One of the great luxuries that I currently enjoy is having time to read for pleasure. For over 25 years, I held academic positions that forced me, day in and day out, with too little time for other reading, to peruse financial statements, office memos, funding requests, general office correspondence, or accreditation reports. Although their respective authors undoubtedly put great effort into these communications to me, none remains memorable or triggers the wish to re-read it. These days I can read exclusively what I want to read, not what I must read, and the treasure trove of history, biography, poetry and novels again lies open before me.

All my life, I have been an avid reader. I was very fortunate to have friends in my teens who also loved to read, and with whom I could exchange and discuss books that fascinated and enthused us. Most of the books that I read when I was 15 or 16, I remember vividly to this day, and lesser impression on other readers. We can fail a book, or a book can fail to hold a dull rainbow of books. Their spines are worn; threads stick out like gray hairs. Their gold and silver lettering has been rubbed away long ago by a thousand sweaty hands, leaving only a shadow of their former elegance. Smaller ones hide behind larger ones, some even slip behind the front runners. Each lurks, hidden amidst hundreds; each identified by 10 to 15 letters of the ubiquitous call number that is sometimes further hidden on the cover that is not visible. Each sits in mean silence while the patron searches for his needle in the haystack. Only after he has trekked a mile over the hard, gray carpet, stared blankly at the dozens of signs that all seem alike—PR3671.T85 to PR 6842.S9—does he sigh, “I hate this library.” Slowly, without enthusiasm, he returns to his original nemesis, the librarian, and asks for help.

The librarian is calm, cool, and ever smiling in spite of his impatient and frustrated tone when he asks where his book is. She marches to and up a flight of stairs, oblivious that her heels send thunder rolling through the stairwell, and then goes down an aisle, up a row, around a corner and stops. Voila...she pulls a book from the shelf disturbing a cloud of dust. The cloud hangs between the two. The patron’s bewildered gaze turns to elation for a moment, but in the next minute has darkened with self-reproach: “Why didn’t I find it if it was that easy?” His limp and humble posture betrays his frustration, and he wonders if he will be successful next time. And, the librarian’s smile has softened to sympathy because she understands that the library is an intimidating maze to the unpracticed.

Most of us read for content in our youth, not for style, composition, or other artistic elements. The story mattered most. What happened and how it ended drove our interest. But along with the love of reading, an appreciation grew for how a story was presented, in what way it was told, and in what language. Thus the reading for content, powerful in itself, developed into a much deeper involvement and enjoyment that characterizes the adult reader.

Revisiting the favorite books of my youth, I also gratefully remember all the people who read to me as a child, who taught and encouraged me to read, who gave me my first books and thus opened wide the doors to the limitless world of knowledge and enjoyment. A belated blessing on each and every one of them! Would that every child could enter the world of reading as happily as I did.

“...a book ought to be like a man or a woman, with some individual character in it, though eccentric, yet its own; with some blood in its veins and speculation in its eyes and a way and will of its own.”

—John Mitchel