

Ex Libris

So it's a hot day in July of 1952 and I've got my little 9 year old butt planted on the railing of our front porch on Hager Street, drumming the balusters with the heels of my Keds. I'm getting a nice hollow sound brum, brum, brum ... courtesy of the termites ... and it's becoming reminiscent of the sound of Indian drums, so I segue from a simple jungle search and rescue beat to the ever popular, "Carpets...brum, brum, brum...from the looms of Mohawk," a commercial jingle heard at least 100 times each day on the radio. This is a faster kick tempo than the Mau Mau roll call and I'm seated backwards on the railing, so if I fall back ass over teakettle I'll wind up in the bushes, which sort of seems like it might be fun, but I'm just not ready for the plunge.

I've made one repetitive noise or another out here this morning just to confirm my ears are still working on this very boring 24th day of summer vacation. Mom is approaching her annoyance limit. Something gets slammed down in the kitchen and then purposeful footsteps move out in my direction. I need to think clear and fast now if I'm going to have an answer to "WHAT do you think you're doing, young man?" Making up a story for an answer she doesn't expect will tip her off guard and our little unacknowledged game might remain genial for a while longer until she finally makes me leave the porch. She thinks I should go and play. She doesn't realize I am....with her. Mothers are easily bought friends and they never make fun of you. They can be excellent playmates when necessary. Having lived here on Hager Street a few months now, I am able to testify the kids in this neighborhood are less than desirable. Most can't even spell. One of them

attempted to spit on my "I Like Ike" button. Well, I guess it means he could read. No one here is on my short list of potential playmates.

But when Mom reaches the front porch, she doesn't try to cut off my legs at the ankles. Instead she tells me to put on a clean shirt and comb my hair. On July 14, 1952 ... Bastille Day in France and by the way Polly Bergen's 22nd birthday for my very first time, Mom takes me to the library.

What an absolutely astounding place was the Utica Public Library. I hadn't known! Why had the adult world been keeping this wonderful secret from me! Mr. Thomas R. Proctor in his infinite largesse had bequeathed what appeared to be a fortune to build a magnificent structure whose lobby rivaled the Pantheon. The book stacks went



up 3 stories, I seem to remember, and you walked among them on translucent glass-like floors. There were literally zillions of volumes and a special room for children's books. This was SO much better than the library at my school in the dungeon-like basement, used mostly for hearing tests, air raids and after-school punishment. I could curse and swear and steal all the milk money I wanted now. Who needed a Heaven so far in the future, let alone Purgatory, when the real paradise was right here beneath my sneaker-shod feet.

And the smell! Paper and glue and ink, luscious ink. I love ink. It is the most wonderful smell in all the world.

On that day....write it down in my Baby Book.....I made the discovery of a lifetime. Lots of people wrote lots of stories in lots of books and were given lots of encouragement and lots of appreciation. I could read other people's stories instead of making up my own. And theirs were better!

I still remember the very first book I checked out of the library. It was an actual novel called “Billy and Me,” meant for young readers, about a boy and his best friend who joined the Boy Scouts and had all sorts of neat adventures riding horses, paddling canoes and raising money. I forget what the cause was. Anyway, what really impressed me were the descriptions of, for example, the hot dusty trail rolling out ahead in the bright sunlight and the snow-white moon coming up over the hill on a crisp October evening. I had never realized such vivid pictures could be drawn with words, excepting of course the Baltimore Catechism’s description of the Fires of Hell.

The Children’s Room librarian was an older grey-haired woman who had a clipped manner and a disapproving look sewn on her face. Later in the summer, when I discovered I could check out books in the main lobby from a younger pretty woman, I found one excuse or another to do so. I love librarians always have.

The sign on the young woman’s desk said her name was Melinda and I thought it was just the most beautiful name anyone could ever have, even if it wasn’t a saint’s name. As a bonus, she seemed to smell slightly of ink. I handed her a book for older children called, “You Can Get It Free!” and to make conversation I looked around the library airily and declared, “Yes, I’ve finally found the secret the adult world has kept from me all these years.” I was told later to check out all my books in the Children’s Room.

Over the years I have haunted many libraries. If I’m in a small New England town with my wife as she peers into store after store that seem to offer exactly what can be purchased at home, I will often lag behind, get lost and find the library. If the librarian is a person who actually reads, the book list will most likely be excellent, providing ideas for books to pursue when I get home.

I’ve seen and used numerous large and exalted libraries, even pretentious “collections,” but size and sophistication matter little. It’s our very personal experiences we have among the books that count.

On a rainy September morning some years ago in South Paris, Maine, as I nosed my way along the great smelling shelves in the comfortable little village library, I came across the book that had changed my life. “Billy and Me,” misplaced by some errant child into the New Releases section, stared back at me. Seriously, it really had changed my life! It opened the world of the community library to me and thereby a public sphere of ideas and thoughts and arguments and discourse far beyond what I would have experienced in the dungeons of most small Catholic school libraries of the 1950’s.

Once my life of libraries and reading had begun, Mom may have had a few misgivings over the nerd she had created. She found herself constantly telling me to get my nose out of the books. “Find something else in the world more interesting,” she would say. But that took a few years and when it happened, the girl in the 3rd row, 8th seat back didn’t smell at all like ink. She smelled delicious.

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