

Raised by Reading: A Life in Books from the Children's Literature Festival to Harry Potter

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I delivered this speech as the keynote at the author luncheon for the 2010 Children's Literature Festival at the University of Central Missouri, in Warrensburg, Missouri. (The reason I was invited to speak there will shortly become clear.) It shares some language with both "The Wand Chooses the Wizard" and "Some Observations on Electric Eels."

- I gave my talk title to Naomi back in the summer, when she invited me to speak here:
- "Raised by Reading: A Life in Books from the Children's Literature Festival to Harry Potter"
- And I started sketching out what I wanted to say last fall
 - My memories of the festival, and the many authors I met
 - The books I read,
 - And how those experiences shaped me and led me to love reading
 - And to want to make a career making books
- But then, at Christmastime, my grandfather died. How many of you knew him?
- His name was Philip Sadler, and he founded the festival in the late 1960s,
 - So this is now the 42nd such event.
- And we are all here, in this room, because of him.
 - Some of us biologically—my mother and I
 - Some of us psychologically
 - That he created the circumstances in which we came to love books and reading and writing,
 - or we're able to do those things because of his support or guidance
 - And all of us chronologically
 - That this speech, this lunch, this festival literally would not exist without him.
- I know he suggested my name to Naomi for this slot because he was proud of me and wanted to hear me share my publishing experience with you.
- So I'm going to do that. But I'm also going to talk a little bit about the uses of reading, and the festival, and why we all come here together
- And I hope it will be worthy of your interest, and his suggestion.
- I attended my first Children's Literature Festival when I was just seven months old.
- It was March of 1979, and my grandfather asked my mother to go to the airport and pick up Barbara Robinson, the author of *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*
 - Mom says that Clyde Robert Bulla may also have been in the car that day, and they stopped to pick up Gertrude Bell too

- So here I was, in the car with three wonderful writers for children,
- And did I appreciate it in the least?
- No!
- Apparently I started bawling, and poor Barbara had to hold me in her arms all of that two-hour drive down to Warrensburg.
- Which, in retrospect, is a pretty good beginning for a bookish life. ☺
- The first book I learned to read was by a festival author: David Harrison's *The Boy with a Drum*
 - There once was a boy with a little toy drum
 - Rat-a-tat, tat-a-tat, rum-a-tum-tum
 - One day he went marching and played on his drum
 - Rat-a-tat, tat-a-tat, rum-a-tum-tum
- My parents had to read that book to me so often that I memorized it
- And then at some point, the magic became mine.
 - I could decipher this word, then that one.
 - Rat . . . and tat. Rum . . . and tum.
 - I could read *The Boy with the Drum*.
 - I could read *Make Way for Ducklings*.
 - I could read *Ramona the Pest*.
 - And then in theory, and with some practice, I could read whatever I wanted.
- I don't think it's overstating the case to say that after being born, learning to read is the most important thing that has happened to me in my whole life.
 - Because everything else in my life follows off of that—where I went to college, what type of work I pursued, the kinds of people with whom I've connected.
- It opened up the whole world to me
 - And that's kind of a clichéd thing to say about reading
 - But clichés become clichés because they have a grain of truth.
- And this is the first use of reading in my life, and in many kids' lives: EMPOWERMENT
- I think about power issues a lot when I'm editing, because children have virtually no power, other than what they can cadge out of the adults around them.
 - They don't have physical strength, size, money, knowledge of the world, the ability to earn a living—anything we value as adult currency
 - They're completely dependent upon the grown-ups in their lives.
- But reading puts all kinds of power into a child's hands.
 - First there's literal, physical power, as reading is a totally user-driven and user-powered activity.
 - There's no “on” switch or battery or power cord.
 - The reader controls how it happens, where it happens.
 - How fast it happens, when to begin, when to stop.
 - If you've been a child dependent upon your parents to read to you, or on access to the TV or computer,
 - And you learn to read,
 - Suddenly all the decisions are up to you.

