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Journey of Imagination

Celeste Ashley

Celeste Ashley wrote this essay as a senior in high school, and is now a college sophomore studying writing. She adores reading, relishes writing, enjoys photography, and passionately loves cheese and the color blue. Spending time with her fabulous family and fantastic friends is one of her all-time favorite pastimes. She plays piano and violin, has lived in five different states, and was homeschooled K-12. She wishes for nothing but that her writing will glorify God and convey His truth in such a way that it brings her readers closer to Him.

I wander blissfully through the spacious library, up and down row after row, each brimming with books. The murmur of hushed voices around me creates a tranquil atmosphere. Fellow book lovers browse the shelves as librarians return books to their homes. I could work in a library, utterly surrounded by books. Closing my eyes, I inhale deeply and exhale a sigh of satisfaction. The faint, pleasant aroma of paper and ink—the musty, mysterious smell of ancient, falling-apart books and the crisp, starchy scent of books just off the press—seeps through every fiber of my body. I am practically in heaven.

Although I've already gathered all the books I can borrow this time, I gaze longingly at the numerous ones I cannot. Brushing my fingertips along the spines of the volumes, I dream of the wonderful stories that lie enclosed between those covers. I imagine the fantasies swirling around my hand and over my head, begging to be picked up, beckoning me to unleash their potency. These are tales of adventure, danger, love, suspense, magic, and mystery; stories that captivate my imagination, imprisoning it until the last word on the last, crisp page; legends that enchant me; words that evoke distinct emotions; novels that envelop me and all my senses through their transportation into another's life. These are made-up stories of girls who step through a magic mirror in fancy clothes and are transported to a life based on their apparel; diaries of real princesses; mysteries solved by Nancy Drew or the Hardy

boys; Beverly Cleary's narratives of a gangly, hilarious girl named Ramona; the American Girl books; the Prydain Chronicles. Such potential lay in these unopened books which I observed!

Anticipating the worlds of wonder within these closed pages, I continue gazing at the rows of books. I am alone in my own little world, a different person with a different life. I am a daring spy in a foreign land, overhearing enemy plans. I am a queen, wearing a gown of light blue silk whose skirt flows in ripples to the floor and a silver tiara, set amidst my brown tresses piled high on my head. I am a scared, lonely, orphan girl without a friend in the world. So many possibilities, but I cannot explore them now.

I have had a deep passion for books ever since I can remember. The power of words has always had a firm grip on my mind. Words have the ability to whisk me away to another world. I love being able to "lose myself" in a book. I am completely oblivious to the world around me as I become enthralled by the lives of the characters in the book. I am irretrievably tied to their emotions. When they are distraught, I am sad. When they are in danger, I am on the edge of my seat. When they are victorious, I am joyful.

My favorite books are the ones I can hardly put down, such as *The Wingfeather Saga*, *The Binding of the Blade*, and *Ella Enchanted*. These are books that consume my thoughts and imagination until I have read every last word. Then comes that instant pang of remorse that the story is over—how I wish it was not! Often I will continue the story in my mind, imagining what happened next to the characters, or running scenes over and over in my head. Numerous times, I reread my favorite portions of the book before reluctantly returning it to the shelf. With finishing a book, however, comes the exciting task of choosing a new one. I eagerly consider my options, agonizing over the decision. Which story will enchant me next? Should I choose the page-turning thriller that sends chills up and down my spine? Or the fantasy saga, complete with mythological creatures and romance? The mystery, rich in suspense and drama? Once the decision is finally made, I am happy and able to anticipate the beginning of a new literary adventure. The rest of the books will wait for next time.

I have rarely, perhaps three or four times, not finished a book. Whether they were long, boring, dry, or slow, I stubbornly refused

to quit (though, granted, I did put them away with a sigh of relief when I finished). I have hopes of someday reading many classics and writings, including but not limited to *Oliver Twist*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Surprised by Joy*, *A Grief Observed*, *Till We Have Faces*, *North and South*, *Emma*, and *Martin Luther's Ninety-five Theses*. To me, reading is an essential part of learning to write. To that end, I continue reading the works of great writers, and strive to learn how to emulate them. I also admire the authors whose books I have already read and love. My favorite genre is Christian fiction, so I have read many books with that flavor. Some of my favorites have been Donita K. Paul's *Dragon* series; Wayne Thomas Batson's *Door Within* Trilogy; L.B. Graham's *Binding of the Blade* series; Lois Walfrid Johnson's *Viking Quest* series; *The Lord of the Rings*; Andrew Peterson's *Wingfeather Saga*; and Jonathan Roger's *Wilderking* Trilogy, to name a few.

