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My Summer Reading Confession

I HAVE A CONFESSION TO MAKE. When I was growing up, I cheated on the library summer reading challenge. At the time, I didn't really believe I was cheating. At least, I didn't want to admit that possibility to myself. You see, the library allowed me to check out five books at a time, so of course, I took out the maximum each week. When I returned them, five stickers were handed to me in exchange—despite the fact that, maybe, I had not read every single word of each book.

The goal of the summer reading challenge was simple. The person who read the most books in each age group won a prize. Being intensely competitive—to a fault, apparently—I wanted that prize with my whole heart, but even more so I wanted the public gratification of being the best. (I can't even remember now what that enticing prize actually was.) When handed five stickers for five books, who was I to correct the adult offering them? It's difficult to admit now, well over fifty years later, but I feel the need to be honest about my possible transgression.

During the 1970s, the arrival of July meant our annual family migration from suburban New York City to rural western Massachusetts, and to the one hundred-year-old constantly-falling-apart colonial house where my mom had grown up. The small village of Shelburne Falls with its granite buildings and iron truss bridge still envelops the tiny stone and brick library where, upon arrival each summer, I would promptly sign up for the summer reading challenge. Each week, maybe even twice some weeks, I visited the bookshelves of my favorite building in town, eager to earn those glorious multicolor bookmobile stickers to place on my summer reading chart.

In 1975 I was overjoyed to see my name in the paper as the age-group winner for the Arms Library Bicentennial Reading Program. Oh, how that felt like the pinnacle of childhood success! You can understand, then, that I would have preferred to keep my indiscretion a secret for eternity rather than admit to lying about reading. For my bibliophile family, this deception is about as close to committing a sin as I can imagine. After all, just being around books influences a child's future success, so what was the harm, right?

Reading and visits to the library were the heart of my childhood, especially during the summertime in Massachusetts. We had a weekly ritual. Arriving at the library with books in hand to return, I would leap up the wide granite steps, traverse the ancient threshold that delivered me to another time and place, peruse the shelves with never-ending curiosity and indecision, then finally choose five books, and try to read them all that week. With picture books, that was easy. Later on, as I progressed to reading chapter books, it became more difficult, and so the stack became shorter—except when it was time for the summer reading challenge.

Game on. Bring on the books.

The pull to the library was always organic. It's just what my family did. We went not only to get books, but also for puppet shows, storytimes, and, well, just to be around Babar, Harry the Dirty Dog, and, later, the Ingalls

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family on that far away prairie. Oh, the glorious mustiness of the stacks. How I loved to walk up and down those long aisles, inhaling the wisdom and knowledge emanating from their shelves.

My sister Alix and I craved the cozy tutelage of the library so much that we would often drag our three tall wooden bookshelves to one corner of our shared bedroom in order to create our own little library. Inside the back cover of each book in this bedroom library was a paper card pocket adorned with a hand-drawn angry-looking cat, courtesy of Alix's artistic talents. Some of those feline-embellished tomes remain with me on the shelves of my grandmother's antique secretary desk residing today in my upstairs hallway. I often pause while walking past these shelves to pull out my mother's 1929 copy of Wee Gillis, flipping through the pages until I get to that cat staring back at me from inside the back cover. I checked that book out many times from Alix, the child librarian, reveling in Wee Gillis' adventures of figuring out where he fit into his family in the highlands and the lowlands of Scotland.

Exercising that early library experience and expertise, my first encounter with real employment was, of course, at the library, shelving books in the children's section of the Yonkers Public Library on Central Park Avenue. So talented in returning each volume to its proper place with record speed and dexterity, I was able to steal moments in the recesses of the stacks in order to peruse my old friends—Sammy the Seal, A Snowy Day, and, my all-time favorite, Make Way for Ducklings—before placing each with loving care back on its metal shelf.

My sister did me one better and went to library school, earning her master's degree in Library Science. As a master in the library skills practiced since childhood, Alix ascended all the way to the position of Assistant State Librarian at the Massachusetts State House. She got to spend her days with William Bradford's Of Plimouth Plantation and documents with John Hancock's signature. Boy, was I envious!

Little did I know growing up that the library was, in fact, part and parcel of my DNA. It was intertwined with my family in such a way that each generation carried forward the essence of its importance. The library in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts had been organized in 1854, first occupying a small space in the bank block of the tiny village. Its third head librarian happened to be my great-great-grandfather, Zebulon Field. While not his full-time profession—he wore many hats in the community, from mill owner to stone mason to town justice—this position was one that reflected his progressive beliefs. He even allowed his library position to be a family affair, with his twenty-one-year-old daughter Ellen declaring enthusiastically in her 1857 diary, "I am librarian every Sat."

More profound to my ancestral identity was realizing that Ellen's sister Emma—my great-grandmother—wrote the word "Library" sixty-five times in her 1860 diary. At the age of sixteen she was employed there, most often cleaning up, but also using the library as a social rendezvous point. "This morning went to the Library & to walk with Ann...I swept the Library this forenoon...I am nearly through my duties in the Library for this year..." Taking special notice of how Emma capitalizes the word "Library" each time, I can only deduce that the space, and the responsibilities she had there, shaped her moral outlook and beliefs. She was not only

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a dedicated worker, but also an industrious reader, mentioning books borrowed and read during the year: Goldsmith's Works, Rectory of Moreland, and Boston Common. For her work at the library in 1860, Emma earned twenty-five dollars—equivalent to over nine hundred dollars today. That is an astounding income for a teenage girl in the mid-nineteenth century. I remember getting my first library paycheck of forty-five dollars in 1982, immediately feeling rich, fulfilled, and—most importantly—a bit more independent than the day before. Knowing that Emma must have shared similar emotions connects me to her through the cobwebs of time.

My great-great grandfather not only placed importance on broadening the minds of his community, but also permitted his daughters to work in a space of enlightenment. He valued education. He understood that access to books meant access to information and knowledge. He, too, would have handed me five stickers for five books, with no questions asked.

I can't fault my nine-year-old self for cheating on the summer reading challenge. While the interpretation of the rules may have been questionable, that little girl just wanted to soak in all she could from the words in those books. She wanted to know more than time and ability allowed. Simply ruminating in the presence of the many pages felt powerful. She was just trying to wish the words off the page and into her head. She just wanted to know more. She wanted to be better.

That little girl still lives inside of me. I always want to believe I can read more than what is possible with my limited time and ability. As I write this, there are several stacks of yet-to-be-read books on my bedside table, and even more books on my living room shelves. Some have been there for years, keeping me company, allowing me to think about their contents and how their words will influence me, once it becomes the perfect time to read them. Of course, I will read them all...eventually...hopefully...okay, maybe.

Today it's not just the words within a book that offer me sustenance. It's the thickness of the binding, the earthy scent and smooth feel of the worn pages that evoke more emotions and memories than the words themselves—memories of the chilly mosaic floor where I sat listening to the librarian read *Curious George Goes to the Zoo*, feelings of anticipation and hope when walking the length of the stacks to choose just the right book, and—more than anything—the joy of approaching the dark wooden circulation desk in the center of that tiny summer library to check out my books for the week, dreaming of how many stickers I would earn on my next visit to that magical space.

The game is still on when it comes to books, but I promise not to make any more wild claims about my fictitious reading achievements, nor accept unwarranted accolades. I no longer crave public recognition for my reading prowess, or lack thereof. I simply enjoy the warmth and the intense focus that reading gifts me.