Literacy Autobiography

“She is too fond of books, and it has turned her brain.” ~ Louisa May Alcott

The first book that drastically changed my life was one of those little golden books that they sell for a whopping $0.89 at convenience stores and grocery check-out lines. My mother purchased this book for me, probably at a yard sale instead of a check-out line. She has always been a yard sale kind of woman, and the book came to us a little weathered with pages that were already touched and pictures that had already been seen. I was three years old and having issues with my best friend, Jenna. Neither of us cared for the act of sharing. We were having trouble sharing our toys, our books and also a certain “boyfriend” within our baby sitting circle named Scotty. This little golden book entitled, I’ll Share with You, transformed my three year old world. The book follows the story of twins, Carl and Kelly, as they struggle through and overcome the challenges of sharing with each other. As the simple ten page story progresses, Carl and Kelly finally learn to share with each other. The story ends at their birthday party where they share their toys and cake with each other. My mother decided to read the book to Jenna and I to teach us a lesson. I’ll Share with You quickly turned into The Jenna Book; my new title for it reflecting my personal perspective and meaning that I gained from its pages. I was beginning to make connections between books and my own life. I became obsessed with the book that linked me to my best friend. I took the book with me everywhere. I played with it. I ate with it. I slept with a white, stuffed dog under one hand and The Jenna Book under the other. This book became its own separate character within my three year old life. I was emotionally and physically attached to both the pages of story and the meaning behind it. I was rapidly becoming not only a much better sharer, but also a girl who found herself within the pages of a
The Jenna Book will always be the first book that I turned into my own. It became more than just a book; it became a friend.

Also beginning at the age of three years old, my mom and I would take weekly trips to our town’s library to pick out books that she would read to me at bedtime. The children’s section of the library provided a story-telling hour each week. To me, this was heaven. The room was filled with bean bag chairs and colorful carpet squares that each child could sit on. Paintings of popular characters lived on the library walls, listening to each of the stories with us. In this sense, reading became a fun social activity. The story-telling times at the library included written text, a child’s picture book, and the act of the librarian orally reading that book out loud. The librarian, adorable Mrs. Otto, would encourage the children to interact with the reading by asking questions about the plot or by requesting the children to repeat simple sentences from the narrative together as a group after she read them out loud. In these ways, the combination of oral and written traditions formed a network of literature between the children, the librarian and the actual literature itself.

Furthermore, the library would attune its story-time subject matter to different holidays or important historical events. Sometimes different adults would dress up as famous historians or characters. I recall being read to by both Abraham Lincoln and Amelia Earhart. As a child, I remember feeling so close to these different characters and words from the past. To me, these different characters and words could never die. Books were immortal. Reflecting back, these immortal readings were excellent ways to connect children to their surrounding society through the forces of written and spoken word.
On special occasions, guest readers or authors would come to the library to visit and share readings or stories. Sometimes, the librarian or certain guests would create stories on the spot, asking the children to make up a portion of the story and share it with the group. This ongoing story would continue until every child had a chance to contribute. These moments gave me the chance to interact and connect with other kids through books and stories. It also gave me the chance to connect my senses to words. Stories were not silent marks of ink on a page. They were sounds and rhythms and pictures. To this day, I often prefer to hear a person read a text aloud to me than to read it solely by myself. Listening to a text read out loud gives me more room to hear and feel the words. I then create pictures of these senses in my head. My days at the library made me sensitive to the multiple levels of sensory reading.

Eventually, I realized I could not spend all my days with Mrs. Otto and had to move on to the exciting world of Kindergarten. My mother claims that when I got off the school bus on my first day of Kindergarten I stormed into the house with my arms crossed and announced that I would not be going back to school. Of course my mother was concerned, and at first thought that maybe I got into a fight with a fellow Kindergartener or that I didn’t like my teacher. She urged me to explain my reasoning behind such a bold statement. She did not want to have an elementary school drop out on her hands. How would she explain this to the other parents in the neighborhood? “They didn’t teach me how to read!” was my response. I was dead set on learning how to read on that first day of school. It was all I cared about. I did not want anything to get in my way. Eventually, I think I realized that learning how to read does not happen in the blink of an eye. Reading is a step by step process. It is not solely a visual process of recognizing words on a page. I already had the ability to hear and feel and taste the words in the books that were read to me. So, in many ways I had already crossed off certain steps on the list.
Another huge step in my own process of learning how to read revolved around my memory. Before I could even read or decipher words, memorization held a huge role in my literacy abilities. My parents would read my favorite books to me over and over and over again. Eventually, I began to memorize these books word for word. Once I had the books memorized I would want to be the one to “read” them to my parents. Even though I could not truly read the words, I would still follow along in the books, reciting from my memory and mimicking the way my parents would leaf through the pages while reading them to me. I remember reciting a book from memory to my mother while she was hospitalized for a short period of time due to a surgery. My dad and I went to visit her and I brought one of my favorite books with me. As I sat next to her, I narrated the book word for word to her for the first time.