My dad was in the Air Force for twenty years. When I was five, he received orders to move from Beavercreek, Ohio, to Edwards AFB, California. Our family sold our house, packed our many belongings, and began the eleven-day car ride to our new desert home. I am certain my car bag was stuffed with books. As we traveled the dusty, seemingly-endless highways day after day, I sat hunched in my seat, completely absorbed in Laura Ingalls' *Little House on the Prairie*. I loved reading her descriptions of making maple candy, the log cabin in the woods, the home by Plum creek, and the deep, deep snow. I remember little of the trip, except when we stopped to rest or sightsee. But I remember those books. I still want to read them again someday.

When I was in eighth grade, I made a personal goal to read one hundred books during the school year. As soon as I finished a book, I wrote down the title so that I could keep count. It was a very fun challenge. I read books such as *Ben-Hur*, *The Knights of Arrethrae*, *Redwall*, *Mandie* books, *Ella Enchanted* (one of my all-time favorites), and *Carry on, Mr. Bowditch*. Towards the end of the year, I was running out time and running out of books! For my one hundredth book, I finally settled on *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. Although it would not have been my first choice, it worked and I enjoyed the story for what it was worth.

My extensive and enjoyable reading experiences have naturally impacted and augmented my desire to write and to be able

to create a story of my own that is both thrilling and masterful. I long to write a novel that will make its readers feel the same way I do about my favorite books. I have so many ideas for tales of adventure, fantasies peppered with magical creatures, enticing page turners, thrillers, scenes of heart wrenching sorrow, and passages describing immense joy. Yet these are only ideas. Not only that, but they are undeveloped, raw material. How in the world am I going to turn these into fictional stories with real-life scenarios and a meaningful message? When faced with this momentous task, my excitement fades imperceptibly. My determination cracks at the edges. This task, I find is not easy at all! It is nearly impossible to pluck from the air a perfectly well-developed character, and a structured, flawless plotline. In fact, it is impossible, because no one except God is a perfect writer. No author, however experienced and talented, puts together a novel overnight. I must slowly grasp this concept, and realize that if I want a polished masterpiece, I will have to work for it. As I examine my situation in life, I find that I am not without resources.

As part of our school curriculum, my brother and I use a program called Omnibus, a literature, history, philosophy and Bible course. We read books and then discuss them, answering questions provided by the textbook. We have read epic poems such as Gilgamesh, Inferno, and Beowulf; classics, including Dorothy Sayers' *The Nine Tailors*, *Robin Hood*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia*; books of the Bible (Genesis, Romans, James); and even some history books, considered the first of their kind—Herodotus' *History*, Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, and Eusebius' *The Church History*. Reading and discussing these ancient works has given me new knowledge and insight, and stretched my thinking, reasoning, and writing capabilities. This course has definitely been instrumental in my level of literacy and a great asset to my goals of being a writer.

Undoubtedly, the person who has had the most influence on my reading and writing thus far is my mother. She taught me how to read in the first place. Once I had a basic understanding of the phonetic structure of our English language, I took off. I read book after book. Mom has faithfully supplied me with reading material for years, sometimes going out of her way to find new books in preparation for an upcoming road trip. On some occasions, she

took time out of her busy schedule to read and check out a book first before letting me read it. She has always been careful and conscientious about what I am reading.

Mom has always encouraged my writing. When I was five, this consisted of praising my one or two page stories, barely legible and utterly silly as they were. She not only complimented my five-year-old “accomplishments”, but saved every one. As a junior high and highschool student, my writing has, of course, changed form and become more substantial in its content than simply the boy who lost his jacket (and later found it in the closet, where it was supposed to be). Mom’s role in my writing has changed as well. Now, instead of simply praising, she edits, offers ideas, clarifications, and constructive criticism. She is a huge asset to my ability to write, half the reason my writing is any good at all, and simply amazing. I would not have come as far as I have without her encouragement and instruction. She often supplies ideas for my plot as she edits. “This doesn’t make sense, Celeste,” she will say. “That is not even logical. Why don’t you have them do this?” I groan, because now I have to write more, but usually end up following her suggestions. Dad has also been influential in my writing. His gift is spotting grammatical mistakes, so I hand him my stories, newly finished, for punctuation editing. When he hands them back to me with a “Very good” and nod of approval, they are dotted with red marks: a missing period here, too many commas there, holes in sentences where some word is obviously absent. I am indebted to my dad for catching silly mistakes in my writing.

I am delighted to have a small audience from whom to gather feedback: my parents, siblings, grandparents and friends. All come back with information and ideas I hadn’t thought of before. After sending my friends a sequel I had recently finished, one of my friends told me, “It was really good. I liked it better than the first one. The first one didn’t really seem to go anywhere.” I agree. I will have to go back and rewrite the first one.

My grandfather constantly offers his services and his advice. “I can help you get a copyright,” he’s told me. “I really think you should pursue getting published. It’d be a great thing for you, Celeste.” “Thanks,” I reply. “I’ll think about it.” The thought of being published is exciting but also a scary at the same time. I’m not sure I’m ready

yet. I mean, speaking to a real publisher? Talk about intimidating! Someday, yes. Until then, I must keep writing and polishing and dreaming.