- It's user-programmed, too—you choose what you want to read, when; completely on-demand.
 - The power of making your own choice.
 - Second, there's the power of knowledge.
 - Reading gave me access to all kinds of books, all kinds of information, well outside what my parents might tell me at any time.
 - If I wanted to know something, I could look it up.
 - If they didn't want me to know something—if I was clever about it, I could look it up.
 - And there were lots of things I didn't know I wanted to know until I knew them—what happened to Anne Frank, who wrote *Frankenstein*
 - I learned both of those facts from books by festival authors: *Remarkable Children* by the Fradins, and *What Do You Know?* by David Harrison.
 - The stories surrounding those facts fascinated me, and laid part of the basis for my later interest in history and poetry.
 - Finally, there's the power of imagination and identification,
 - Because much of the best children's fiction is about children finding their own power, or learning the right use of power.
 - Any story with magic, or an orphan, or a secret space no one else knows about, is a story that gives its child protagonist power,
 - Setting them free to have great adventures and undergo great tests
 - And letting the child reader—*me*—be there as well, gaining the strength and wisdom of those experiences without ever leaving my bedroom.
- So I loved reading nonfiction for knowledge, as I said,
 - But I loved fiction more.
- And goodness, all the books I read!
- Papa would come to visit us in Peculiar, or we'd come here to Warrensburg, and he'd have great bags and boxes full of review copies for me to pick through and choose from.
- My parents took me to the library, where I burned through the children's section quick as you please.
- I loved series: The Babysitters' Club, Ramona, Anne of Green Gables, the Little House books
 - When I was six or seven, I remember asking Papa if he could get Laura Ingalls Wilder to come to the Festival, and his answer: "She's *dead*, Cheryl."
 - Oh. Okay.
- But that, I thought, was really the only limit on my Papa's power.
- How many of you have been to more than five festivals?
- How many to more than ten? Twenty?
- Well, it doesn't matter how much of a VIP you are—

- You've been missing out, because you didn't come to the Festivals as Phil Sadler's granddaughter. ☺
- I came every year into high school—and it was GREAT!
- I got to go to any author talk I wanted
- When I got there, I got to sit in the desks shoved to the side of the room, rather than on those cold linoleum floors with the rest of the kids.
- Going through the book sale in the gym was like an all you can eat book buffet.
 - I got to walk behind the tables and pick out whatever I wanted,
 - and my grandfather would put it on his tab.
- I got to go to the author hospitality room, where I would ask many of the authors for autographs.
 - If you're one of those people I bothered twenty years ago,
 - Hovering at your elbow to interrupt your lunch,
 - Which was supposed to be your one child-free time in the day . . .
 - I'm sorry.
- I really was in awe of all of the authors I met—that somehow *they* made these books I loved, that all these people and their stories came out of their brains.
 - I'm still in awe of that, for books and characters I love.
- When I was eight or nine years old, my favorite living author at the time was Zilpha Keatley Snyder.
 - She wrote what are still some of the best child-empowerment stories around: *The Egypt Game*, *The Velvet Room*
- She was speaking at the dinner one night, and even though I was just a kid and the dinner was all adults, I got to go and hear her because I loved her books so much.
 - I wore my best new dress and my shiniest shoes
 - And Papa put me at a table right up front so I could see
- I still remember some of the jokes Ms. Snyder told that night—that a child wrote to her and said “You don't know anything about me, and all I know about you is from your back flaps.”
 - She said she mentioned that anecdote in a talk once, and a grown-up man yelled at her,
 - “Turn around.”
- And she signed my books. I couldn't talk to her while she was doing it—too shy—but she did, and I still have those books at home today.
- I *was* a shy child—or, a better word, a retiring one.
- If something bored me, or made me feel uncomfortable, or awkward, or lonely . . .
- Why, I would just retire somewhere, take out a book, and read.
- This has been the second great use of reading in my life: ESCAPE.
 - Using books to enter a reality different from and more satisfying than my own.
- When I was in middle school and the early years of high school, I wore coke-bottle glasses and a back brace for scoliosis. My friends all grew up faster than I did, in every sense, and grew away from me, which hurt a lot.
 - And so, to use a lovely line from Laurie R. King's *The Beekeeper's Apprentice*,

