

## **You're Still Allowed to Imagine: A Literacy Narrative**

Before I could read, my Mom and Dad would always read me stories. Especially my Mom. My mom has a deep love for books, and this love has definitely influenced my own attitude towards books, which I'll get into further later. Anyway, before bed, nearly every night, I would insist that one of my parents read my favorite book to me. Friends of a Feather, by Bill Cosby. Pre-arrest Bill Cosby, mind you. This would make me around three to four years old, though I couldn't say for sure. I had heard this story so many times that even though I couldn't read it, I knew nearly every word. My Dad loves to tell the story of when he tried to read it to me one night. This book wasn't short by any means. It was definitely long for a children's book. My parents got sick of reading this long, boring, picture book to me every night. So one night, my Dad tried to skip a page. He says my eyes were closed and I was nearly asleep, so he thought he could get away with it. Just a few words into the next page, I grabbed his hand and said "You skipped one." All he could do was silently turn back the page, and keep reading. What else would you say to a four-year-old? This book is what originally started my love of stories.

Even still, I didn't read as much as you'd think. My mom would give me books to read, and I would start quite a few of them, usually at the same time. However, I tended to get bored with a lot of them and would ditch the book after a little while. It was so hard for books to live up to my expectations and my imagination. Because of this, I loved to draw pictures far more than I liked to read. This was until around 3rd grade. It may have been a year earlier or later; I don't quite remember. At school, we would have yearly Scholastic Book Fairs. The Scholastic Book Fair was once a year, where our school would set up a couple dozen shelves worth of books, ranging from children's picture books to middle school-level novels, to flashy books about video games with pop-ups in them. As a not-so-avid reader, I was never a big fan of these,

but I always picked up a book or two to make my mom happy. Everyone usually eyed the fun books, like the Guinness World Record book of that year, or maybe a Super Mario book. This one year, however, the librarian herself recommended a book to read – the first in a series of something like 80 books. It was called “Warriors”, though I couldn’t remember much of the plot anymore. I reluctantly accepted and paid for my things.

When I got home, after doing my homework, I decided to check this book out. It was more out of curiosity than anything. I finished the book within a few days. I became obsessed, and I told my mom I just HAD to get the next ones. I picked up the ones I could find at the school library, and my mom happily ordered the remaining books in the first series of 6 books. I burned through them, and they quickly started to consume all my free time. Whenever I wasn’t doing homework, or playing baseball or video games, I was reading these books. I think the reason I latched on to these books is because they were so imaginative and much different from the other books I tried to read before. I hadn’t read many fantasy novels, but reading these books quickly changed that. This series springboarded me into series like Harry Potter and Percy Jackson, which are both detailed, vivid, fantasy books that could finally satisfy my imagination. Because of this, throughout elementary school and into middle school, I became an avid reader. My mom couldn’t be more proud.

Growing older and continuing into middle school started a drastic change in my literacy. I no longer enjoyed reading books and turned a full 180 to drawing pictures. As school progressed, more and more of my reading was assigned. The downside being that school stifled my imaginative thinking. Whether this was intentional or not I don’t know for sure, but it happened either way. What I love so much about books is that they let you imagine WHATEVER you

want. The stories that were told felt so real and I really felt myself in them. This passion for imagination is what drove me to read so much. But when you read for school, it all changes. Books are no longer magical and whatever you want them to be (ignore the cliché). It's all about what you think the author meant, and whatever fancy words your teacher wants to hear. You don't get a say in the story anymore. I remember specifically in middle school, in 6th grade, I had to give a presentation on any book I wanted. The previous summer, I had read *Ready Player One* at my Mom's request and loved it. So much so that I was actually excited to do the presentation, the first and last time that's ever happening by the way. So I stood in front of the class and gave my presentation with full confidence. That didn't last long. When I finished, everyone was allowed to ask questions. This was fine, but my teacher herself wanted to ask a question. And it was less a question than it was a personal attack. Okay maybe not, but that's sure what it felt like. She said something along the lines of "Your presentation was good, but your interpretation of ... wasn't quite right. It's more supposed to be ..." So basically she was telling me that what I thought of the book was wrong. That doesn't even make sense! Needless to say, I was a lot less excited to read from there on out.

As I mentioned, my turn from reading to drawing followed quickly after this. What I loved so much about drawing is that it truly could be whatever I wanted it to be. My imagination was the only limit. That and the fact that I couldn't really draw. Either way, I loved it and would get in trouble very often for scribbling and doodling in the margins of essays, worksheets, and the like. I collected notebooks worth of drawings, a lot of which were my favorite video game or cartoon characters. Many of them were also my own creations, although I'd find that soon enough this would frustrate me. I really loved drawing people, or at least living characters. The problem with this was that it was really hard. I watched tutorials on YouTube all the time, from a

creator I've since forgotten the name of. It worked, and I was improving considerably in a short amount of time, but it was never enough for me. I saw all these vivid images in my head that I just wished so badly I could get onto the paper. It always ended up being slightly off, or a little too difficult, and it was impossibly frustrating. I remember one time for my older sibling's birthday a couple of years ago, I had decided to draw a picture of them on a birthday card. I spent hours drawing, erasing, crumpling up, and trying again to make this perfect. But I just for the life of me could not figure it out. I ended up giving up and making a generic card. This was the problem with drawing: I wanted it to be too perfect. And I couldn't for the life of me settle for less than perfect. Because if I saw it in my head, I should be able to draw it, right? Anyway, I ended up dropping that hobby slowly, as it became much more frustrating than relaxing going into high school. My thirst for imagination had, once again, ruined something I loved.

In more recent years, I have definitely drifted away from my passions and settled for generic writing, almost always for school. At least I'm pretty good at it, so it's not all bad. But whether I was good at it or not, I just... didn't really enjoy writing. It always seemed so tedious to me. I yearned for a way to let my creativity out, but I had killed the only methods I knew. Some other things I didn't mention were learning music and coding – both literacy in their own ways. I loved playing the piano but, once again, wanted to do my own thing and my teacher vehemently disagreed. I quit doing that in 8th grade. I tried teaching myself to code in 5th grade with one of my friends. We started by learning HTML and CSS on our own, which was fun enough, but we moved on to creating games on a website called Scratch. Scratch was created by MIT students as an easy way to code. It was just a website, where you could organize blocks that

represented code instead of writing lines yourself. Yet again, however, I had all these great ideas and never seemed to be able to make them. I quit doing that as well.

However, upon reflecting on my experiences, I've realized something. I can't rewire my brain and stop being a perfectionist. That's not how that works. But just because something isn't "perfect" doesn't mean I can't enjoy it. I've always wanted to express myself through reading, drawing, and music, but always ended up being frustrated when my imagination was stifled. But now, I can choose to do whatever I want. I don't have a teacher telling me which books to read and what interpretations are valid. I don't have to impress anyone with my drawings, nor make a teacher proud while playing music. I can do these things for me. To relax. I can take back the things I used to love and become 'literate' all over again. I can use my imagination however I'd like, and nobody can tell me otherwise. Maybe I'll stop by the library and pick up a book soon.

For old-time's sake.