

Books in My Mind

by Kulasang Kulelat

I have been dreaming of books lately: Books that can talk, books that can see. I dream of books that jump with joy and books that weep. I always wake up confused, unable to make sense of the dream. It's like falling half asleep while watching a movie and then waking up as the credits are rolling up the screen. I remember the scenes, but not the whole movie. I remember snippets, but not the full dream.

Our editor has the same weird nocturnal visitations. Only, instead of talking books she dreams of manuscripts, galleys and proofs. She says she's having an overdose of her job. Well, maybe I'm having an overdose of books. You see, I work in a library where the walls are lined with books and journals from different parts of the world. Inside, over, and under my desk are more books and more magazines.

I like books. That's why I don't understand why they have to sneak into my consciousness when I am asleep. It's not like I haven't given them enough thought or care when I am awake. Most people adore pet animals. I get a high from sniffing the pages of a new book. Some people can go on and on about their stamps and old coins or their high tech electronic gadgets. I get ecstatic just feeling the edges of a perfectly bound volume. Others save and scrimp for a rainy day. I, on the other hand, will blow a month's lunch money to get my hands on a hard-to-find book.

But books are not to me a fetish. I don't buy them to prettify my book shelf, or to create a high culture ambience for my house. When I was a child, my father saved dozens of art books, coffeebooks and four sets of encyclopedia from the garbage dump. My father's boss threw them all away because they probably did not fit in his redecorated mansion. Those books did not even look like they've been read. In my book, my father's boss was fetishizing books.

Last week, my workmates and I were lamenting how so many young people now don't seem to value books as much as we, who were born a decade earlier, do. How else can you explain this group of college students who came to the library to research on the history of the feminist movement? We gave them a couple of books but they asked which one directly refers to their topic. We told them to check out Kamla Bhasin's *Some Questions about Feminism* but they wanted us to point out which paragraph defines what feminism is about. They simply said they didn't have time to read the books we were recommending.

Encounters like this make me want to call my parents to tell them how grateful I am that they taught me to read. I was four when I learned my ABCs. I remember sunny afternoons spent looking at pictures of a whale, the earth, a bumble bee, an African mud hut, the goddess Kali, and so many other fantastic creatures, places and objects.

I remember my grubby hands leafing through the pages of glossy magazines my mother brought home. In the summer of '68, I began to string words together and pair these with pictures and then with ideas. And that is how I came to know about the war in a place called Vietnam, that humans rode on a ship called Apollo 11 and that one of them did the moonwalk. These and many other things, I learned from reading.

My first book was a tattered copy of *Pepe and Pilar*, a reader for Grade One pupils in the 1950s and early '60s. There was also a book about legends which opened to me a world inhabited by seafaring Vikings, brave Amazons, Celtic warriors, and Arthurian knights. I visited the courts of kings and queens of many and varied empires, though the British was my favorite. After some time, I became so familiar with British royalty that I even made a chart of its kings and queens. I also rode with warriors and joined them as they championed campaigns.

When I was five, my father took me to my first bookstore in the big city. I forget now what store it was, but I still remember the smell of the books. They smelled of newly minted money. Until now, the crisp peso bills that come out around Christmastime never fail to bring me back to that day when we first bought my books: *Cinderella* and *Three Billygoats Gruff*.

Like any other human activity, the survival and flourishing of reading depends on one generation's ability to pass it on to the next. The ability to read is a basic survival skill, but it is so much more than knowing one's basic alphabet. Reading demands the ability to recognize symbols, emotions and meanings, and to put sense to these.

Books are repositories of humanity's humanity. They teach about human conditions—the highs and the lows, the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the evil, the

sublime and the crude. And when it is really good, a book disturbs your peace. It can make you furious.

Last year, while I was on an extended "diaper leave," I picked up Margot Bradley Zimmerman's *Firebrand*, a reworking of the story of the fall of Troy. I could not put it down until I reached the last page. In Zimmerman's novel, it is Cassandra who narrates the Trojan saga. Born to the King Menelaus, Cassandra is sent at a young age to her mother's kinsfolk—the tribe of Amazon women—where she is schooled in its warrior-priestess tradition. Gifted with the ability to see the future, Cassandra is cursed to carry the burden of her knowledge because no one, the jealous gods declared, will ever believe her. Thus, she foresaw the burning of her city and the pride and vainglory of the men which will fuel it. She is spurned by her King-father, feared and hated by her brothers. Even her mother, who has long suppressed the proud legacy of her kinswomen, kept her distance. Cassandra is exiled to the Temple of Apollo, there to spend the rest of her life as a virgin-servant to the deity. Towards the end of the story, after Troy finally falls, Cassandra is raped by Greek soldiers. The little girl she had adopted is also raped and dies from the savagery of the attack. The women who survived, Cassandra included, are taken as war loots by the Greeks.

