

Much ado about books

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Sarah Bailey: keynote address

Chapter 1 – The Book Life Chose Me

As far as I know I wasn't dropped on the head as a child.

But at around one year of age I did experience a violent incident.

This is as it has been described to me:

Still in nappies, I entered the rumpus room in our old family home, surprisingly sturdy on my tiny legs.

I headed straight for the far wall of the room which boasted rows of shelves that ran from left to right.

A huge bookshelf.

I stopped short of the wall of books, maybe a metre away, and put my hands on my tiny hips.

I narrowed my eyes.

Clearly I had a plan, though no one can say what the plan was.

I waddled over to the shelves and started trying to climb.

I lifted my leg onto the bottom shelf.

I reached up my right hand and closed it around a particularly thick book.

For a split second everything was fine and then the book broke free from the shelf and tumbled down on top of me, the flat of it smacking me square in the head.

For several moments I lay flat on the floor, not crying, simply staring up at the hundreds of books.

I've always wondered whether just like Peter Parker being bitten by the spider, that was a sliding doors moment for me.

Perhaps that was the moment that the universe decided I would become a writer?

Or, maybe the literary smack to the head somehow shaped my entire personality?

If that *was* the case, then identifying the title of the book would go some way to explaining a lot of things but unfortunately, no one can remember what tome attacked me so aggressively.

Perhaps it was *Crime and Punishment*, prompting my interest in right and wrong and the murkiness that lies in between?

Maybe it was *Alice in Wonderland*, sparking my curious nature and love for talking animals?

Maybe it was an *Atlas* and unlocked my love of travel and adventure?

I'm pretty sure it wasn't *The Bible*. I suspect my life may have gone in a very different direction if it had been *The Bible* that belted me.

But in lieu of being able to identify the bookish weapon in question, I have settled on a more general theory. Like some kind of bizarre form of amnesia, perhaps I was blessed with having a love of books and reading literally knocked into me that fateful day.

Maybe it just makes for a good story.

And I do love a good story.

But regardless whether this little incident had a bearing on things at all, one thing is undeniable: ever since I can remember, I have been hooked on books and a lover of stories and words.

Chapter 2 – A Portal At My Fingertips

The dangerous bookshelf I just spoke of was in a generous rumpus room in suburban Melbourne, in a quiet neighbourhood on a quiet street.

I grew up, the eldest child to a middle-class couple who had chosen to be a nurse and an engineer. I have a younger sister, had wonderful grandparents and a few pets thrown in for good measure.

My childhood can best be described as completely normal and possibly slightly dull, in only the way a general sense of safety and predictability can generate. But I was blessed with parents who were both avid readers and who were aware that we, sitting in our middle class bubble, were very lucky.

My parents knew that there were many other kinds of lives out there being lived.

How did they know this?

Because they had read about these other people.

My parents had been fortunate enough to have parents (and teachers) of their own that had taught them the secret which they in turn passed onto us: that there was a direct portal to these other people's lives at our fingertips. We could access other worlds at any time.

Books are fairly modest looking objects but I am sure that all of you here today have experienced their magical powers. While scientists claim incremental developments in the fields of mind-reading and time travel, I've been doing both of those things for years and all I have ever needed to plug into is a book.

From a young age I would hear my parents talking about the magical bookshelf portal.

My mother's voice would lift when she talked about stories she was reading. She became animated; her eyes lighting up and her hand drifting to her heart as she described the worlds she had visited.

My dad would talk about characters as if they were real people.

Frankly, they both seemed much more excited about books than they often did about real life. I would look up at the silent bookshelf and feel puzzled. How could it be that everything they talked about was *in* there?

But however it worked, I wanted access. I wanted the same high.

They read to me, frequently and passionately.

I met Spot and Winnie the Pooh. Big Ears and Noddy. I followed Alice down rabbit holes and disappeared up magical faraway trees.

Every night my parents gifted me my own private audio book as I greedily turned the pages in time to their narration.

I read about naughty children and sick children, gifted children, poor children and rich children. I read about children from faraway places.

I read about lives that were wonderfully different to mine.

Like a gardener planting seeds I started to cultivate my own bookshelf. One that was much safer in size and with books that were much less dangerous than the one in the lounge room.

It was basically a place to store all of my fictional friends and I was happy to read my favourites over and over. Or demand that my parents read them over and over.

This propensity for repetition might be why, when I was about six years old that mum said, 'I think it's time to get you a library card.'

Chapter 3 – The Magical Palace of Books

Mum took me to Ringwood Library.

I had never seen so many books. There were hundreds of them, thousands of them.

There were rows and rows of shelves and they reached high up to the ceiling.

There were secret codes and scanning machines.

It was quiet, a little bit like church and the people that worked there knew everything.

I tip-toed around this special place in wonder. I couldn't believe there were so many books in the world. How was I ever going to read them all?