- I crawled into my books and pulled the covers up over my head.
- And I had some wonderful adventures. Not just with my old friends Anne and Laura, whose stories I reread every couple of years, but with Jane Austen’s novels, which I discovered in eighth grade, and Mary Stewart’s Arthur trilogy
 - Which sparked an interest in Regency fiction and fantasy novels that’s lasted till this day.
- But reading for escape is a double-edged sword, as I imagine many of you know,
- Because it disconnects you from the people around you.
 - You enter your own world, where the voice on the page drowns out the real voices in the room.
 - The reality on the page will almost always be richer and more interesting than the reality you’re living.
 - It will almost certainly be better shaped, for one thing, because it has a conscious shaper.
 - And the mere fact that you can close the book and turn off that reality gives an appealing illusion of control—
 - all the more appealing if you’re a kid, and control is still something you don’t have much of.
- So you read more and more, and separate more and more from the lives other people are living.
- This is something we forget, when we praise kids like me for reading and reading and reading
 - That reading can be as addictive and isolating as video games, or the Internet, or TV, or any other intense, focused interaction with people who aren’t there.
- And I spent so much time reading about, and *loving*, imaginary people’s social lives—I didn’t always have one of my own.
- So I was a little shy of a lot of people—authors, the boy I liked at school.
- My grandfather, too. Or “Awed” might be a better word for how I felt about him: that he’d met all these authors I so admired, how he would travel around the world, to Italy and England and Egypt.
 - He had that wonderful imperious manner, with the sharp glare and the big laugh.
 - For my thirteenth birthday, he took me to see a traveling production of *Les Miserables* in Kansas City. I remember desperately trying to come up with topics of conversation beforehand that I thought would impress him or interest him. “Opera,” I thought, “what are his favorite operas.”
 - We went to the Savoy Grill downtown for dinner, and I ordered a ten-dollar steak—by far the most expensive dish I had ever had, that I could remember, at that time. I was *amazed* by the expensiveness of it. Papa had oysters, of course, and offered me one, and laughed when I made a face.
- Because of all this, when I was thinking about what I wanted to be when I grew up, I thought: “Children’s literature professor.” Because being a world-travelling, opera-attending, oyster-eating, author-knowing, constantly book-reading grown-up seemed pretty damn cool.

- Since I was a smart girl, my father really wanted me to be a doctor. When the subject comes up, he *still* says that I would have gone to medical school if I had had a better biology teacher in tenth grade.
- But I realized, round about 11th grade, that I wasn't really cut out to be a doctor.
 - I thought, and still think, the human body is amazingly cool. But learning about it and working with it wasn't my greatest joy in life.
- That was reading. Thinking about stories and how they played out and their implications afterward;
 - being caught up in one, and figuring out how that catching-up worked, how the author made me care.
- So my mother brought home a book from the library entitled "Great Careers for Readers."
 - Another life-changing book
 - I read through that, and I thought, "Huh. Being an editor sounds pretty cool. "
- And when I found out I could be an English major and get a college degree more or less by reading novels and poetry—well, I was all over that.
 - So I went to college in Minnesota, with a long-term plan of becoming a professional book editor,
 - And I majored in English with a specialty in Jane Austen.
- I had first read *Pride and Prejudice* in middle school, but now I read EVERYTHING she wrote
- And I fell hard for Jane Austen's world. I wrote fanfiction based on the books. I read criticism of the novels for fun. I attended and helped organize Jane Austen dances.
 - And I adopted as a motto Elizabeth Bennet's proud assertion: "My courage always rises with every attempt to intimidate me"
- This is the third use of reading in my life, and in many children's lives: An act of conscious self-creation.
- I had found a fictional world I loved, and escaped into it.
- And when I came back to this real world, I tried to keep a little of Austen's morals and values present in my own behavior—
 - to be like one of her heroines, witty and warm and wise.
- For young readers, novels provide case studies for lives they might one day lead:
 - Hero—or failure? Outcast—or superstar?
 - The books ask, "What sort of choices would *you* make in the protagonist's position?"
 - And they promise, "If you act like this, in these circumstances, these are the results that will follow"—including, even, a happy ending.
 - Of course, we can't really recreate the circumstances of which the author is writing in the real world.
 - But the promise is immensely comforting: Do this, act as the hero does, within your own circumstances, and you'll create a narrative you know, you've *read*, in the tangle of real life. And that will help you survive.
- Children and teenagers can try on many identities in the course of growing up.
- Me, I just went straight to Jane Austen and stuck with her.