I must have been only four or five years old when my mother was in the hospital, but I still remember that feeling of accomplishment. My mother was very impressed, as were the nurses who were in the room. As I was getting positive attention from the adults surrounding me, I felt proud. As I look back, my ability to memorize books turned into my ability to recognize words and sounds. My familiarity with books and reading gave me a head start in my early years of education. My memorization skills prepped my mind for development and desire to learn how to read. Being able to “read” like the grownups made me feel closer to them. Once I started to read more and more, the attention I received from the adults around me heightened. This positive attention I received from my parents and teachers probably helped me to begin reading at an advanced pace and comprehension level for my age group.

In elementary school, well after I had become a master reader, I fell in love with Beverly Cleary’s *Ramona Books* series. Ramona was a mischievous and imaginative little girl that was always getting into trouble. She was my idol and soon after discovering her, my life revolved
around this fictional character. I cut my hair the way Ramona’s hair was described in the book. I sought out new friends that I thought looked like Ramona. I named my guinea pig Ramona. My birthday cake had a picture of Ramona on it when I turned seven years old. In an attempt to punish me, my mother would not threaten to discontinue my television allotment, but instead told me she would take away my Ramona books. I wrote letters to Beverly Cleary and praised her for creating the most wonderful character in the entire world. I turned into a Ramona freak. Let’s just say that if Ramona were a real person, she probably would have filed a restraining order on me. In the same way I connected myself to The Jenna Book when I was three years old, I was connecting my life to fiction. I was an innocent child finding friends among pages and words. Stories made sense to me; they were different than real life. Real life could not always evoke the poignant and distinct emotions that stories could. Stories revealed certain ideas and situations to me that I might not come across in my own life. In many ways, I was discovering more truth in fiction than in reality.

Even though I started to become more independent by reading to myself, my mother never stopped reading books to me. We used to each take one end of our oversized couch, and under the heavily shaded lamps my mother would read to me in the dim light of our living room. I always loved being read to. I liked being able to hear the worlds being born right into the air that I breathed. Some of our favorite books to share together were The Anne of Green Gables series and Where the Red Ferns Grow. The latter book tells the tale of two hunting dogs and eventually ends in their devastating deaths. It has to be the most heart wrenching novel in all of literature. I remember my mother trying to finish the end of the novel through sobs and gasps of breath. Listening to the words and emotions coming from her mouth, I too wept. I remember thinking to myself, “I want to be able to write words that make people feel something this deep.”
I will always cherish those memories with my mother on our oversized couch. Sharing a story with someone brings the two people closer together.

The meaning and inspiration I found in the world of books gradually evolved into a love for writing. Starting in second and third grade I became increasingly more interested in creative writing. The more I read the more I wanted to write. The idea of writing stories and creating images through words thrilled me during my younger years. Much of my desire to write stemmed from the hope to one day mimic Beverly Cleary. Some of my teachers encouraged my classes to experiment with creating our own stories. Many children wrote the usual story about their families, friends or their pets. I, too, started off writing a few stories like this. However, the more I read advanced books for my age level, the more my mind started to grow and develop creatively. Inventing elaborate plot lines involving secret doorways leading to mysterious underground chambers and magic threads that granted children wishes became regular themes in my pieces of writing.

Furthermore, my classmates and I got the opportunity to share with each other and read aloud our personal pieces of writing. This provided everyone with the opportunity to display our literary feats and learn from each other. A few friends and I would get together outside of school to share stories with each other as well. Here, I discovered that writing was not limited to a grading scale or an academic audience. First and foremost, we wrote for ourselves, and we had a blast doing so. My younger sister and I would often be found playing among the pine trees in our backyard pretending we were runaway orphans living on our own in the wilderness. If we were not between the pines, we would be downstairs in our basement writing scripts and commercial breaks for the “The Bailey Sister Talk Show.” We did not limit our writing process
to pieces of paper. We lived out our imaginations and brought our stories to life. The writing process always snuck its way into my playtime.

