

## Learning to Read

by Samier Mansur

My sister read *Little Women* at age nine. She was memorizing world capitals at age eight and knew what the word “idiosyncrasy” meant at age seven. When I was seven, I killed frogs and ran from cooties. When she read and memorized these funny sounding names, I couldn’t understand what she found in those books. To me, she was being a showoff. What about words that could entertain?

Entertainment was the only use I saw in books: what important message could a book convey that a TV couldn’t? At age five, Curious George was my first literary hero. To think what a man in a big yellow hat and a small monkey could do. I was amazed. My mother always asked me to read more like my sister—different books, thicker books, books with fewer or no pictures! This was out of the question. She told me I would be smart one day, and do all the things I wanted to do when I grow up. At that age, being smart meant being like MacGyver (my favorite TV character at the time), and I was sure that MacGyver never touched a copy of *Little Women* in his life, unless it was to defuse a bomb, of course.<sup>1</sup>

Ninth grade began and I was about to burst. I was filled with emotion. Anger, sadness, and loneliness consumed me. My new “home” was an old colonial house, called the “Hore House,” named after the original owner of the 19th century, famous for having housed Ulysses S. Grant sometime during the Civil War. It was a pretty place. The dorms were all colonial era homes, renovated to accommodate our modern needs. The landscaping was well groomed and of old fashioned taste. It seemed like a utopia to the common visitor. To me, however, it was a façade. This place wasn’t for me.

I was enrolled in Concord Academy, a boarding school in Massachusetts, far from my family and friends who were back in Pakistan. The rules were stringent; I couldn’t enjoy life the way I was accustomed to. This took a toll on me. I never did school work, didn’t socialize much. To fill the time, I started reading magazines.

First it was *Time*, then *Newsweek*, and *US Weekly*. I began to see that what was written in these magazines described the part of the world where I had just come from as primitive, lacking order, and democracy. What I read in these subscriptions often made me mad and confused, because these were not the countries in which I had just lived in. I felt an urge to tell everyone my opinion because I had lived there, I had experienced it firsthand. I read almost every article on CNN.com, FoxNews.com, and MSNBC.com every day, as well as the *Boston Globe*. I ended up auditing the classes I had little or no interest in. This way I could be the “responsible” student and attend class all day and get my secondary education on my own time.<sup>2</sup>

I was deeply interested in global issues, politics, religions, and conflicts. I read many sources, and so when it came time to write a term paper in my history class, I decided to write about “Why the United States Supported the Founding of Israel.” I could have written a flowery paper based on mainstream thought, full of simplified concepts and clichés. But I didn’t.

My professor was concerned with what I had written.

“It seems to me that you wrote this paper in order to fulfill your already predisposed bias towards the issue,” he told me.

“I wanted to write this paper from a different perspective,” I remember saying to him, “one which is ignored in the mass media. I can hardly imagine the United States, of all countries, having quotas against the number of Jewish immigrants into the country in the 1920’s, having turned away many ship loads of Jews allowing them to be persecuted upon their return, and having maintained economic

relations with the Nazi party as well as Mussolini's Fascist party through organizations such as Ford, GM, and IBM among others, to have been the most pro-Israel nation out of the kindness of her heart."

"I see..." He wanted to laugh; I could see him holding it back. "When Martin Luther King made his march on the capitol, many nuns walked by his side."

I was desperately trying to find his point, and was about to release a search party. But then he added, "Some people, who did not agree with Mr. King, wrote articles about these nuns being secret prostitutes fulfilling the sexual desires of Mr. King."

Now I wanted to laugh. Was he actually making such a comparison? I was outraged, but remained cordial. "I see," was my reply, mimicking the mockery of his prior choice of words.

"Given your cultural background, and the predisposed bias towards the subject, I can see how you were misled."

"I used sources which demonstrated a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds," I tried to correct him in his assumption.

We ended the meeting entrenched in our respective positions. I learned a lesson from all this. Although I did substantiate my material, I had to take in consideration my audience. I could not just read and write based on a few sources alone, especially with controversial issues.