Mum knelt down in front of me and handed me a laminated piece of paper with a strange looking row of lines on it, 'here darling, this is yours,' she said, 'this card lets you take books home to read. When you're done with those ones we can bring them back and choose some more.'

It was akin to being given a magic wand.

I didn't yet have a passport but there wasn't anywhere in the world I couldn't go.

And for the next few years I travelled as much as I possibly could.

I discovered that there were books that were 'real' and books that were not. I discovered that there were giant heavy books that were the equivalent of the smartest human brain - you could look up anything you wanted to know. This unsuspecting place held more information than I had known existed and I couldn't get enough.

I became a library junkie. My mother only fed my habit once a week but I would go to the library at school every other day.

I used to weave in and out of the shelves, picking books at random amazed at how some books spanned multiple generations, entire lives of people painstakingly documented.

And then be equally amazing that the content of other books spanned only twenty-four hours.

I was fascinated by the titles of books, the different covers.

I would get a genuine thrill when a librarian described a book to me that she thought I might like. The anticipation was delicious.

Leaving the library that day I knew I had found my people. A safe space.

A place where anything could happen.

Chapter 4 – 'For God's Sake, Put That Book Down!'

I read constantly. In bed at night with my torch. At recess and lunchtime. In the car on the way to school. I read in the bath.

I discovered I could walk and read, eat and read, watch TV and read.
It became a problem. My parents came to regret their initial encouragement.
'Sarah, put that book away,' was the nightly cry at the dinner table.
'For god's sake Sarah get your head out of that book.'
'Darling, go to sleep. You can't stay up all night reading.'
'Sarah are you listening?'

I visited the real world enough to get by, but in truth I just wanted to hang out with Anne at Green Gables, climb the magic faraway tree and try to find The Secret Garden.
Of course, as frustrated as my parents sometimes were with my half-present state they were delighted too. I wasn't always excited about eating my vegetables but at least I was reading.

They knew as well as I do now, how much a forming brain gains from reading.

I genuinely believe we learn how to be better humans through literature.

We learn how to understand each other, how to relate to each other and how to be kinder and more thoughtful.

I think diverse reading it is our best chance at tackling sexism, racism and all other forms of discrimination. It is a chance to expose all of those wonderful young minds to the notion of a more equal world. An exciting world.

I'm sure many of you know that resilience is the parenting buzz word of the moment. We are told we must teach our kids how to be resilient. To ensure they have grit and can stick at something. That they are sensitive but also strong.

While all children are different I happen to agree that resilience is an incredibly important characteristic to foster in our children and I can't think of a better way to do this than through books.

Books allow children to practice life without the risk. To role play situations in their minds, to look at a scenario through multiple perspectives. The characters can make mistakes so that the reader doesn't have to. It can help stimulate conversations with others. It can help lost kids feel found and found kids to know what it is to feel lost.

Reading also helped me to problem solve. To think laterally and be resourceful.

Young readers learn that you don't have to love something to learn from it.

And of course stories also inspire us, teach us how to provoke and challenge, qualities that I certainly put to good use.

Chapter 5 – Parental Guidance Recommended

My parents were quite strict. They closely monitored the TV we watched and the movies they deemed appropriate for us to see. Apart from an ill-advised trip to the cinemas to see Bambi with my dad when I was four, (he was not aware of the hunter scene) the worst content my young eyes were exposed to was on the nightly news.

But when it came to books there seemed to be no limits.

I'm not sure whether this was an oversight or whether perhaps they felt that the content of a book simply wasn't as potentially damaging to a young mind, I'm not sure, but either way it was a case of 'if you can reach it on the shelf and you can read it then go for it.'

This was how, at the age of nine I came to be reading The Godfather.

I have spoken before of the profound effect this had on me.

Mainly to my psychologist (no, I'm kidding)

By day I was an innocent looking young girl who climbed trees and was learning about prime numbers, but every time my head was buried in that book I was rubbing shoulders with the wonderful, cursed and extremely dangerous Corleone family.

For better or worse *The Godfather* taught me about sex beyond the biology basics, gave me my first real insight into romantic relationships between adults and made me paranoid that our cousins might be plotting to kill us.

I fell for Sonny Corleone hard and fast, without fully understanding what that meant. All I knew was that he made me feel crazy in a way that no other person – real or imagined – ever had. I was jealous of these other glamorous women that kept getting in my way.

So it stands to reason that his unexpected death catapulted me into a deep depression. To my parents amusement, I announced that I was in mourning and I barely ate and refused to leave my room for an entire weekend. The fictional world, I was fast-discovering, could be as cruel as the real one.

That same year I read *The Hobbit*. It struck my father as quite strange that I could comprehend and remember the details of this vast, complicated universe that Tolkien had created but I struggled to understand how to work out the square root of the number nine. Clearly being hit in the head by a book had not only programmed my brain toward all things literary, it had promptly knocked out all mathematical capabilities at the same time.