- Her novels teach that self-possession, right moral behavior, and a strong sense of humor will get you through most anything.
 - I've found that more or less to be true, and been grateful for the lessons.
 - At the other end of the scale, I'm a bit worried by *Twilight*: that the young girls who swoon over Edward Cullen might never settle for relationships with less superhuman—or stalkerish—young men.
 - It'll be really interesting to see how that plays out over the next several years, as these girls grow up with those romantic expectations.
- Anyway. So I molded my growing twentysomething sense of identity into that of a Jane Austen heroine—complete with empire waists,
 - And I felt wiser and better for it.
- One year my college spring break coincided with the Festival here, and I came over and worked at the book sale, restocking titles on the tables
 - My best friend from college, Katy, was with me, and we watched three titles or genres go out of stock again and again:
 - *Shiloh* by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, about a dog who changes a boy's life;
 - Cheryl Harness's books about American history
 - And books about ghosts, especially *Wait till Helen Comes*, which had terrified me when I was in fourth grade.
 - So Katy and I came up with a book we knew would be a surefire hit:
 - *Ghost Dog in the White House!*
 - The story of a spirited dog who saves the life of Abraham Lincoln's son Tad
 - For a little while, anyway.
- And a couple of years later, I was with Katy again when my life changed dramatically—again because of a book
 - We were driving up to Minnesota for our senior year of college in September of 1999
 - Katy had been working at a Barnes & Noble that summer, and she'd fallen in love with a book series called *Harry Potter*
 - She was in the front, driving, and I was in the backseat, with her copy of the third book in the series: *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*
 - So I picked it up—just to see what all the fuss was about.
 - And a few minutes later, she said “You're really quiet all of a sudden.”
 - I said “Mm-hmmm”
 - And she said, “Are you reading my book? That's my book! Mine!”
 - But it was too late—I was hooked on Harry.
 - I bought the first book, *Sorcerer's Stone*, with my college textbooks that fall, and I read *Chamber of Secrets* over winter break.

- After I graduated from college, in order to pursue the editorial dream, I went to the Denver Publishing Institute, a four-week course out at the University of Denver, for new college grads to learn about the publishing industry.
 - I spent the day before classes started reading *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, which had come out that very weekend
- And one of the things they told us at Denver was that you should try to work on the books you loved the most—the section of the bookstore to which you naturally drifted when you went in.
- And for me, I realized, that was children’s books.
- I had simply never grown out of reading children’s literature.
- Every so often in the last few years, there will be an article in a major newspaper (most recently the *Los Angeles Times*) citing the growing numbers of adults who are reading children’s and YA books and finding out they’re really good—true examples of literary art.
 - Well, DUH.
 - There are certain places children’s literature does not go—certain compacts we’ve all made as adults, to protect children from particular subjects for the time being.
 - We wall off those areas of reality, for better or for worse.
 - And if you believe that good art should encompass as much reality as possible, then something might be missing for you in children’s lit.
 - But the art, the craft, the work of choosing a word and putting it down, choosing another and putting it down, to make a whole alternate reality or to describe most of the one we have—
 - That is all done with just as much care and just as much success in children’s books as it is in adult literature.
 - And since we tend to place a stronger emphasis on plot development and character—
 - Generally, we have a heck of a lot more fun.
- So I decided I wanted to take the risk of moving to New York; I interviewed for a job with Arthur A. Levine, the editor of the Harry Potter books,
 - And I got it, and the rest of my life began.
- I often say my job as an editor really consists of THREE jobs.
 - I’m a talent scout, first of all—I read manuscripts and choose the ones I think have the most promise, artistically and commercially.
 - Then I’m an editor, working with the author and illustrator to turn the manuscript into the very best book it can be.
 - Finally, I’m a producer, overseeing the book’s budget, shepherding it through the design process, arranging for it to have the best title and cover it can possibly have for the market and the content, talking it up to our sales reps and to librarians and booksellers, being sure the people who *should see it do*.
- I love all of these jobs.
- But there was another use of reading in my job description—did you hear it?
- The fourth use of reading in my life is WORK.

