For the Love of Books

Rita Dove

When I am asked: “What made you want to be a writer?” my answer has always been: “Books.” First and foremost, now, then, and always, I have been passionate about books. From the time I began to read, as a child, I loved to feel their heft in my hand and the warm spot caused by their intimate weight in my lap; I loved the crisp whisper of a page turning, the musky odor of old paper and the sharp inky whiff of new pages. Leather bindings sent me into ecstasy. I even loved to gaze at a closed book and daydream about the possibilities inside—it was like contemplating a genie’s lamp. Of course, my favorite fairy tale was *A Thousand and One Nights*—imagine buying your life with stories!—and my favorite cartoons were those where animated characters popped out of books and partied while the unsuspecting humans slept. In books, I could travel anywhere, be anybody, understand worlds long past and imaginary colonies in the future. My idea of a bargain was to go to the public library, wander along the bookshelves, and emerge with a chin-high stack of books that were mine, all mine, for two weeks—free of charge!

What I remember most about long summer days is browsing the bookshelves in our solarium to see if there were any new additions. I grew up with those rows of books; I knew where each one was shelved and immediately spotted newcomers. And after months had gone by and there’d be no new books, I would think: Okay, I guess I’ll try this one—and then discover that the very book I had been avoiding because of a drab cover or small print was actually a wonderful read. Louis Untermeyer’s *Treasury of Best Loved Poems* had a sickeningly sweet lilac and gold cover and was forbiddingly thick, but I finally pulled it off the shelf and discovered a cornucopia of emotional and linguistic delights, from “The Ballad of Barbara Fritchie,” which I adored for its sheer length and rather numbing rhymes, to Langston Hughes’s dazzlingly syncopated “Dream Boogie.” Then there was Shakespeare—daunting for many years because it was his entire oeuvre,¹ in matching wine-red volumes that were so thick they looked more like over-sized bouillon cubes than books, and yet it was that ponderous title—*The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*—that enticed me, because here was a lifetime’s work—a lifetime!—in two compact, dense packages. I began with the long poem “The Rape of Lucrece” . . . I sampled a few sonnets, which I found beautiful but rather adult; and finally wandered into the plays—first *Romeo and Juliet*, then *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Twelfth Night*—enthralled by the language, by the fact that poetry was spinning the story. Of course I did not understand every single word, but I was too young to know that this was supposed to be difficult; besides, no one was waiting to test me on anything, so, free from pressure, I dove in.

At the same time, my brother, two years my senior, had become a science fiction buff, so I’d read his *Analog* and *Fantasy and Science Fiction* magazines after he was finished with them. One story particularly fascinated me: A retarded boy in a small town begins building a sculpture in his backyard, using old and discarded

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¹. *oeuvre (ō’ vər’)* *n.:* All the works, usually of a lifetime, of a particular writer, artist, or composer.
materials—coke bottles, scrap iron, string, and bottle caps. Everyone laughs at him, but he continues building. Then one day he disappears. And when the neighbors investigate, they discover that the sculpture has been dragged onto the back porch and that the screen door is open. Somehow the narrator of the story figures out how to switch on the sculpture: The back door frame begins to glow, and when he steps through it, he's in an alternate universe, a town the mirror image of his own—even down to the colors, with green roses and an orange sky. And he walks through this town until he comes to the main square, where there is a statue erected to—who else?—the village idiot.

I loved this story, the idea that the dreamy, mild, scatter-brained boy of one world could be the hero of another. And in a way, I identified with that village idiot because in real life I was painfully shy and awkward; the place where I felt most alive was between the pages of a book.

Although I loved books, for a long time I had no aspirations to be a writer. The possibility was beyond my imagination. I liked to write, however—and on long summer days when I ran out of reading material or my legs had fallen asleep because I had been curled up on the couch for hours on end, I made up my own stories. Most were abandoned midway. Those that I did bring to a conclusion I neither showed to others nor considered saving.

My first piece of writing I thought enough of to keep was a novel called Chaos, which was about robots taking over the earth. I had just entered third or fourth grade; the novel had forty-three chapters, and each chapter was twenty lines or less because I used each week's spelling list as the basis for each chapter, and there were twenty words per list. In the course of the year I wrote one installment per week, and I never knew what was going to happen next—the words led me, not the other way around.

At that time I didn't think of writing as an activity people admitted doing. I had no living role models—a "real" writer was a long-dead white male, usually with a white beard to match. Much later, when I was in eleventh grade, my English teacher, Miss Oechsner, took me to a book-signing in a downtown hotel. She didn't ask me if I'd like to go—she asked my parents instead, signed me and a classmate (who is now a professor of literature) out of school one day, and took us to meet a writer. The writer was John Ciardi, a poet who also had translated Dante's Divine Comedy, which I had heard of, vaguely. At that moment I realized that writers were real people and how it was possible to write down a poem or story in the intimate sphere of one's own room and then share it with the world.

Guide for Responding

**Literature and Your Life**

Reader's Response Might you have been friends with Rita Dove if you had known her as a child? Why or why not?

Thematic Focus Why do you think reading and writing are often the favorite pastime of shy people?

Journal Writing List your five favorite activities. Is reading one of them? Explore your answer.

✓ Check Your Comprehension

1. How does Rita Dove feel about books?
2. What was the first piece of writing Dove liked well enough to keep?
3. What made Dove realize that she could be a "real" writer?

**Critical Thinking**

Interpret

1. What does Dove mean when she says that gazing at a closed book was "like contemplating a genie's lamp"? [Interpret]
2. What influences contributed to Dove's goal of becoming a writer? [Deduce]
3. Do you think Dove would have gone on to become a writer if she had not attended the book signing? [Speculate]

Evaluate

4. In an interview, Dove has said, "My first and really only piece of advice [to young writers] is to read, read, read." After reading this essay, do you think this is good advice? Explain. [Criticize]

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