

Makenzie Perks

Professor Emily Hemmer

First Year Writing

05 September 2023

Friends in Books :The Language of Makenzie Perks

August 16th, 2005, the day I was born. At around 3pm, the Baltimore City Hospital brought another life into this world and that life happened to be me. I was only in Baltimore for a few months, not even one-year old before we moved back to the hometown of my parents, York, PA. Of course as the first child of the family, I was adored by the adults and loved like no other. So much so that I resided in my mother's parents' home. My family was building a house in the suburbs and needed a place to stay and my grandparents were more than happy to oblige and give us housing. As the first child, all the knowledge and resources were poured into me; I was a spoiled baby. I spent my first birthday at my grandparents house, my first steps, my first words, everything happened there. This included my introduction to the wonderful world of literacy.

To me literacy was how well I could read and write. Was I literate enough to be able to read the big words in books? Was I able to understand what was being said, the important message of a passage? I knew I was literate mostly because I was raised to be able to read any book I wanted. Books were my best friend. My grandmother was a teacher, and with my parents working tirelessly to provide for us and the new house, my grandparents raised me for years and years. I was always over at their house and continued to spend days and nights with them. I spent my early formative years with grandparents who had a thirst for knowledge and for me to carry on a tradition of good grades and intelligent women. There was an endless amount childrens

books and study tools at that house. My grandma sought to personally teach me how to read and write. She had the time to teach me as I was always over at her house. When dress-up was over and I was done with my extra garlicky spaghetti, it was time to read. She always had a set amount of pages she wanted me to read and would never give up on making me read that exact number. It started with her reading to me. I would be wrapped up in her arms and we would read children's books like *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you see?* or others such as, *The Hungry, Hungry Caterpillar*. Then I could start reading them to her, not just feeling the different textures on the page. Sounding out words became easier and easier. Pre-school helped with that too, but a personal teacher with you twenty-four seven was a bonus. Not only did she help me read, but write as well. There would be days where I would be writing out my letters, following the dotted line on the paper, and it would look atrocious. My grandma would look at the paper and say, "It's okay. Just look at how I write it...see, now you try." She was never harsh about it. Always took a caring and loving tone with me. Her handwriting was always so neat and orderly, which helped me read it easily. Soon I could read, not write really well, but read. At the time literacy was reading, reading stories my grandmother wrote. As a result, I entered the fifth grade with an above-average reading and writing skill set.

There is one day in particular that I remember vividly. My fifth grade teacher, Mr. Medice was my favorite elementary teacher, and is my favorite teacher to this day. He always challenged us to be better and learn. His specialty was history, which was something I had loved. Of course, he couldn't always be teaching history, so there was biology (science was what it was called but it was specifically biology) and English. English really just consisted of reading tests. The whole class would sit in front of him, individually, and read a passage to him. I would have to pause at

periods and make sure I was reading all the words correctly. Little fifth grade me was always so terrified of these. I wanted to be perfect. I needed to be perfect. We were ranked on our reading skills A-Z, the alphabet. I remember walking into the class and seeing one singular name in the “Z” block. It was my name. There was a 10 minute period of the day we talked about the board and everyone got to look at where they were placed and got a little talk from Mr. Medice. It was my turn and I walked over to him. He told me, “You did very, very well. There have only been a few people to make it to this letter this early in the school year”. When I tell you I was bursting with joy, I was. I remember being very surprised, as I thought that the reading was very easy compared to things I have read. At the time, I was absolutely obsessed with reading the Series of Unfortunate Events series. I was in the library every week to get the next book.

That did not stop as I entered middle school. I read books upon books upon books. This was really where all of my obsessions started. I would read around a book every two days. They weren’t the small books either, no those were the thicker hard covers. Everyone would look at me bug-eyed and say I was crazy for reading these large books. To make it worse, they were romances, so people would think it was weirder. I believe this is part of the reason I had gotten ostracized in my early youth. People saw reading as a task and not an enjoyment. They would look at me as if I was a nerd, that I was weird. Books were truly then my only friend.