- I receive probably twenty manuscripts a week from agents or writers, which I must read, evaluate for publication, make a decision on, and respond to.
- That’s on top of the multiple drafts of the ten or so books I already have under contract, which I must read and evaluate on an even deeper level, as part of the editorial process.
- So I read all the time—on the subway, on airplanes, at night, on weekends, during the day.
- But when I find a manuscript that’s really *good*, that really speaks to me,
 - A book I know other readers will fall in love with,
 - Then it’s like having a secret, or a gift for everyone,
 - That I can’t wait to share.
- Of course, sometimes those secrets have been more literal.
- Starting with Book 4, *Goblet of Fire*, J. K. Rowling felt strongly that she wanted readers all over the English-speaking world to experience the surprises and delights of her Harry Potter stories at the same time.
- Because the risk of leaks was so high, all editorial work on the books had to be done in seclusion, with only a very select group of people who read the manuscript and worked on it before its release date.
- For the last three books of the series, I was one of those people.
- My boss, Arthur Levine, was the real editor of the book. But I was the “continuity editor”—a term we borrowed from the movies to describe my role, which was making sure events, references, spellings, and actions were consistent and correct from book to book, in Ms. Rowling’s ever-expanding Wizarding universe.
 - So every time “Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans” appeared on the page, it was Bertie, not Bernie; B-O-T-T-apostrophe-S, not B-O-T-T-S-apostrophe; “Every Flavor” doesn’t have a hyphen, and “Flavor,” contrary to British spelling, doesn’t have a U.
- I worked on this project with three able copyeditors and proofreaders in turn
- And it was both exhausting and thrilling.
- But my favorite memories of those days remain the very first time I read each of those manuscripts,
 - Almost shaking with excitement at getting to be with Harry again and find out what would happen to him next.
- Since 2005, I’ve developed my own list of books I’ve edited, developed, and published.
- And I hope every book I work on has that same excitement for a reader—
 - With characters readers care about with that same passion,
 - A story that’s just that involving,
 - Even if it’s a realistic story about a boy figuring out life in Brooklyn,
 - or a child prodigy trying to make friends.
- That last book, I’m proud to say, is by a Festival author
- Though she was my author before she became a Festival author!

- Her name is Lisa Yee, and she came here a few years ago with her books *Millicent Min*, *Girl Genius* and *Stanford Wong Flunks Big-Time*, both of which I edited, along with Arthur.
 - Papa invited Lisa here after meeting her at a library conference;
 - My mom served as her escort for the day;
 - She spoke to a series of school groups;
- And the circle was complete.
- I had been the child on the linoleum, in those desks, in awe of the authors and the books they'd made
 - And now two books I'd helped make were at the festival, on those very same tables,
 - And an author I worked with was inspiring a new generation of readers.
- Becoming an editor changed my relationship with Papa too.
- I started seeing him regularly at ALA, the American Library Association's annual conventions in January and June.
- We'd have breakfast together one morning with Floyd,
- And then we'd sit together at any Scholastic events, like dinners or brunches.
- This past summer, he saw me receive the Batchelder Award for Best Translation for *Moribito: Guardian of the Darkness*, a translation from the Japanese that I had edited.
- And he told me *A Curse Dark as Gold* by Elizabeth C. Bunce, another book I'd edited, was one of the best YA books he'd ever read.
 - Which meant an enormous amount to me—that the man I'd tried so hard to impress was impressed by something I'd helped to create.
- So our relationship changed a little, from not just grandfather and granddaughter,
 - To two professional children's literature people, appreciating the same books.
- That's an example of the final use of reading I'd like to talk about today: Connection.
- We are all here this afternoon because we believe in books
 - As empowerment, escape, self-creation, work
 - Or any of the myriad other uses of reading in our lives.
- But most of those uses happen one-to-one:
 - one reader, one book;
 - one connection between them, one life changed.
- Papa started this festival to open up that relationship
 - To bring in the author behind the book
 - To have a whole class share in that experience
 - To get beyond the back flaps, as it were,
- And make deeper and wider connections across the whole community of readers.
- In so doing, he created a community here—even more, a family
 - Of authors who return year after year

- The people who organize the festival—Naomi, Cathy, Mollie and their committees and volunteers,
- And of course, my Papa,
 - Who loved, LOVED, having you all here every year.
- The head of the family is gone now—both the festival’s family, and my own.
- But the legacy of connection he created lives on
- In the opportunity for all of us to come together
 - For children to find a life-changing book of their own,
 - And for children to connect with you authors,
 - And to know books are made by human beings,
 - And that they might even become authors one day themselves
- My life is a testament to the power of those ideas and connections
- And to the example and hard work of my grandfather.
- Because of him, I *did* become a world-travelling, opera-attending, author-knowing, constantly book-reading grown-up.
 - (I don’t eat oysters, though. I draw the line there.)
- And it’s because of you all, too, and the inspiration and wisdom you brought to me and to so many readers through the years.
- As Phil Sadler’s granddaughter, a member of the Sadler family, an editor and a reader,
- I say thank you to all of you
 - For the books you created
 - For coming back year after year
 - For bringing so much delight to Papa’s life
 - For guiding me to pursue my own
- And finally, for your kind attention here today.
- Thank you.