During the time I was beginning to realize that excellent writing is not easy to achieve, I made a decision that proved just that. A couple of years ago, I decided to try to write a book in a month with a program called NANOWRIMO (National Novel Writing Month). A friend of mine had done it, and, having completed her book, told me about it. If you could write your book in the month of November, they would award you five free copies of your book. I already had an idea, and proceeded to write out a basic plotline. I wanted to have a crystal clear idea of where I was going with the story before I started writing, because I wouldn't have the leisure of sitting around waiting for an idea to come to me.

When November started, I started writing. I found that I had not planned as well as I should have. Almost immediately I was stuck. After taking the story one way, I retraced my steps and rewrote it. Mom read each portion as I finished it, commenting, advising, and critiquing. As the month progressed, I ran into several other dilemmas. It was stressful to not have any ideas. I had a deadline! In truth, there was nothing holding me to that deadline. I had no obligation to finish writing by November 30. The only thing that kept me going—and I believe this was the objective of the program—was my determination and unwillingness to give up. Could I persevere through thick and thin, trials, tribulations, and writer's block? The test had begun. The thought that I might not finish it, might not meet my goal, might give up—was unbearable to me. How could I look back in five, ten, fifteen years and know that I had given up? I dreaded that regret.

So, I wrote. I wrote whenever I could—after school, on weekends, when I was supposed to be doing school. I took my manuscript with me when our family went to my grandparents' for Thanksgiving and tried to work on it there. Although I didn't accomplish much writing that week, one of my cousins did come up with a name for my villain. In that regard, it was a profitable week. I had to write down until the very last day, but I was able to finish the book. With a huge sigh of relief, I submitted my draft. I had not only exceeded my word-count goal, but also succeeded in finishing my novel. The next step was designing the cover and

choosing a title. Once the title was chosen, the cover was easy to coordinate. The problem was I could not think of a title! I ended up using Mom's suggestion of *Black Dawn*. The title, an oxymoron, is exactly the kind of title that would make me curious enough to pick up a book and possibly buy it. This done, I was able to order my free copies. Forcing myself to sit down and write everyday was difficult, but I knew it was worth it when I received the books in the mail—my books! It was exhilarating and at the same time strange to see my writing in print. Having to be disciplined in this project was a good step for me towards the writing future I hope to have.

This was not the first book I had completed, but it is the only that has been written in so short a time. The first somewhat-lengthy story I wrote was titled *A New Friend*. The second story, *Leesa*, was about a thirteen-year old girl who fled her home with her family to escape the invading armies. This was to become the first in a trilogy, which I called the *Acacian Trilogy*. The second one, *Fiona*, is the most polished story I have so far. Sadly, the third and final installment is yet to be written. But I've also written several other short stories and the beginnings of a series set in "Animal Land". Though it might appear that I have written a somewhat substantial amount of material, overall, I am not completely thrilled with it. It is still raw, unpolished material. Much work is still to be done.

Despite knowing that writing captivating fiction is difficult, I still dream of writing it. Part of me shrinks from hard work. At the same time, the challenge fine tunes my determination to write great fiction. Yet, is that how I want to spend my life? Struggling to create plausible characters, heart-racing plots, and engaging literature? Puzzling over how to integrate a gospel-defined message in and throughout each book? Holed up in my home, bent over thousands of pieces of loose-leaf notebook paper, pencils, and a thesaurus? Rubbing my fingers raw from writing, writing and rewriting? Editing and changing and rethinking over and over and over? Trying to meet deadlines and work with real-world publishers? I love writing though. Am I not willing to go through some hardship in order to do something I enjoy? Or is it simply the idea of writing that I love?

Couldn't my life—shouldn't my life—be better spent? What if I'm not actually supposed to be some semi-famous author? What if "all" I do is be a stay-at-home mom and raise kids? It may not be

a glamorous occupation like being an author in the limelight, but it is a glorious, God-approved occupation. Maybe I should go to the mission field. Take up my cross and endure persecution for the sake of the gospel. Winning souls is a most valuable, purposeful life's occupation. What if, somehow, in some God-ordained way, I could do all three? Write books, raise kids, and work in the mission field? Is that possible? All things are possible with God. Now what do I do? With all these possibilities, how in the world am I supposed to know what God wants me to do?

What happens five years down the road is completely in God's sovereign plan. Whatever life holds for me, I know He will always be with me. I must rest in the knowledge that He has a plan, and I don't have to know what it is right now. For the present, I'm supposed to be doing school, serving in my church, obeying my parents, encouraging my friends, writing stories—for the glory of God. I'm supposed to be here, in Beavercreek, at home, at church, at the library.

I chat with one of the librarians, a friendly, older woman who encourages me to apply for a job here. Her cheerful personality, sunny smile, and serene composure are a welcome and pleasant aspect of my library trips. I would love to work with her. And, of course, I would be in close contact with one of the things I love most on earth: books!