The Lay of a Lay Librarian

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Some years ago, while being interviewed on a local radio station, I was asked why a character in one of my books had behaved in a certain way. My reply turned out to be more technical than I intended, and I concluded by saying, "I'm afraid I went into that a bit deeply, but you see, I am a lay psychiatrist."

My interviewer, whose interest had seemed to be lagging, looked at me with new respect and said brightly, "Are you *really*?"

In the same jocular vein I might say that I am also a lay librarian. The happiest event of my childhood was the building of a branch library a few blocks from my home, and the best job I ever had was at the Des Moines Public Library. I really didn't have a title, but today one would say I was a public relations specialist. I did all kinds of interesting things. What I enjoyed most was my weekly half-hour radio program over WHO where I reviewed books, reported news from *Publishers Weekly* and library journals, and announced upcoming events at the main library and its branches. That I was on friendly terms with the radio station's young announcer added to my pleasure although I had no way of knowing that one day he would be the fortieth president of the United States.

My future husband turned out to be a man who loves books and libraries as much as I do, is also the fastest reader in the world, and can read type upside down and in reverse.

With this background it is not surprising that our first child, Jane, at nine months ate my library card, thus beginning a new generation of card-carrying library lovers. It may even have been responsible for her becoming a writer, which she is today. I do know that my library background, plus the encouragement of my English professors at The University of Iowa, particularly

John Towner Frederick, were the most important factors in shaping my own literary career, which began at age eight when I had a poem published in the old *Des Moines Capital*.

It was then the die was cast. I was going to be an author. That was it.

I wrote voluminously all through high school and continued doing so in college where I met a handsome young newspaper reporter named Frank Eyerly, whom I later married.

It was as a young matron I fell into my wonderful job at the Des Moines Public Library, working under the direction of Forrest Spaulding, one of the most respected librarians in the country.

This gave me the best of both possible worlds, allowing me to work at the library in the mornings while my husband was sleeping, and to write half the night while he was at work on the *Des Moines Register*. I wrote short stories that didn't sell and articles that read like short stories that did. I had three regular nom de plumes. For lighthearted, frivolous pieces I was Linda Lee. For more serious matters I was Miriam Carlock, my great-grandmother's maiden name, and when I needed a male viewpoint I became Sandy McTavish.

Being asked to teach a creative writing class (creative I was if nothing else) inspired me to make one more attempt to break into the fiction market that had so far eluded me. Overlooking the rule that only members of the working press could contribute to a magazine called *Newspaper Man*, I signed my husband's name to a story, giving his newspaper's address, and sat back to wait for his surprise when he received a rejection slip. Instead, several weeks later my husband called from work. "Guess what?" he said. "I just sold a story for 50 bucks and they want my picture and a brief biographical sketch."

After this I wrote with even more zeal, putting in long hours each evening after our two small daughters were in bed. Borrowing on the experiences of an older friend whose husband had died, I assumed a new persona—Alice Lanner—and wrote "What It Means to Be a Widow." On its twentieth trip, it sold to a national magazine. The editors loved it, paid $500—a fantastic sum in those days—and promptly requested that I write a story to be called "I'm Glad I Got My Divorce." Though

happily married I obliged, using as a framework the experiences of a friend who had divorced a worthless fellow and was struggling to raise two small children. Although I changed her exhusband's employment (actually he didn't have any), the sex of her children and everything else I could think of, and signed the piece "Anonymous," the day after the magazine appeared my friend wired me from New York where she'd gone to seek her fortune: "I'm never going to tell you anything again as long as I live." (She has.)

The editors loved the new "confession" so much that several months later they were at me again, this time with a request to write "I'm *Sorry* I Got My Divorce." This time I invented from scratch a story about a woman for whom divorce proved not to be the solution. Both articles were enthusiastically received and prompted many letters from readers. Of the many sent on to me, one read something like this: "My dear: do not be sorry for one minute you got your divorce. Just be glad you are rid of the skunk."

