Judges’ Commentary on “Inside An Open Book: A Literacy Narrative”
by
Mary C. Zangrilli

“Inside An Open Book” received an Honorable Mention in the University of Pittsburgh’s 2005/06 Composition Program Writing Contest

The task of telling the story of one’s life as a reader and writer without trudging off into commonplace talk of education requires an agile memory, astute eye for detail, and determination to represent the vitality of literacy. From the very first paragraph of Mary C. Zangrilli’s “Inside an Open Book: A Literacy Narrative,” an individual’s relationship with books comes alive as sentences take unpredictable yet fitting turns:

For years I have held them, dreamed of writing them, made miniatures of them for children’s dollhouses. I have carried them through rain and hail, thrown them through kitchens and down fire escapes, caught them in mid-flight. I have given them and accepted them, climbed trees with them. I have read and read and read them, until the ink paled. Books have so thoroughly described my life that I now believe that I am living one.

The memorable ending of each sentence in this opening showcases the author’s control of emphasis.

The narrative proceeds chronologically, focusing first on well-chosen memories of elementary reading and writing experiences. To convey the exhilaration of a very young writer, for example, Zangrilli wisely quotes a first-grade journal entry directly, yet also creates context for that quotation from an adult perspective: “My memory begins with the writing of a first-grader’s journal. ‘I am 6!’ I can remember the bleeding blue ink on the dog-eared memo pad. And that is how my memory began, an ink-blot summary of the age before any serious vocabulary emerged.”
When the story moves from elementary skills to more daunting standards for cultural literacy, Zangrilli concisely renders this complex transition through revealing detail, well-paced punctuation, and humorous yet poignant quotation:

When I received a scholarship to a New England prep school, I emigrated from an inner-city Catholic school where erudition was a social liability to an academy where the smarter you were, the cooler you were. I was illiterate; I could not tell you the difference between Methuselah and métier, Stradivarius and Richard Strauss. As a scholarship kid, the problem I faced was not only my own cultural illiteracy, but the tremendous literacy—of all sorts—of my classmates. When I came home for Christmas break, I said to my father, “Tell me everything there is to know.” He did not know where to start, and so he didn’t. I bought a book on manners and delved into my history book on Christmas day, and, still, I was illiterate.

The decision to follow the narrator’s plea to be told “everything there is to know” with the report that she “bought a book on manners and delved into [her] history book on Christmas day” reflects the author’s restraint. Rather than spelling out implications, she trusts well-positioned details to speak for her and takes her subject seriously without taking herself too seriously.

Near the narrative’s close, she confesses to now being an avid reader and prospective teacher too involved in the literary analysis required for her undergraduate English major to read purely for pleasure. Here she also deftly recalls paragraph one’s tree-climbing reader:

When I was at Andover, I became friends with a poet who asked me, frequently, what I was reading. He asked everybody that, fishing for leads, since he’d exhausted the Western canon by the age of 15. I don’t know what became of him (I think Murakami caught him between its dog-eared pages), but I’ve adopted his question, and I pose it to people whom I suspect of being closeted bookworms. The problem
is when they turn the question back to me, and I have to answer for my illiteracy. Truthfully? Aside from the books I am reading for class, I'm not reading anything at all. My literacy is rap music and a television series touting a teenage detective.

As an English major, I read and analyze multiple texts in a semester, so I am not completely bereft of the written word. But gone are the days when you could find me perched up in a tree with half of the New York School of poetry balanced on the branches. You won’t find me skipping class because I have to finish *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. I’ve sold my Frank O’Hara anthology, and I have a year’s supply of *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper’s* and *The New Yorker* piled up in the corner unread. I used to dream in text, but now it’s just the flashing blue lights of the sitcom of choice, endlessly persuading atoms to blink in sync across the screen.

When I graduate, I know I will resume reading for pleasure . . . . I have become aware of what a gift literacy is, and I look forward to giving that gift to my students.

An early section, titled “Reflections,” represents Zangrilli “as a reader who hears the cadence of a piece of writing, as a writer who attempts to deliver cadence as well as content, and as a thinker who needs to grow.” This insightful self-evaluation, focuses the narrative’s journey through key scenes of her reading and writing life in search of better understanding of its varied textures and implications. Our Awards Committee’s Honorable Mention for Mary C. Zangrilli’s “Inside an Open Book: A Literacy Narrative” recognizes this author’s skillful handling of narrative detail and sentence rhythms as well as the intellectual energy with which she concisely and memorably navigates literacy’s complex personal terrain.

A friend of mine and I were bored with our second grade curriculum, so we developed a complicated note-trading
system to communicate . . . . Words at that age were like water; they were necessary, but we spent them carelessly, capriciously. It was only later, at this age of 26, that I learned what a burden a word can impose. An unnecessary word can wreck a sentence. A noun, linked with an imprecise adjective, can destroy the ribs of an essay. Words have become so heavy that I am afraid to use them. I have come to appreciate literacy as a truly remarkable gift, one that must be used with pensiveness. Far beyond my grade-school friend’s mantra of “Keep in Touch,” I use words to keep in touch with family, friends and the community. Literacy is a tool, and I have become grateful to know how to use it.