*Figure 1: The book series that got me interested in fantasy romance, and the first series I read from my middle school library.*

Middle school was also the time where I had found out that English and History were truly my best subjects. Anything below a 97% in those two classes was failing to me. I guess you could say it was with my grandma's help that my literacy had become so well evolved that I could think this way, that I would even feel this way about a school subject everyone around me despised. These English classes were different from Elementary school. They required us to speak to the class, To present findings and share our research. Research. For the first time I found a topic of English I was not very familiar with nor good at. I could make the slideshows as pretty as I possibly could, but I had to have what the teacher was looking for. I ended up being over-prepared. I had too many facts and the papers sometimes went all over the place and I struggled to make it back to the main subject. When these bad grades started coming in my mom told me to ask my grandmother for help. I didn't want her help as I would show myself as a failure in the one subject she made me excel in. So I talked to my peers instead, less experienced, but would make me look less of a fool than if I had talked to my grandmother. The grades finally were brought back up...but I had another issue. Speaking to the class.

As middle school progressed into high school the teachers didn't allow note cards to look off during our presentations. We needed to KNOW our information, to have memorized what was on the slides. They wanted us to actually understand what we were talking about. Freshman year I cried. I cried on a podium in front of my class because the teacher had said she would be taking points off for every "umm" and "uhh" muttered. I was terrified, absolutely petrified. There was nothing I could do about saving my grade. I was not the best speaker. A form of literacy I could not overcome and be above average at. Until then my understanding of literacy was subject only to books and stories I would read and write. I had tears run down my

face silently as I looked down at the podium and then back to the clock on the back wall, a trick I learned so I didn't have to make eye contact with anyone, feel their judgmental stares. When my presentation was over I sat back down in my seat, head hung low. I listened to the next person and saw how confident they were. I had never ran out of a classroom so quickly. Others were more confident, others could memorize what they were saying. I couldn't, I froze and nothing was coming to my brain whatsoever. This never really had gotten better, but my freshman year teacher was the only teacher I had ever encountered to take "umms" and "uhhs" so personally, and take it as a weakness.

I had never had weaknesses in literacy before that. I was perfect, raised to be the best reader, have an extensive vocabulary and be able to comprehend what I was reading, which could only get me so far in a professional sense. I had to talk to others, had to converse with them in the things I know. Even if I knew exactly what I was talking about, I would get flustered and choke. I feel as though that was why I always felt alone. I could never get enough courage to speak properly, to be "normal", talk "normally". So my literacy was always dumbed down to books. Books and writing my thoughts down on a piece of paper with horrible punctuation. If there was one thing my grandparents couldn't teach me, it was correct grammar. Yet, I could easily speak through paper. I could get my thoughts out without debating if it was the right or wrong thing to say, it was what it was. Once it was written on paper it made sense, no pauses to see if I was right or "umms" to give myself time to give myself courage to speak up. Even if my grammar was bad, there were no awkward pauses. There was no one to snicker at my stuttering or watch me fail, crying on a podium. My friends were on paper. They were fictional characters that I was able to read thanks to my grandmother. They were fictional characters I kept reading

about because my teachers told me I thrived while with them. My friends were still books because of the encouragement from those around me and will forever be my friends because my literacy allows them to be.

Reflection:

I won't say this essay was very challenging to write. As a person who is always surrounded by words on paper and knows what good writing and horrible writing looks like, I just let myself write. I let myself spend an hour putting my thoughts on a page, wherever my brain took me is where I went. None of these events are false, I truly did have a horrible time in middle school and spent my free time reading instead of with other people socializing. The one thing that I never did until the end of writing this essay was define my literacy. I guess I never thought about defining it for myself since I felt like my life was so boring and bland compared to the reading in class. I grew up and had a normal childhood, nothing special. I learned just as any other kid did and was writing what everyone else wrote. But going through writing this essay made me realize that my main source of literacy is reading. I couldn't speak as well as I thought and my essays mainly relied on my story telling, not my grammar or my punctuation. My story telling. I blame that on the fantasy romance books I read. Overall I think this essay dumbs down my life into a category: bookworm. I am proud of this title, I enjoy what I do, I have no more shame in it, it brings me joy.