

On My Friends

I have had a lifelong interest in two things: reading and nature. Regarding my latter interest, I can still vaguely recall how, as an illiterate kindergartener, I relished going outside to marvel wide-eyed at nature's grandeur ("nature" in my urban Milwaukee neighborhood consisted of maple tree-lined streets and their noisy sparrow denizens). And when I was not outside, I was either gazing longingly outside my bedroom window at the greenery, napping and dreaming of the aforementioned greenery, or roughhousing with my little sister. As for reading, I was introduced to it early in life, thanks to my parents and mainly my mother. When I was a young child, she was determined that I sit down and discover the wondrous worlds waiting within the pages of a well-written book (thus affording her an hour or two of quiet time). Because of her efforts, I now possess an immense collection of children's books, most of them pertaining to nature. But these are much more than books: I consider them to be the primary source of my continuing love for the environment. And, more importantly, I view them as my beloved childhood friends.

Prior to my enrollment in school, my mother mailed off for books and would read them to me after I finished toddling around the house. This helped me unlock the powerful meaning of those mysterious black words, and soon I was reading sentences and entire pages on my own. I carried this newfound love with me to school. I still remember the excitement that sent my first-grade heart racing whenever I received the gaily-colored order forms from my school's monthly book clubs. My mother, obliging my wishes, would buy me three or so books each month until sixth grade. In those days, the zenith of my month occurred with the eagerly-anticipated arrival of those crisp new books,

entombed in shrink wrap, awaiting liberation from *my* hands alone. I believe the first book pertaining to nature that I ever acquired was a Time-Life book about insects (Time-Life libraries ended with the first trial volumes in my household). From then on I voraciously devoured other nature books that I could get a hold of, proudly divulging their contents to my family at the dinner table, and sometimes receiving harsh reprimands when those facts involved the disgusting eating habits of bugs and their ilk. But how could I help myself? Manatees have toenails on their flippers! Some reptiles have a third eye! Bananas are technically berries! All these amazing (and, I admit, useless) facts filled my mind to overflowing: I had to empty myself of them, and then rush to the nearest public library for another refill. Of course, my home library contained the typical childhood fare, such as the various works of Dr. Seuss and classic children's novels like Theodore Taylor's *The Cay*, a favorite of mine. Personally, I feel no childhood library would be balanced without such imaginative works of fiction. But the vast majority of my collection revolved around the workings of the natural world. And today, some thirteen years later, my interest in and concern for the environment remains as strong as ever, a fascination that I attribute to those wonder-filled children's books and their wonderful authors.

As I grew older, I would scour used book sales for interesting reading material, scanning the titles to see which piqued my interests. The condition of these dog-eared books was far from crisp and new, but I cared only for the ageless information they held. When I learned that my uncle wanted to clear out some books from his old collection, I came to the rescue of many National Geographic and Smithsonian titles that explored the worlds of ocean vents, Yellowstone hot springs, and the Ice Age. These

became welcome additions to my growing collection. Some acquisitions even came from as far away as Jamaica, where most of my family resides. My maternal aunts, well aware of my love for reading, often gave me old books that used to belong to my now-adult cousins. Most of these were 1970s-era primers dealing with Jamaican history, but my cousins also read a good amount about nature as well, typically Jamaican flora and fauna. I haven't been able to find titles such as Ladybird Books' *Bears and Pandas* anywhere stateside, but the fact that my cousins also delighted in these books at one time makes them very special to me.

As is the case with all readers, my tastes matured as I grew older. My interests in environmental issues remain as strong as ever. But nowadays, I find myself paging through more scholarly works such as Michael Pollan's *The Botany of Desire* in place of Scholastic's pop-up books. While I explored what renowned authors like Jared Diamond or David Crosby had to say about the role environment plays in human affairs, the covers of my beloved children's books grew increasingly dustier. To this day they wait on my childhood bookshelves, yearning to once again feel the hands of an inquisitive book-wormy child. But I've never forgotten my roots. Whenever I visit home I always breathe a silent sigh of relief to see all my books present and accounted for, having managed to avoid my mother's clutter-clearing rampages for yet another month. Inevitably, those dear friends of mine will end up either unceremoniously thrown out or donated to a library while I'm away. But until one of these fates befalls them, I still treasure the memories that lie betwixt their pages: even now, my mind is flooded with images of me rushing out in earnest attempts to find camouflaged creatures in my inner-city backyard after reading about insect defenses in Barbara Brenner's *Where's That Insect?* Or I would

check with Frank Rhodes's *Fossils* to determine if the latest funny-shaped rock I found in the alley was truly a fossil of some previously unknown prehistoric monster. Now I have a passion about the environment, and I have taken a couple of classes aimed at increasing environmental awareness amongst a generally unaware population. Who knows? I may even consider a career in this field. Perhaps I'll write and illustrate a book that will move some future youngster to take action, be it searching the rainforests for a plant that can treat cancer to searching the surface of Mars for signs of life-bearing neighbors elsewhere in this vast, unknowable universe. I don't believe anyone is born knowing what they want to do. Parents, teachers, and personal experiences have to nurture any seedling of an interest before it can blossom. And in my case, I was fortunate to have the additional help of my books. In the midst of my congested concrete jungle home, few things could have opened my childhood eyes to the natural world we live in quite like these books. And for this, I am eternally grateful to them.

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