleasure. My father was an architect and my mother was a biologist (both retired now, ergo the past tense), so education was valued in our home. From what I have learned about literacy over the years, the "normalcy" of books and reading at home played a major part in encouraging my own love for reading.

As I grew older my favorite genres were historical fiction, science fiction and fantasy, along with nonfiction research projects I often pursued just because I was curious (and perhaps a little pretentious), such as Ancient Egyptian history and Greek/Latin mythology. I avidly explored my parents' home library, and often tried to tackle books I wasn't intellectually ready for yet (such as the plays of George Bernard Shaw). Public and school libraries were my playgrounds and treasure houses. Summers in particular were largely defined by trips to the library (conveniently located a block away from the YWCA where we had swimming lessons). Books gave not just the world to me, but all possible worlds, fuelling intellect and firing imagination.

I went on to study music (developing another form of literacy), which brought me to Bloomington, and then pursued graduate work in Folklore and Ethnomusicology. Reading, writing, and critical thinking were, of course, essential to my studies. I needed high-level literacy skills in order to succeed in my courses, and my lifelong love of reading prepared me well for tackling that kind of discourse.

Sadly, though, the pressures of my academic reading caused me to almost completely lose the habit of reading for pleasure. I had so much work to do that I didn't

think I could afford to “steal” any time away for a novel or a nonfiction book that interested me. The most I allowed myself for several years when not on vacation from school was to slowly read the short stories in *Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine* over the course of a month, since individual stories didn’t require so much of a temporal (or emotional) commitment. Strangely, I *did* allow myself to get storytelling fixes from television in those years; I don’t know why I didn’t translate that “entertainment permission” to books—perhaps, again, because an hour in front of the television for my favorite drama didn’t seem like such a commitment. I knew that once I started reading, it would be very hard for me to put down a good book, immersing myself in the world of the story, and it could be days before I could think about other things without wishing I were reading that book instead.

Finally I had the good sense to burn out on my Ph.D. (at the dissertation stage, no less), and with encouragement from friends realized that librarianship could be very close to my true calling, specifically youth services librarianship. Although pursuing my MLS while working full-time has once again made reading for pleasure a little tricky sometimes, I have the very good excuse that I need to be as widely read in children’s and young adult literature as possible—lovely encouragement to get the lead out and read. The public library is now a dear friend once again after far too long an absence. Thank you, Library Science!