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Brick by Brick

Matthew Beal

Cedarville University, mbeal@cedarville.edu

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Brick by Brick

Matthew Beal

Cook-A-Doodle-Do—that’s the title of it. It was my first true love in reading, a masterpiece of childhood literature. Oh, you should have seen the colors of each page. Flashes of green and red highlighted the rooster’s body, and the other animals flourished in their respective shades and hues of blue, pink, yellow, and red. That wasn’t the only thing that made it so enjoyable, though. The story was well-written for my developing mind. One farm of animals embarked on a quest to craft a thing of glory, the one and only strawberry shortcake. And there sat Grandma in our lazy boy chair reading it to me, her ball of white hair topping a body that had probably eaten one too many shortcakes. That didn’t matter, though, because no one read it like Grandma did. She possessed every inflection and voice with perfect artistry, and she knew which line to emphasize above all. ‘Twas the line that evoked, without fail, a delighted laughter to accompany my young smile. After Hog’s premature consumption of the shortcake and suggestion of a new food dish, Iguana turned to him and said, “Yeah...how about a plump, juicy roast pig?”

With stories of this nature, I grew to love reading. My dear mother and I used to trek down to the public library and return with stacks of books. Sometimes, we checked out so many books that we found it challenging to get them all home in one trip, my mother being a petite woman, and I being four years old. Nevertheless, our dedication to an avid consumption of literature was not to be impeded by our wanting of size. We were a team on a mission—to search out new stories, to make contact with the great characters of prose, and to boldly read what no child had read before (contrary to the suggestion, though, I had no knowledge of Star Trek at the time as my introduction to it would come a few years later at the hands of my phaser-beam-loving father).

Now it was one thing to be a child with no cares in the world except to snuggle up with a parent on our plaid couch and follow the

whimsical journey of a prince and princess or the always entertaining conundrum of an animal. It was quite another thing when I first stepped into elementary and began to assemble the literary bricks constructed in my preschool years. I was no longer concerned with the band of misfit mammals searching for some insignificant trinket. No sir, it was time to read of daring escapes, lost treasure, and the quest of the amateur sleuth. None exemplified these traits better than the Hardy Boys. Now possessing the traits needed for reading on my own, I began a crusade of conquering one book after another. The lazy boy chair that used to hold my grandma became my own little world of mystery and intrigue.

“Chet, one your bills is a counterfeit.”

“Counterfeit? That’s impossible?” I wondered. “No way Chet’s bill is fake. Where did it come from? How did he have it? Was it the man they ran into earlier? It had to have been him.”

Through each installation of the Hardy Boys, I found myself immersed in the dimly lit caves, I could hear the thief searching for the lads as they held their collective breath, and I felt the angst of their dire circumstances.

Middle school, by contrast, was uninteresting concerning reading, and that’s speaking in kind terms. Yes, I read, but nothing grand stuck out to me like Cook-A-Doodle-Do had before school or Hardy Boys had in elementary. It was just average, ordinary reading that simply didn’t do it for me. Though I panned the shelves of our middle school selections looking hopefully for something to break the tedium, my endeavors were for naught. All that was available was a repetitious assemblage of prosaic, banal literature that had swiftly perished upon its entry into the literary world. One particularly droll literary indiscretion came in the form of a book called *Mystery at Inn Number 31, New Inn*, though the true mystery was how the publisher thought it well and good to release such a lackluster, monotonous work as this. “In the form of Sherlock Holmes,” the review read. Realistically, a better summary would have been, “Dr. Jekyll Takes a Sedative,” or “Ennui and Insouciance.” Had the author thought it best to prep his readers for a real literary treat only to craft a sleeping aide? After several muddled paragraphs of mundane medical malpractice, I found myself reaching for a copy of my father’s quarterly statistical reports in order to spice up the reading for a spell. A typical reading of *New Inn* followed a general form:

he escaped to his aunt, and breathed a sigh of relief when he landed his job with Mr. Wickfield. The other reason I was chest-deep is because 700+ pages is a lot of reading, and Victorian-style language can be...shall we say dry at times. When the plot lulled, I found myself reverting to middle school again. But such was my ambition, my interminable drive to be the eighth to finish *David Copperfield*, that I pushed forward. I read in the lazy boy, in the dining room, in the kitchen, at school, during my breaks at work, on the way to soccer games, and anywhere else that I could with proper concentration. As our team was traveling one sunny day, I sat in the back of the van plugging away at this bastille of a book on my Nexus 7. I swiped to the next page to find it much shorter than the rest. "Could it be?" I wondered. Deep in my heart, a little flame of hope was lit. Another swipe confirmed my elated expectation. Across the screen read the words, "You've completed this book!"

That was two and a half years ago when I saw that beautiful phrase materialize on the screen of my Nexus. Now I read the works of the Founding Fathers, John Locke, and Adam Smith with the same enthusiasm I had for *Cook-A-Doodle-Do*. The lofty prose that once repelled me now draws and fascinates my senses, though it's not the only literature I read. I've flipped through the pages of *World War 2*, gripped by the timeless heroics contained within it; I've found the world of fiction to be just as gripping. *Atlas Shrugged* has become a recent quest of mine due in no small part to my aunt's and mother's insistence on reading it. My appreciation for having read *Copperfield* is enlarged with every page I turn.

In a way, *David Copperfield* was a right of passage for me. I was a good reader before *Copperfield*, but I never challenged myself (which had stagnated my reading skills). *Copperfield* developed my vocabulary, expanded my appreciation for fine literature, and worked every literary muscle I had. As I sit writing now, I look back on it as the true turning point in my journey of literacy. Do you know what I started doing after reading *David Copperfield*? I started using a thesaurus. I began to appreciate complex words and phrasings that added meat and zest to my writing. Since then, few things in writing have so consistently delighted my mind as the moment in time when a well-worded sentence and its proper placing lock eyes for the first time.

I won't say that I would be an illiterate mess without reading

David Copperfield, but I do wonder what would be different. Would I appreciate word choices as much? Would I love reading as much as I do now? What would my essays have looked like otherwise? I could question on to exhaustion. But now my word count runs long, and I have typed far into the evening. With that homage to Dickens, this narrative I close having now realized how great a number of persons and proceedings have added to my literary journey and being eternally grateful for such a contribution as they have made.