

What's the First Thing You Can Remember About Reading?

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Announcer 1: The podcast that explores why library and information science research matters.

Announcer 2: We interview researchers about their work.

Announcer 1: And they connect the dots between what they do and its importance to your life.

Announcer 2: Okay, let's get on it.

Female: I feel like the first thing I remember reading was *Puppy Too Small*. I loved *Puppy Too Small*.

Female: And there was this one I really loved, I think it's called like *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* or something. It's a picture book about all the different letters.

Female: The first thing I remember about reading is that I actually hated it as a kid.

Male: Babysitting my cousin's children, I had been lent a copy of Isaac Asimov's *Foundation Trilogy* by my grade eight teacher.

Female: The specific corner in the library where the Berenstain Bears collection was.

Female: My mom reading with my twin brother and I, and then later she continued to read to me until I was 13.

Female: My first really strong memory of reading, which isn't actually maybe reading because I couldn't read.

Female: I loved hearing my mother read stories to me and talk about what was happening and how it applied to real life.

Female: The Russian A,B,C book.

Female: Looking at a stop sign and recognizing that I could never not read it again.

Catherine: So I'm Catherine Ross and I'm a professor emerita at FIMS at Western.

Lynne: And I'm Lynne McKechnie and I'm a professor at FIMS at Western.

Paulette: I'm Paulette Rothbauer, also I'm an associate professor at FIMS at Western.

Catherine: Okay, so my first book that I can remember – and of course it’s not the first book, but it’s the one that sticks out in my mind – is this Little Golden Book about a whole lot of animals that were in the middle of Africa, and their pool of water was drying up and it got drier and drier and drier and drier. And everyone said “What will we do?”

And they turned to the wisest of the animals, which was the lion. And the lion said “We’re going to have to do an overland trek.”

Or maybe it was the elephant. Possibly it was the elephant. And the elephant said “We have to do an overland trek to a place that I remember many, many years ago had water.”

And they went and they went and they went and they went through many pages, and at the end they got there. But it wasn’t quite like the thing they remembers so they didn’t like it very well. And then it rained. And then they came back to their own little pool and everyone was so happy and they jumped in the water and the end.

Paulette: And it was a Little Golden Book you recall.

Catherine: It was a Little Golden Book, yeah, the ones that were 35 cents.

Lynne: Or 25 cents. And you know until *Harry Potter*, the Little Golden Book *The Little Poky Puppy* was the bestselling book of all time.

Paulette: And that’s the book that always comes up. When I hear Little Golden Book I always picture...

Lynne: *Poky Little Puppy*.

Paulette: Yeah.

Lynne: The minute I read it I recognized the plot. But then I’ll say what book stands out for me. When that question was first posed I thought ‘Oh, it’s clear, it’s Trixie Belden’, which was one of those dastardly series books.

And the thing is, we loved them, we and my friends, and for all sorts of good reasons. First, we could read them on our own. We read them. You know, they were chapter books. We read them on our own. But also it was that what I see now as like social capital. We traded them. And you could get these things. They were cheap. And there was all these wonderful waiting periods where so and so had a birthday coming and her aunt always sent her a new Trixie Belden. So she’s going to read it first, but then who’s going to read it after?

I treasure them and I have almost a complete set of the first eight still now. I’m not re-reading them because I don’t want to disrupt that deep tremendous pleasure.

Paulette: That’s great. So I knew that you were going to ask us this question, so – at least yesterday I knew that. And it’s hard for me to remember what the

first thing was that I read, which is surprising to me, right. So I've been spending a lot of time thinking about 'Why can't I remember the first things that I read?'

But what I do remember is that I had a record player, a little Fisher Price record player that came in a suitcase. I think it was Fisher Price. And I had two albums of books, and one was the Disney Snow White, which I also had a book version of that. And I also had a record that was Sereno de Bergerac. And those are my earliest memories of reading, right, which is also kind...

You can't see this because we're on a podcast, but I'm doing air quotes around reading. But it surprised me that my first memory of reading was actually about listening to records. I'd forgotten about it. But I loved both of them a lot.

Catherine: But you know that's interesting because it raises the issue of the relation of reading to other media, you know, records in those days but then it became videotapes and now...

Lynne: Videogames.

Catherine: Videogames.

Paulette: Yeah, and you know the memory, it's kind of wild because it's really multisensory for me. I can picture, you remember the evil stepmother from the Disney Snow White, and her dramatic purple black and white hair. I can picture it vividly, even though I probably haven't looked at that or seen the film in over 35 years or however long it's been.