These days the kids are binging on Netflix but in 1992 I was binging on *The Lord of the Rings*. I read those books like I was on fire, exhausted by the perils of the journey but completely captivated by our mission.

Sure, Dolly Doctor was informative but books were my north star. Without them I would have been lost. John Marsden in particular was able to connect in a way that felt so incredibly important as a young girl navigating the personal in parallel with the universal. Whether depicting the mind of Marina in *So Much To Tell You* or navigating a war torn Australia with Ellie in *Tomorrow When the War Began* I never felt alone when I had one of his books to read.

Chapter 6 – From Writer Blocked to Unlocked

During this time, I became aware of a desire to write a book of my own.

It's hard to explain this feeling. It was a restlessness, a way of looking at the world through the lens of whether something would make a good story. A habit of noticing personality quirks. It was a compulsion to write things down, to map out little plots and dream up titles. Once this craving came, it never went away but it is certainly not something that I ever articulated or said out loud.

But it was there, a constant distraction.

I had fingers itchy to write and more ideas than I knew what to do with.

As a little kid I would painstakingly copy out large slabs of text from my favourite books.

As a teenager this desire manifested in attempts at terrible poetry that I wrote by candlelight. As I grew older I continued to read everything I could get my hands on and also began to keep a diary (which I have since had to incinerate as it was so unbearable to revisit).

This ritual evolved to writing short stories and creating strange fan fiction before fan fiction was a thing.

I am pleased to inform you that none of these texts have ever seen the light of day but they were the groundwork for a future in writing. Without realising it, I had begun my lifelong apprenticeship.

I enjoyed writing for writing's sake but the main game was always to write a novel.

I decided I was going to write a book by the time I turned sixteen.

When I was sixteen I decided I would write a book by the time I turned eighteen.

Unfortunately my head was a busy place in my last two years of school, it turns out it is quite exhausting growing characters and dreaming up worlds as well as being a teenager, plus, I didn't know anything so there was not a great deal for me to write about.

As the years went on I started to appreciate that writing a book was much more difficult than simply *wanting* to write one.

Over the years I continued to dabble with my 'books': I would write a few pages, or even a few chapters but then I would read a book and decide that perhaps novel writing was a mountain that I was not yet fit to climb after all.

But it turns out that the library was once again the key, a portal to a part of myself that I was unable to access elsewhere.

During my time at uni I discovered that my ability to get words down on the page was in direct correlation to the time I spent in the library. I did my homework at home, I read my class texts at the pub and cafes, but I wrote my book in the library.

Something happened to me when I was surrounded by all of those books.

Something good.

Whether it was an ingrained sense of competitiveness or some kind of inspiration via osmosis, writing my book in the library was like pouring fuel in my writing tank.

The words flowed, I hit ten thousand, and then twenty thousand. I was finally making a book!

It was such a thrill to think that maybe I was creating something that would become a story, something that someone could one day hold in their hands and sink their brain into.

But then suddenly I hit a metaphorical brick wall which had all the characteristics of a real-life one. And then I got busy. My life got in its own way. I blinked and a decade went past.

But I still really wanted to write a book. I really, really wanted to.

So a few years ago I headed back to the library and I reset the goal posts.

I would write a book by the time I turned 35 I decided.

I went to the library once a week for six months.

And then I took long service leave and went every day for eight weeks.

And I did it. I don't know whether ghosts of authors past seeped into my bones or the whirlpool of words swirling around me cheered me along but my first novel, *The Dark Lake*, was published a day after I turned 35.

Chapter 7 – To Have and To Read in Sickness, Health and Everything in Between

A few years ago, a library provided a safe haven for an old school friend of mine to discover the truth. Abused as a young child she became suddenly desperate for justice at the age of 32. Not able to gain information from family or the police, she visited the State Library of Victoria to hunt down articles about her case. She sat there amongst bookshelves and strangers and read about a seven year old girl walking home from school in 1989 who was

attacked and raped. The little girl was her. The library itself became a portal, this time to a dark place but an important one. She caught the train back home that day, a little broken but with her mind full of information that she had long forgotten. She contacted the police. As a result, twenty years after the crime, her rapist was convicted based on her dogged determination and the new information she had subsequently been able to provide, things that her brain had fought against remembering.

When my children were little the library became a place where all my fellow zombie parents gathered on a Tuesday morning struggling to contain our squirming infants as they clapped their hands delighted to be read aloud to by someone other than their exhausted parents.

I don't exaggerate when I say that certain books have saved people I know, both literally and figuratively. They have helped loved ones through times of crisis and opened their eyes to things that have been going on right in front of them. Books don't lie but nor do they lecture. You can decide the pace that you digest a book. Fast and furious, slow and careful. Whatever you need, the book will gently, unobtrusively deliver.