The magazine's next request was for a story to be called "I Neglected My Parents" and was supposed to be written from a male viewpoint. For this I interviewed no one, simply concocting the tale of a too success-oriented businessman who could never find the time to visit his poor old mother and father—until it was too late. I was later told that the day the manuscript arrived in the editor's office there wasn't a dry eye in the place.

Articles such as these, and similar assignments, demanded imaginative rather than reporting skills and proved to be a useful transition to the young adult novels I began writing in the early 1960s when the market for short stories and articles began to dwindle.

Inspired in part by my daughters' remarks about the "gumdrop" novels of their high school years, which invariably ended when the young heroine captured the boy of her dreams, I wanted to write about real kids in real life situations. This I accomplished with *Drop Out*. Published in 1963 and in print in hard cover and paperback editions for more than 20 years, this book is often cited as the turning point between the "gumdrop" and the "anything goes" of today's novels for the adolescent.

But even with the success of *Drop Out* and other novels that succeeded it, I soon learned that in the eyes of most people, switching from adult to juvenile writing was a definite step *down*, and that a certain amount of condescension is likely to be found. In fact, after a glance at my white locks and a guarded inquiry as to whether I am "still writing," acquaintances are likely to tell me: "You know, my daughter (or niece, or granddaughter) just happened to have one of your books lying around and out of curiosity I read it. I really enjoyed it. In fact, I couldn't put it down!"

In such cases, I keep my peace but am often tempted to reply, "Of course, and why not? It's good! Why shouldn't I—I, who have been widowed, divorced, remarried, neglected my parents, been a newspaperman and God knows what else—why shouldn't I be able to write an interesting novel about almost anything—and certainly write one about kids with

A selection of books by Jeannette Eyerly. In addition to many books, the University Libraries also have manuscripts of the author.

whom in one way or another, I've spent the best years of my life?"

A children's book should be as good or better, its characters as believable and as carefully plotted and written, as any of its adult counterparts. If it does all of these things well, it will have a happier and longer life and exert greater influence than many adult novels. Certainly, few children's books are to be found in remainder catalogs.

Still, in the minds of many people the category of "writing for children" remains pejorative. On the average of once a month, someone asks me when I am going to write an "adult" novel—as if some special value accrues to a book because it is written for adults. Some people even go a step farther and say, "How do you go *about* writing for children?"

To such a question I reply: The same way one writes for adults, because the same rules apply. A book is either well written or poorly written. It is either interesting or boring. Children care nothing about best-seller lists, awards, and book reviews. They know what they like and they read it, not only once but half a dozen times or more. When they outgrow one type of book, they move beyond it. I remember one of my daughters who, in about third grade, asked for and got for Christmas, all the Bobbsey Twins books her father could find. She tackled the new stack of books with gusto, only to ask a few days later in a gloomy tone, "Why does Father Bobbsey always laugh 'Ha, ha, ha?' "

Our concern today, however, is not the reading of mediocre literature but the possible replacement of *any* reading by electronic means. We marvel at the early readers in past centuries who absorbed more books as children than many adults today do in a lifetime. By the age of three, Samuel Johnson was reading the measured cadences of *The Book of Common Prayer,* and Jonathan Swift was reading the Bible. Lord Byron read the classics in the original from the age of five, and it is said that Thomas Babington Macaulay's greatest pleasures as a small boy were to read and eat bread and butter in front of an open fire, afterwards explaining what he had read to his nurse. Throughout his life he was seldom seen without a book, and he died in his library, an open book in his hands.

I have a friend who is no Macaulay but she, to my knowledge, has never washed a dish, peeled a potato, ironed a shirt, or taken a bath without a water-spotted, well-loved paperback book propped open before her.

It has been said that learning to read is one of the most complex tasks that a human being accomplishes in his or her lifetime, and the amazing thing is not that so few people fail but that so many succeed. Of course, not everyone who *can, does.* I am inclined to think that we library lovers are born with the love of reading, much as some children are born with perfect pitch or the ability to draw or sing. Such readers will find something to read wherever they are.