### **Facing "Reality"**

However much I disliked the atmosphere of Concord Academy, the experience was crucial to my overall development. Life was not about floating above obstacles as I had been used to. The barriers were getting higher, and my feelings and emotions weighed me down. Life was so easy before . . . . Now it wasn't.

I refer back to ninth grade as an awakening. I laughed sometimes, had a circle of people I could barely call "friends," but I also experienced a kind of suffering. Not suffering as in "kill me now, I can't take this anymore," but one which took me deep inside myself, to the chatter of my soul in conflict. I picked up the Qu'ran for the first time and began to read. It was the only thing that calmed my nerves and settled the confusion within. Often times I found myself in my room on a weekend night, dimming the lights in my room with an open Qu'ran as I cried myself to sleep—hoping to dream of better times ahead.

Living in Pakistan a year later was living out a dream. In short, my life was my ocean, and I was a gaudy yacht penetrating the unknown at will. I was enrolled at the International School of Islamabad, a US Government school. It was here where I read my first real novel in 10th grade.

I was slowly opening up to reading. I had always done well in English, but had never read a book. I failed a pop quiz on the novel, *Siddharta*. My teacher (an English national) looked at my score, looked at me, and said, "I would not expect this from a person of your caliber." I didn't understand why she said that; I never before had read a book she assigned and had always managed A's in the class. But the comment stuck with me. I felt sad that I had let her down, but at the same time what she said gave me an ego boost. "A person of my caliber"—I felt like a big shot without . . . big shots. So I gave the book a read. It was beautiful, so beautiful I could not explain why I liked it so much. It was full of ideas I didn't know what to make of. Finally, a literary work had reached within me to strike a chord in my heart. Ideas of enlightenment, true knowledge, and suffering for salvation were among my new encounters. I had finally come to realize that if I stayed on the right path in my life, I could pursue these concepts forever.

### **Education, For Real**

Twelfth grade senior year I was turned upside down and re-introduced to the world. The joke which filled each period of high school stopped here. Mr. Hibbs was my re-educator, a hero of sorts.

Through his selection of the material we were to read, I was hooked. It started with John Donne and his many poems about love, and went on to Tennyson, Coleridge, and many poets of the Romantic age. We studied *Othello*, *Hamlet*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. *Frankenstein* and *Heart of Darkness* followed, along with Orwell's *1984*. *Sophie's World* opened my eyes to many philosophical concepts from the ancient to the present. Elie Wiesel's *The Accident*, Fyodor Dostovsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from the Underground*, Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* and the *Myth of Sisyphus* were studied, as well. T.S. Eliot's many great poems, including the "Four Quartets," "The Hollow Men," "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and "The Wasteland," and Dante's *Inferno* followed religious themes. We studied Nietzsche's concept of Nihilism through his works as related to the modern world. *Man's Search for Meaning*, written by Viktor E. Frankl, and *Invisible Man*, by Ralph Ellison, completed the course.<sup>3</sup>

Such books taught me more than all of my years in the "education" system ever had. The abundance of wealth and knowledge these great works provided me with an outlook which I had never been exposed to before. My views on things changed as I emerged from these books. I didn't and couldn't see the world in the same way again. It was as if everything had a meaning, whether seen or unseen. Destiny and fate are intertwined at every step and waking moment of this existence we call "life."

I began to realize why people suffer for truth, why salvation is necessary, why people die for concepts which can neither be seen nor touched. I started to see a reality which is unseen because we are so conditioned into thinking one way. The world became so much more complex, yet simple at the same time. Infinite ideas such as love, faith, and hope branded my heart. These books became my entrance into a new world.

