

Caleb Williams

Professor Leach

English 1110-36

16 February 2009

My Journey Through Literature

I cannot remember not reading. I cannot remember learning to read, save for flashes of grade school—but reading has been there forever. Even before I could read, people read to me. My mother, father and grandparents all read to me. Books I remember most from that time were the Berenstain Bears, the Laura Ingalls Wilder series and one my favorites: Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs by Judi Barrett. I have also had books all around me at home. Our family has ten bookshelves—all overflowing—at our house. I have books piled by my bedside. My mother and stepfather have a half-bookshelf in their bedroom.

In Texas, my elementary school had an Accelerated Reader program that really got me going. We got “points” for being able to answer questions on books we had read. I was never number one—a kid named Ethan Schuman always was (he even read during class)—but I was in the top three people in my grade during most of my tenure at Sam Houston. I cannot remember what I read at that point. All sorts of children’s literature, I suppose. I remember that there were levels within the program and unlike a few kids like Ethan, I was not quite at the higher level and I could not earn as many points as they could.

The sinking of the Titanic in 1912 and the pursuit and sinking of the German battleship Bismarck in 1941 stick out in my mind as the subjects of books I read in second grade. Our class would have time during the day to read. My friends and I would go to the bookshelves and peruse through our favorites, such as copies of the Guinness Book of World Records from the 1980s, and a few children’s editions of popular novels, such as Heidi by Johanna Spyri and

Journey to the Center of the Earth by Jules Verne. Once, in either second or third grade, my class got an assignment about the then-ongoing O.J. Simpson trial. A girl and I were excused from the assignment because we did not know anything about the trial. My parents did not let us watch much TV at that age, so my siblings and I were not as exposed to current events as others were.

Before fifth grade, my family moved to Minneapolis from Texas. Just before we moved, my favorite book was The Grand Escape by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor. It was the tale of two indoor cats that venture out into the outdoors. Somehow, this book ended up “missing” from the Sam Houston library. I “found” it only after the lost-book fee had been paid and our family was in Minneapolis.

As a ten-year-old, I could see the difference between the education systems in suburban Texas and inner city Minneapolis. Out with the Shurley method—where our class spent countless hours diagramming sentences—which I found quite effective, and in with the melting pot that is Minneapolis. I also lamented the lack of the Accelerated Reader program. I asked the librarian within the first month of fifth grade if there was one. Unfortunately, there wasn't.

I do not remember this from Texas, but it was certainly very prevalent in Minneapolis: a clear anti-education bias among my fellow students. I do not think this ever discouraged me from sharing my knowledge in class, but it did make me aware of being “too smart.” At this age, I remember checking Hardy Boys books out at the local library, but beyond that, I do not recall what I read.

Sixth grade is when memories of reading become more concrete. I really hated sixth grade. It is during this period when I first remember reading during class. In math, I sat at my own table and I was able to spend parts of the class lost in a book while others were working. It was at this time that I first became interested in Star Wars books. Since the first novel was

published in 1991, there had been many books written and I had a lot of catching up to do. I ended up buying a new one at Barnes & Noble every time I got finished with the last one. If I could not afford to buy more, I just reread the ones I had.

In seventh grade, I transferred to a different school, where in class we read William Shakespeare plays and other classics such as The Diary of Anne Frank. I had the same English teacher in both seventh and eighth grade so we studied similar material over that two-year span. It was also in seventh grade that I learned a skill that I have used ever since: the ability to read while someone else is speaking in the background. As in sixth grade, I was able to work at my own pace in seventh grade math and had quite a bit of time in which to read after completing my class work. While the class continued to work, I read. Generally, during this time I read for fun (who would want to read stuff for school when they could have fun reading?).

On the side, I continued with the Star Wars books. Between seventh and eighth grade, I read Les Misérables by Victor Hugo, as translated by Norman Denny, c. 1976. I read it purely for fun, and was able to complete it. I also tried reading The Three Musketeers by Alexander Dumas, but got so bored halfway through that I gave it up. I believe I was trying to challenge myself with Les Misérables, but by the time I got to The Three Musketeers, the idea of challenging myself was gone and I wasn't motivated to continue on a slightly boring, normal length (to me) novel.

In high school, I cannot remember too many of the books I read for class. In summer school between my sophomore and junior years, we read a wide selection of Stephen King short stories. I have never been a Stephen King fan, and while a bit weird, his shorts stories were quite enjoyable. Senior year, we read August Wilson's Fences and The Hot Zone by Richard Preston. I

also believe we read part of Shakespeare's Macbeth, though certainly not the whole thing. I also never read any of the classics associated with high school English.

At the same time, my personal experiences with literature had changed. I moved from Star Wars to Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan series. Clancy's novels are much longer than the Star Wars novels: a paperback Clancy novel runs anywhere from 700 to 1,300 pages. I can trace my interest in the Clancy novels to a video game I played in middle school. The game was an adaption of Clancy's Rainbow Six. I read Rainbow Six for the first time on a trip to Europe in 2002. As with the Star Wars novels, I periodically reread the series as I continued to buy more books.

At the time, the Harry Potter craze was starting to take off in a big way in the United States. I resisted reading the series at first. But, like so many before me, I gave in and read the first book and soon the two others. As the other books came out, I would read those too. Again, while waiting for the next book to come out, I would reread the series. When each of the last three books came out: Order of the Phoenix in 2003, Half-Blood Prince in 2005 and Deathly Hallows in 2008, my family members queued up and began reading the books in turn. I would start in the morning and read non-stop until the late night, as late as one or two in the morning.

At the same time, I was reading other books for fun. Some that stand out are novels by John Grisham, The Da Vinci Code and Angels and Demons by Dan Brown, The Godfather and Omertà by Mario Puzo. I also read some non-fiction and biographical books, such as Band of Brothers by Stephen E. Ambrose and Mozart by Marcia Davenport. I also read some computer and web programming books toward the end of my high school career.

In college, the amount of reading I did dropped dramatically. I became the Photo Editor of the Augsburg College Echo student newspaper and soon it seemed my whole life was

wrapped up in the paper. In addition, I became much busier socially, watched a more television, and was on the internet a great deal more. Reading took a back seat. That was not for lack of books. I took a full-size bookcase to college with me my first year, but only read a few of the books on it.

Since I left Augsburg, I have done quite a bit more reading. I reread part of the Tom Clancy series. This summer, I also was able to finish the Harry Potter series. Last month, I reread the whole series for the first time since reading Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows in July. I also did quite a bit of writing. Picking up where I left off with the Echo, I wrote quite a few news stories for WikiNews.org, and online open-source news website.

Literature has permeated my life: whether being read to, reading for pleasure, or for education purposes (the last two not being mutually exclusive), the written word has been important to me. The strong foundation of reading as a youth gave me a head start on the other students in school, whether kindergarten or college.