And also, the soundtrack that goes with audio books. I don't listen to audio books much now at all, but it's interesting. I was curious to go back and try to remember that, because there are also memories of things like *Clifford the Big Red Dog*, which I know I got through the scholastic book program. We didn't have a lot of books but... But you know you do start... It's a curious...

You know one of the things what I think we all do is ask our readers to start from the earliest memories of reading and then to account for a reading history somehow. But it's curious when you do it yourself.

Catherine: And you know how much has been dropped out, because what these interviews do is that they capture that have been important enough to readers that they remember it for decades.

Paulette: Yeah, that's so true.

Catherine: So all the other things that we may have read haven't registered with us.

Lynne: And recollection, which I think is amazing because I teach the children's reading classes, the children's materials. And I give them the other children's one they'll look at a dozen, 15 picture books and they nice little

response reports. And it's so common that they recollect that. I didn't remember this book. But I saw the cover and I said "There she is. There's Madeline."

And then all of a sudden the memories of my mother reading this with me, I always find that fascinating because it's really made a part of that person, not just their history as a reader but their history as a person interacting in the world. But it's latent. It's under there and hidden. So recollection is really Amazing too.

Paulette: Recollection that comes about because people are talking to other people about reading. There's something about that conversation about reading that matters. Like it's our methodology, right?

Catherine: Yeah.

Paulette: And there's something special about that as well.

Lynne: And they love doing it. We never have problems finding opportunities for conversations with readers, or people who might not even be described as avid readers. They're always so eager to share that. I've been thanked a lot of times, you know "Thank you for the opportunity to talk about this", which makes it really satisfying and special when you're out there, you know.

You're not giving them a survey. You're not asking them to do stuff that... You're asking them to do something pleasant, and it becomes pleasant for both the researcher and the participant, the – I don't even want to call them... They become like a colleague in the process really of doing that work, just because it's a shared – a shared understanding is what emerges in some way. I've always like that.

I always was happy when I was going out to get my data and other people always wanted... I was once told I was having far too much fun doing my Ph.D. thesis for example, because I would come back so happy after talking to a four year old about what she was reading.

Catherine: The key to this kind of interview of course is to start with a reader and then say 'What was important to you?' That's why that first question, what can you remember either reading yourself, the first thing you can remember either reading yourself or having read to you is a good thing to start with, because then you can then say 'And then what? And then what was important? And then what happened? And then did anything change?'

And the question that evokes a big response when I ask it is "What would it be like for you if for one reason or another you couldn't read?"

And they say "Oh my God! Oh, that'd be terrible. That would be just like not having sex. I don't know what I would do. It'd be like, I don't know, I'd be colour blind."

And then they came up with all kinds of metaphors about how their life would be impoverished. And some people would say things like “I wouldn’t be the person I am if I couldn’t read.” They didn’t say ‘Oh well, I’d just play more golf.’

Lynne: Certainly with the children, because they don’t have long biographies as readers, depending on how old they are. But you know they always knew. I’d say “Well, is there one amongst these”, because I talk to them in the context of their collections, a very concrete, you know the books that were in their room. “Is there one among these that’s special?”

And I don’t know how many times someone would jump, you know, and a nine-year-old boy jumped up, ran, came back, he’s hugging the book and he said “This is my Pokemon book”. Well, it was just so passionate. And I wasn’t about to tell him there was something wrong with it, because there’s all sorts of adults who would tell him there was something wrong with that.

And he just went on. He said “I’ve just taken it everywhere.” He said “I took it up north. I’ve taken it in the car. I’ve taken it everywhere.” And it was heavily frayed and it was just, they know how important reading is to them.

So I think that might be a younger equivalent of “I would die.” I mean it was clear to me if he left that Pokemon book somewhere behind he would die.

Male: I don’t know if it’s exactly reading but apparently, when I was a small child, my parents would read sort of fables and stories to me so often that I had basically memorized what happens according to what page was going on. So I would take books, my books, and read to other family members, aunts and uncles and stuff, and friends. And they’d all be so impressed that I could read at about one and half, two years old.

Announcer 2: This has been another episode of So What?.

Announcer 1: The podcast about library and information science research and why it matters.

Announcer 2: So What? is created and produced by students at the faculty of information and media studies at Western University in London, Ontario.

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