

May 7, 2006

Dear Oprah,

Do you remember when you learned to read, or like me, can you not even remember a time when you didn't know how? I must have learned from having been read to by my family. My sisters and brother, much older, read aloud to keep me from pestering them; my mother read me a story every day, usually a children's classic, and my father read from the four newspapers he got through every evening. Then, of course, it was Uncle Wiggily at bedtime.

So I arrived in the first grade, literate, with a curious cultural assimilation of American history, romance, the Rover Boys, Rapunzel, and The Mobile Press. Early signs of genius? Far from it. Reading was an accomplishment I shared with several local contemporaries. Why this endemic precocity? Because in my hometown, a remote village in the early 1930s, youngsters had little to do but read. A movie? Not often — movies weren't for small children. A park for games? Not a hope. We're talking unpaved streets here, and the Depression.

Books were scarce. There was nothing you could call a public library, we were a hundred miles away from a department store's books section, so we children began to circulate reading material among ourselves until each child had read another's entire stock. There were long dry spells broken by the new Christmas books, which started the rounds again.

As we grew older, we began to realize what our books were worth: Anne of Green Gables was worth two Bobbsey Twins; two Rover Boys were an even swap for two Tom Swifts. Aesthetic frissons ran a poor second to the thrills of acquisition. The goal, a full set of a series, was attained only once by an individual of exceptional greed — he swapped his sister's doll buggy.

We were privileged. There were children, mostly from rural areas, who had never looked into a book until they went to school. They had to be taught to read in the first grade, and we were impatient with them for having to catch up. We ignored them.

And it wasn't until we were grown, some of us, that we discovered what had befallen the children of our African-American servants. In some of their schools, pupils learned to read three-to-one — three children to one book, which was more than likely a cast-off primer from a white grammar school. We seldom saw them until, older, they came to work for us.

Now, 75 years later in an abundant society where people have laptops, cell phones, iPods, and minds like empty rooms, I still plod along with books. Instant information is not for me. I prefer to search library stacks because when I work to learn something, I remember it.

And, Oprah, can you imagine curling up in bed to read a computer? Weeping for Anna Karenina and being terrified by Hannibal Lecter, entering the heart of darkness with Mistah Kurtz, having Holden Caulfield ring you up — some things should happen on soft pages, not cold metal.

The village of my childhood is gone, with it most of the book collectors, including the dodgy one who swapped his complete set of Seckatary Hawkinses for a shotgun and kept it until it was retrieved by an irate parent.

Now we are three in number and live hundreds of miles away from each other. We still keep in touch by telephone conversations of recurrent theme: "What is your name again?" followed by "What are you reading?" We don't always remember.

Much love,
Harper

(Sources: [Letters of Note](#))