

Reading Past Memories

Theresa E. Nelson

"So, what you been reading?" I casually ask, knowing full well that I've just committed myself to an additional thirty minutes on the phone, minimum.

"*The Long Walk*. I know you'll like it," Dad says with a chuckle that matches his mood. "It's about a Polish soldier sent to Siberia; how he escapes and walks south over deserts and mountains to freedom in India."

We don't have to clock many phone minutes before Dad and I invariably begin discussing our recent reads. A book, article, web site, it doesn't matter as long as it's print form.

Dad and books are as companionable as eggs and toast or steak and potatoes. I have early memories of him reading in the evening after we kids were in bed. I'd stumble out of my dark bedroom door into pupil-blinding light to obtain some water or use the bathroom, and Dad would be sitting at the kitchen table or on the living room couch, his strong hands gently cradling the spine of a book.

Before we were old enough to attend school, Dean my older brother, Bliss my younger sister, and I would vie for the coveted lap position as Dad read us a short bedtime story. Goliath and a shepherd boy battled for victory, a fiery furnace declined to consume three men, a boy was sold as a slave and then thrown

endings. If a book is any good, its ending is always

in jail, and hungry lions refused to consume a falsely accused man. My fifth winter and Dean's sixth, Dad took time to patiently decipher the language of the alphabet, explaining how the skinny black marks below pictures were interpretable codes. Our three red heads bowed and merged over a slender book filled with rows of rhyming words – oat, goat, coat, moat – which Dean and I triumphantly took turns pronouncing. Silly sentences were next. The cat and rat sat on a mat.

Reading expanded my life unquestionably. It became my favorite pastime. I'd get so caught up in the plot of a book that I'd turn on the small light beside my bed to satisfy my curiosity concerning the plot and characters, all the while listening to Bliss whine about not being able to sleep. Always I'd listen and try to anticipate when Dad would walk down the hall to check on us so I could extinguish the light and pretend I was sleeping.

Other families I knew camped together, played baseball together, hiked through mountains together, but what drew our family together was Dad reading aloud to us.

This routine existed for years.

Reading aloud to us kids was something Dad took for granted. Although it was another item on his burgeoning to-do list, it seemed to be one of the more enjoyable parts of his daily life. Yet it shaped my siblings' and my life, creating our fondest memories of childhood and family times.

When I started second grade, Dad began reading chapter books aloud – creating a routine that would continue until I was in my late teens. We sat around the dinner table during winters, and Dad deposited us into the middle of families with a bushel of red-headed kids in *Cheaper by the Dozen*, transported us on fishing trips that turned sour in *A Fine and Pleasant Misery*, introduced us to a dog who thought he was human in *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be*, and carried us to a farm where two oxen captured a boy's heart in *Farmer Boy*.

bad – because you don't want the book to end. (Pseu-

For an hour or so my siblings and I sat enthralled, taking a break from our daily skirmishes, relaxing our battle lines with each other. We became so mesmerized by the characters' struggles that we forgot our petty grievances and complaints about the day. Suddenly it didn't matter that our teacher had forgotten that I was to walk the milk money to the office, or that Bliss had stuck her tongue out at Dean and me; that Mom had yelled at us when we wouldn't let Bliss ride bikes with us.

These characters Dad introduced to us appeared in our daily conversation. Bliss and I would discuss the plot and characters as we lay in bed before sleep sneaked up on us. Dean liked to act out the more exciting parts of the story and repeat certain phrases and lines. We compared our current life, situations, and even others' to the plots and characters. "There's a Rancid Crabtree," we'd observe to one another as we sat licking our ice cream cones and watching the parade of people pass on the sidewalk. We talked about the characters as if they were our intimate friends we cared about, as real as our classmates or best friends. And we did care about the characters and what happened to them – cared fiercely. It was this caring for them, this identifying with them and their conflicts that drew us back to hear more.

Characters planted themselves in my dreams. Sometimes I would be Laura finding my way home through a blizzard, or plotting revenge on Nelly Olson – who seemed to resemble my sister. Sometimes I imagined myself as one of my book characters, even adopting a new style of talking, until the person became imprinted on my soul – the two of us blending into a new person.

Books were chosen for enjoyment, humor, and memorable characters. During funny parts, as tears of laughter streamed down Dad's once-freckled face, we'd laugh – Bliss sliding off

her chair, Dean whacking the table in rhythm to his chuckles, and me banging the leg of the nearest person.

During sad parts, the family pet dying, a crushed dream, we sat motionless, trying to hold back the tears that knotted our throats and stilled our breathing. Then suddenly Mom was passing Kleenex and we quickly blew our noses and wiped our eyes, casting quick embarrassed glances at each other to make sure we weren't the only one crying. Though if we were, teasing always came later.

After a few chapters Dad closed the book and announced bedtime. We'd loudly protest that we weren't tired and beg him to read more, but usually the pages remained shut. Slowly we'd disperse upstairs, our thoughts so full of characters and speculating about their next adventures that it didn't seem such a big imposition to share the toothpaste with a grabbing brother or wait ten minutes for Bliss to emerge from the bathroom.

Dad has perfect rhythm and a strong voice that floats smoothly into ears when he reads aloud. I tend to hurriedly sprint from the end of one sentence to the next, my voice rising and falling like irregular breathing. Still, the routine Dad started, is continued. I read aloud to my husband and daughter at home and in the car. We travel through many of the same books Dad read during my childhood, as well as new ones – revisiting old friends and making new. Sometimes we pass the tissue and sometimes we slide off chairs in waves of laughter.

My dad is the only person I know who can coherently read aloud and laugh at the same time. His eyes will begin to moisten like saturated cotton balls and his voice will rise an octave to high alto, but he'll keep reading. Occasionally, though, he'll burst out laughing and have to set the book down to wipe his eyes and blow his nose.

Unfortunately I wasn't gifted with Dad's knack of reading aloud and laughing simultaneously, which means it takes

child, it becomes a part of your identity in a way

time to wade through the funny parts when I now read to my family. I'll be laughing and slapping my knee with the book, my words incoherent with laughter, and my daughter and husband will look at me, chanting in unison, "What's so funny? Read it to us."

At times like this I miss Dad and his gift of reading.

So we call each other and do the next best thing. We discuss books, share observations and opinions about our reading pursuits, and recommend our favorites. And occasionally I'll ask him if he remembers that Patrick McMannus book he read to us, or the story of the dog who wanted to be a person, and we'll laugh and reminisce, discussing the plot and characters as if no time has elapsed.

Dream Card

Joanne Faries

six years old, new bike
what more could I need?

sealed tiny envelope
revealed my own library card
name in print, entrusted
check-out

book adventures far beyond
pedaling on our driveway

that no other reading in your life does... (Nora