These days the library is my office. It's where I write my books.

I sit in the open plan area, surrounded by all the other books that have come before, with my computer on my lap and watch the comings and goings.

Libraries are not nearly as quiet as they used to be.

My local library sometimes gives my years in an advertising agency a run for their money.

My library co-workers are an eclectic bunch. Not everyone there is writing a book.

People come to find a book to read, to do a concentrated burst of work or to find an important piece of information.

They come for the free WiFi. For the company.

People meet at the library to talk about ideas.

To teach. To download notions from their brains and turn these thought bubbles into tangible things that can be shared with others. They come to the library to put the finishing touches on their masterpieces.

It is a place of learning and a place of creativity.

It is a place where everyone is treated equally.

And just like all those years ago I feel at home there and switch into a mode of productivity that I can't quite seem to find anywhere else.

Chapter 8 – Passing on the Book Baton

Books, like children, tend to out-live their creators.

Words written hundreds of years ago have transported me to places that no longer exist.

Words written as recently as last year have taken me to places that *will* never exist.

I have walked a lifetime in the shoes of fictional strangers.

I have wept tears for people that have never taken a breath.

My favourite books are an eclectic mix of titles, and not unlike the friendships I have made over my lifetime, some of the books were important to me for a reason, some meant something for a season and some will be with me for life.

And of course, I'm far from done; I plan to spend the rest of my life meeting and falling madly in love with as many books as possible.

In fact, just like when I was a little girl first stepping into the library, I feel a unique kind of anxiety when I consider all the books I will never read. Just like countries that I have resigned myself to never set foot upon, I know that there are books I will never open. That I will never get to experience.

Books I know I 'should' read.

The best books.

The important books.

The books that everyone is talking about.

The ones that will open my mind and make me a better person.

But, if life is essentially a series of decisions regarding how one spends one's time, then life is also strategically deciding which books we deem worth ingesting.

Last year in Australia thousands of new books were published. A handful of these books will be read by many but the long tail is long. Many books will find only a few hundred readers. Most will be overlooked by the masses, the potential in their pages largely unrealised.

But regardless of whether one person reads a book or millions do, I still find it incredible that each book contains an entire world, and characters bursting to break from the shackles of their pages and release themselves into the minds of readers.

The impact that one book can have on a person should never be underestimated.

The impact a book can have on culture and human behaviour shouldn't be underestimated either.

How much of our lives we should spend reading is something that we could debate until the end of time, but I happily admit that my personal expectations are high and skewed toward an answer that is 'as much as is physically possible.'

I have been joking with friends recently about the merit of introducing a policy called 'literary leave', time granted by the government to every Australian adult to read books.

Or perhaps we should all be assigned mandatory reading lists, five books hand-picked for you that must be read each year.

Jokes aside, I am puzzled when I encounter a non-reader. I understand that everyone is busy but since I have been able to read I have chain-smoked books like a desperate addict. I simply can't imagine not being able to answer the question 'what are you reading at the moment?'

Reading for me is like eating and every single book I have read provides me sustenance.

But as accustomed to reading as I am, I'm also aware that in this era of busy, committing to a book is no small thing. Most books take at least eight hours to read. I have known people to complain about this, as if they are outraged that a book demands so much of them. I tend to think of it the other way around: books are such good value. Where else can you get 8-10 hours of entertainment for \$30, or even better, for free if you borrow it from the library?

Most films go for 90 minutes and it costs almost \$25 to go to the movies.

Spending time with a good book is a much better investment.

And of course added to that is the hours of discussion you can have with fellow readers unpacking the book, analysing it, arguing about it and debating a dream cast. These days if you don't belong to a book club who even are you?

I myself have been known to read a book, listen to a podcast about that book, google reviews on the book, watch the film version, discuss it with friends and then give it another read.

And I still want more.

Good or bad there is very rarely a book I read that doesn't teach me something.

I don't know what the future holds for the human race but I do know that storytelling will be a part of it. I'm encouraged by the recent data which suggests people are 'returning' to reading, books sales are up, reading is cool.

Obviously the way the stories are told might evolve and we'll no doubt experiment with format, structure and themes.

But telling stories is part of being human.

Our lived experience is our legacy and this must be documented and protected. I believe when all is said and done, stories are all we leave behind.

And so wraps up *my* somewhat rambling love letter to books, words and everything that my zest for reading has led to.

But I know that each of you has your own book journey. Your own stories to tell about the stories you love. Your own book memories.

And that of course is the best part.

Just as the experiences we have shape us, so does every book we read.

So please, let us all pay our respects to the humble book.

To the ones that have opened our eyes and changed our lives.

The ones that have become part of our DNA.

May we read them.

May we re-read them.

And may we aggressively press them into the hands of as many of our fellow humans as possible.