I emerged furious from reading *Firebrand*. It drew out my anxieties about the world to which I have just brought my second child. There is so much intolerance and ignorance, and so much violence directed at women all throughout history. That week, I was swinging between sadness and anger; it was maddening.

There are books that are a joy to read, even when they are not about happy things. Anne Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, a gift from a friend, I read slowly, savoring the grace of her prose and reveling in her celebration of the richness of life. Dillard's writing is thoroughly riveting, even when it's about nature's horrific side:

"And then the eggs hatched and the bed was full of fish. I was across the room in the doorway, staring at the bed. They hatched before my eyes, on my bed, and a thousand chunky fish swarmed there in viscid slime.

The fish were firm and fat, and white, with triangular bodies and bulging eyes. I watched in horror as they squirmed three feet deep, swimming about in the glistening, transparent slime. Fish in the bed!—and I awoke. My ears still rang with the foreign cry that had been my own voice.”

I learned my alphabet at a young age, but I only truly learned how to read when I was already a young adult. In high school we were made to read classics like J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*, Kahlil Gibran’s *The Prophet*, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, Ignazio Silone’s *Bread and Wine*, Jane Eyre’s *Wuthering Heights*, Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*, Boris Pasternak’s *Dr. Zhivago*, Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. We even had some of Mao Zedong’s poems, back-to-back with Rabindranat Tagore’s in our Asian-African literature class. Unfortunately, my teachers seemed to be interested only in getting us to write our term papers. Uninspired and motivated only by the need to meet academic requirements, I had to drag myself to read literature; I left high school only barely literate.

In college, I became active in the underground movement against the dictatorship. Soon I was lapping up the works of Mao and Lenin for lunch and having indigestion from reading, unprepared, Marx’s *Das Kapital*. During this time, I read because I had to sharpen my “ideological weapon” in order to defeat the class enemy. For what it’s worth now, I actually ended up a fairly literate student of Marxism.

But I was kicked out of the Party for political insubordination. Having practically grown up under the unwavering gaze of the proletarian gods of history, this was like being given the boot by your parents. Politically orphaned, I struggled to get my bearing again. Reading helped a lot.

In Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* and Foucault’s *Pendulum*, I found reverberations of my own philosophical break with the grand narrative tradition of Marxism. I wish I could have written this line from *The Name of the Rose*: “Perhaps the mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, to make truth laugh, because the only

truth is in learning to free ourselves from inane passion for the truth.”

I also reread the classics of my high school days, discovering in the process that some members of the bourgeoisie can and do have a soul. I had a short but exhilarating flight with the Latin American magic realists. My accidental discovery of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* on a bookstore shelf led me to other North American mainstream feminist writers. And while I did not completely retreat from left-wing political writings, the writers I read were no longer in the orthodoxy’s must read list: Gramsci, Althusser, E.P. Thompson, etc. Soon afterwards, I was exploring the bleak writings of the Frankfurt School and the difficult works of writers like Foucault and Habermas.

I was indiscriminate; I read everything that crossed my path. Having been rescued from a life of reading only politically-prescribed materials, I gorged my mind with every book that took my fancy. Unfortunately, behavior like this can cause literary indigestion. I think I’m just coming out from one.

The library where I am now working is a special kind of library. It is part of a resource center founded by and for women. Women run it, and women’s works dominate its collection. A whole new world of books has opened up for me. In fact, I never realized that there are so many books written by women. The first time I browsed through the library, I felt the weight of my sin of omission. All this time, I must admit, I had been reading dead, white men. My intellectual education had been defined by the writings of men and by their worldview.

I have never used the word “feminist” to describe myself. But when pressed to define my sympathies, I resort to the label “organic feminist,” which, in my imagined political thesaurus, means a feminist who has not yet been indoctrinated.

So now I am re-educating myself, carefully plodding through the materials in the library, quietly picking the brains of sisters in the movement, and simply learning from doing things. I wonder, perhaps the dreams I am having about animated books is my mind letting out a full-bodied belch to make room for more knowledge. ☺