When I see a book now, I see the cover as a door--the pages, long hallways full of new visions—and the back cover, an unlocked backdoor; a place for me to enter over and over again, probing the language, the concepts, and the author's mind as well as my own. My experience with reading overwhelms me with the sheer abundance of knowledge which, alone, I may never encounter in my mortal life. I find it tragic to know that there are other works so magnificent that I will have overlooked. How sad it is that there are infinite truths and the sum of my knowledge combined with the great names of history will only accumulate to a fraction of a drop in the vast ocean of perpetuity. But then in the end, if I stay the course, follow the pursuit of knowledge and enlightenment, I will have upheld my humanity.<sup>4</sup>

### **Endless Rivers, Infinite Skies: My Liberation**

Reading, writing, and knowledge take me on a journey without an end. As I drift into the unknown and push farther down the river, the events of my life, this world, my existence, the past, and the future become clearer, more connected. I slowly come to realize the river is never-ending because "my beginning is my end and my end is my beginning." I look upon my voyages differently every time because of the new awareness and insights I have gained from my prior passages. I stare at the surroundings, and everything becomes more beautiful as I acquire the insatiable appetite of curiosity.

I see that everything needs to be questioned, just as a child being brought outdoors for the first time looks around the world and wonders. The light shines upon her face as she watches the sun and its fluffy companions, the squirrels greedy with their nuts, and a dog busy trying to catch its own tail.

“Mommy, can animals talk? Why is the grass green? Why are people different colors? Why does it rain?” Famous philosophers from Democritus to Socrates, to Berkeley have asked the same questions. The mother is dumbfounded and tries to answer her child as she looks towards the sky and notices a creature flapping its wings, ascending towards the brilliant light above.

The feathers of the bird ruffle in the wind. It soars high above, as it glides above all and heads towards the edge of the earth. Looking downward, it catches a glimpse of humanity. Plato watches like a mystified ant pointing at the sun; Asoka cries over hundreds of thousands of dead soldiers as he plants his sword in the blood-drenched field forever; Alexander (not yet) the Great makes his vow to carry out his father’s dream; Buddha meditates under the great Pipal tree; Columbus peers through the fog seeing the face of another peering back at him; Jefferson places his pen into the ink pot and marvels at what he has just dared to write; Martin Luther King has a dream; Socrates collapses, the cup in his hand rolls on the hard surface...and keeps rolling. I am that bird, gliding through the purple, red, orange, and gold of the infinite sky. I become part of it all. Bathing in the breeze of heaven and scent of ambrosia from the clouds, I get lost in the intoxication of enlightenment.

## Notes

1 As an energetic child who was read to by teachers and my parents, I could only appreciate books for their entertainment value. Beyond amusement, books, at best, relayed a simple moral. Whether it was never steal porridge and break into bears’ homes, or trade a cow for magic beans, it was all an “educational” alternative to television. Given the titles of the books I enjoyed, which would consist of fairy tales and *Curious George*, it was hard to imagine them for any other purpose. Why would anyone read thick books without pictures? It was an invitation to boredom when the natural world was still out there to be ran around and played on.

2 Having just arrived from Pakistan, I had first hand experience in having lived in a global hot spot. I was there during the Kargil Campaign, the Nuclear standoff with India, the overthrow of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, and the Military coup headed by now President Musharaff; all of which I saw taking place with my own eyes. I was well traveled and felt the responsibility to be knowledgeable about worldly events, especially those where my own cultural roots take me. Hearing all sorts of stereotypes, I took it upon myself to address them whenever one came up.

3 Reading such heavy works did not come easy. Trying to understand the different styles, meanings, and overall message of each work was a difficult process in itself. I was often frustrated at the complexity of the works and what they implied. I was being told to re-examine my world and appreciate a reality which was not evident by any physical standards. Each text presented a piece of the puzzle, and in the end it was up to me to position them in a manner in which the image portrayed was that of an inherent, self evident truth.

4 I believe, as human beings we have a purpose behind our existence. We are endowed with such a mind, which is able to overcome, deal with, invent, and imagine so many different factors and experiences. Rather than live just to satisfy our primal urges, we have a responsibility to strive for answers, knowledge, and perfection of our soul so that we may stand tall in the in the End, facing our Maker. Anything less, as I said, would be denying one’s own humanity.