Once my years of middle school rolled around, I gradually began to write my own stories less and less. Middle school was different than elementary school. Competition entered through the doors with us as we each took our first steps into our new school. School and writing were more about grades and less about fun. In my sixth grade classroom, we read a lot of books and wrote a lot of book reports. I dreaded these reports. I loved to read books and I loved to write, but I did not like having to monotonously re-tell the story of a book that the entire class had already read. I would rather tell my own stories that I was making up in my head. Yet, this was not an option. Looking back now, I do not think I fully realized it when I was in sixth grade, but this was a very limiting and frustrating experience for me.

In the eighth grade, I was chosen among three hundred students in my class to participate in a nationwide writing contest. Two other students in my class were also chosen to write. One afternoon, the three of us were removed from our classrooms and taken to the school’s library to conduct our writing prompts for this contest. Walking out of my classroom, I remember feeling extremely proud of myself. I was smart and special, and I was representing my school as a writer. Yet, I also remember feeling very nervous. There was a lot of pressure on my shoulders to write about a prompt that I knew nothing about and was not necessarily emotionally connected to. I stumbled through the entire process. I remember leaving the experience feeling defeated. After our prompts were submitted to the contest, I never heard any news about the results. I felt that I had poured my sweat and tears into a piece of writing for nothing. For all I knew, this contest was imaginary. I had never felt more disconnected with my own writing than I did at that moment. I would probably have felt more connected to a prompt
of my choosing or something that I could emotionally connect to. Looking back now, I do not even remember the content behind that silly, tainted prompt.

Eighth grade writing contests came and went, and soon I was moving on up to the scary world of high school. The jump to high school brought with it an even higher scale of competition. The level of reading and writing increased measurably, but also in a more meaningful way. High school did not require us to write book reports; it required us to write essays. At least essays forced us to use our own words. High school also brought back the importance of mentorship to me that I valued so much in my parents and elementary school teachers in my childhood. My tenth grade teacher re-opened my passion for writing. He was a man of elitist intelligence, and proved this to our class by showing the tape of his winning performance on the television show *Wheel of Fortune*. This teacher carefully selected age appropriate, but also age challenging novels for our class to read. He often asked us to write personal and creative responses to our reading assignments. I was finally becoming emotionally connected to stories again. Yet now, the stories were considered to be *literature*. At the end of the school year, our class read *To Kill a Mockingbird*. To evaluate our reading of the text, the teacher offered our class different options. We had to chose two out of the three methods to demonstrate our understanding of the novel: 1) Write an analytical essay about a theme from the novel, 2) Create a piece of visual artwork representing a theme from the novel, or 3) Construct miniature versions of Scout Finch and Boo Radley’s houses. I chose the first and third options. The essay was the normal thing to do and was fairly easy for me to write. In regards to the creation of the houses, I never had so much fun on a project in my life. Even though I was not writing down words and sentences while I was making Scout and Boo’s houses out of boxes of Wheat Thins and egg cartons, I was truly connecting to the text and creating my own meaning
among the meaning of the author. Looking back, I have so much respect for this teacher. He opened doors to students with many different learning styles and creative abilities. As a class, we knew who we were writing to. There were no more invisible audiences.

After tenth grade, I was lucky enough to find myself in the class of another phenomenal teacher. She was the epitome of the dramatic, emotional English teacher that we can see in movies such as *Dead Poets Society*. This woman was passionate about literature and writing. She probably grew up with her very own Ramona. The first assignment of that class was for each of us to write a personal essay. The teacher told us we could write about any event or person in our lives that stood out to us. We were supposed to incorporate certain literary terms and tools throughout the piece, such as metaphors and imagery. I wrote about my little sister and I playing among the pine trees in our backyard pretending to be orphans. On the day the teacher handed back our pieces, many students were openly upset and frustrated. Before I got my essay back, my one friend, who normally got straight A’s, showed me that she had received a rather low grade on her essay. The paper was marked up in red ink. I was terrified. I was the last student to be called up to the teacher’s desk to discuss my essay with her. When I finally got there, I was relieved to see that I received an A on my piece of writing. I was the only student in the class to get an A. The teacher praised me for the work and told me that she could truly feel my heart running deeply through the words of my paper. Of course I was proud to receive a high grade on the paper, but what I felt in that moment had nothing to do with a grade. I felt proud that I finally was able to write something that made another person feel my emotions so deeply. This teacher understood my need to write and express myself. She will always be a kindred spirit.
After high school I attended Temple University in Philadelphia. In 2007, Temple University was ranked as the most diverse university in the United States of America. I was immediately drawn to the waves of colors and accents and languages that splashed forth at me every time I walked down the streets of Temple’s campus. Growing up, my small elementary school was located in an area that was not very wealthy. Many immigrant families moving to the area would find low-income housing in the perimeters of this particular school location. Thus, I found friendship among students of varying races and cultures at a very young age. These friendships began to weed out during my middle and high school years as the students of other races and cultures began to fade into the background of my predominantly white school district. So, going to Temple was like going back to elementary school for me. In a sense, I felt I was at home. On that first day of school, as a newly declared English major, I wanted Temple to teach me how to read all over again.