They will read the type on cereal boxes, notices tacked on walls and lamp posts, messages on billboards, and the miniature information leaflet wrapped around a bottle of aspirin. I have seen born readers with their heads inside a kitchen cupboard reading old newspapers folded to cover the shelves, or scraping coffee grounds off a newspaper they are wrapping garbage in, to read a story they had missed.

My favorite reading story is about four-year-old Michael who tried to climb *inside* a large picture book. He opened it to his favorite page, spread it open on the floor, and stepped in. When nothing happened, he cried in bewilderment.

Young Michael may have been the first person who physically tried to get "inside" a book. But he is not the first person who, after a couple of good "tries," failed to get past the first dozen or so pages. In other words, there are some books each of us would not read on a bet, not because it's not a good book but because it's not our kind of book.

It's been said that Henry James couldn't finish *Crime and Punishment,* and that Charles Lamb couldn't get through Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.* Barbara Tuchman admits she thinks George Eliot's *Middlemarch* is "a female Moby Dick." Harold Ross, *New Yorker*'s wonder boy, once remarked that many readers couldn't say quickly whether Moby Dick is the captain or the whale.

All of us have our own specialty—the kind of book we like best: history, mystery, biography, fiction, travel, science-fiction, whatever. We know our libraries inside out. We know

where to find our favorite out-of-town newspaper, the financial poop sheets, the bound copies of *Popular Mechanics* or of magazines that have ceased publication. We are not like the man in the art museum who said to his friend, "I don't know what I like, but I know what's art."

We learn how to spot others in the library who have interests like our own . . . a gentle comradery similar to that found among gardeners. Recently I was in the mystery section of my neighborhood library and was grousing because I couldn't find the book I was looking for. A majorful-looking woman carrying a shopping bag full of books marched up to me and thrust a book in my hand. "Try this one by Clifton-Baddely. You'll like it." She was watching me, so I thought I'd better take it. And do you know? Among several other books I selected, I liked hers best.

In Lawrence, Kansas, where my younger daughter Susan once lived, there is a group of faculty wives who call themselves "The Trollopians." For over 50 years, with only minor changes in membership caused by members moving away or dying, these women have as a group read nothing but the works of the nineteenth-century English novelist Anthony Trollope. When they come to the end of his works, they start in at the beginning. If I lived there, I would be a Trollopian.

A lot of people worry about our libraries. While many long-time library users bewail the loss of the card catalog, some library scientists have more profound fears. They worry that as computers and "preservation without paper" take over, books and libraries will become obsolete. But people have been worrying about that since Gutenberg made scriveners obsolete. I'm not one of the worriers. Books and libraries have been around too long for that. In 1853 a library dating back perhaps two thousand years before Christ was uncovered at Ninevah. Tablets of clay covered with cuneiform characters are estimated to contain some 10,000 distinct works and documents. Under the son of Ptolemy I, the library at Alexandria was not only the intellectual center of Hellenistic culture but grew so large it overflowed into another building.

Modern library methods, which began with the Rule of St. Benedict early in the sixth century, continued with two other

orders of monks, the Carthusians and the Cistercians. *They* had a system of interlibrary loans! The Cluniacs had an annual stocktaking, and by the end of the eleventh century some Benedictine houses had separate reference and lending divisions. Some books were kept in the treasury, while others were chained to a horizontal bar. At our library we don't go that far, but we do keep the elephant edition of Audubon's *Birds of America* under glass. (Once a week, a librarian turns a page.)

Personally, I think that electronic devices will supplement but never entirely replace the book—that wonderful device known as "Built-in, Orderly, Organized Knowledge." BOOK has no wires nor electrical circuits to break down. It is made entirely without mechanical parts and needs no buttons pressed to operate. It can be taken on the bus, to the doctor's office, on a wilderness hike, and to bed.

Altogether, "Built-in, Orderly, Organized Knowledge" seems to have a great many advantages with no drawbacks. So I think it is safe to predict we will not only always have books but libraries to keep them in—at least as long as libraries have a lot of FRIENDS.