College English classes opened my eyes to literature that we were not allowed to read in high school. The texts we read in my literature classes were edgy, filled with sex and drugs and swear words. I became intoxicated by the freedom and expression within the pieces I read. My freshman year I took an African American Literature class. I fell in love with authors Toni Morrison and Richard Wright. They were unlike any writers that I had ever experienced before. In high school, we did not have many opportunities to read texts from authors outside of the Caucasian race. Rarely did we even read texts by women. As a white girl from Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, I became humbled by the struggles and characters these new authors wrote of in their novels. I inhaled Morrison’s novel The Bluest Eye. Diversity became essential to my literary experience. I started to feel that literature could be more than just fiction. Sometimes literature can tell the truth better than life can tell the truth. I began to believe that literature has
certain levels of social responsibility. Religion, feminism and race were addressed on a daily basis in my literature classes. The works of Margaret Atwood and Maxine Hong Kingston opened my eyes to new perspectives and movements in feminism. I discovered my love for Jewish American literature. Novelists such as Chaim Potok, Philip Roth, Jonathan Safran Foer and Nicole Krauss became new friends. The rich cultural history of the Jewish faith meshes both completely and contrastingly with the culture of art and literature. Literature no longer became the pretend world I escaped to, but became a version of truth that I could not escape from.

Writing and storytelling became other outlets that I could not escape from. Creative writing continued to serve as an important outlet in my college years. I took both fiction and poetry writing classes throughout my four years in Philadelphia. Sharing work with others in the class was both frightening and exhilarating. Allowing a piece of writing to be exposed to others is similar to telling someone a secret; a person feels both vulnerable and free. I began to attend poetry slams throughout the city. During poetry slams, people read or recite personal poems to an audience. They often are quite rhythmic. These readings and slams inspired me to write. While listening to different people from the audience, I felt a surge of energy that connected me to the power of words and beckoned me to produce my own writing. Sometimes I learn more about society and literature through such an event, rather than through the process of writing a common, unoriginal essay. Personal prose and poetry always enriched by life, whereas an assigned analytical essay could not always do the same.

Toward the end of my college years, I started to feel restless. Though necessary, the critical essay was turning into a redundant and boring process. Having the opportunity to turn to other literary methods to express my ideas gave me more freedom to truly articulate myself. I had to be reminded that writing was not always about and limited to book reports and analytical
essays, but was most importantly something I had to do for myself. From my years as a Ramona freak to my declaration as an English major, the most important lesson I’ve learned amidst everything is that for myself to be truly happy and successful I must write for myself before I write for anyone else. Reading and writing feed a craving that I have within myself. This craving cannot be stimulated by an essay, it cannot be taught within a classroom. It cannot be forced and does not follow a set of rules. This craving stems from the simple love of a little girl and her books. Then, it progresses to her need to breathe in as many new books and ideas as she possibly can, and to write and create words of her own without the limitations or standards of anyone else. Proudly, I read because I love to. I write creatively because I need to, because words fill me up and give my life a reason, but mostly because my creativity tells a better story.

It’s funny to look back at the little person I used to be when I was playing in my backyard and writing stories with my friends because I realize that we are still so very much alike. I still love books. I still sleep with them on my bed, but not under my arm. I do not go to the library as much as I used to, but only because I prefer to own books. I want to display them on my shelves like trophies. I want them to live with me always. As I leap into my career as an English teacher, I can only hope that I adapt the teaching styles of the teachers that have richly affected my life as a reader and student writer. I want to show my students that books are more than just fiction, but that they are friends and truth. I want to show them that writing is not about book reports. It is not always about analytical essays. Writing, in whatever form it takes, should primarily be about finding meaning and expressing that meaning in an original way. I want to encourage my students to write for themselves before they write for a grade. Hopefully, if I have the ability to pass this gift on to my students, they will never have to write for invisible audiences because they will always be writing for themselves.