



Still Life with Books: A Memoir

By Kathye Petrie

*There are books . . . which take rank in our life with parents
and lovers and passionate experiences.*— Ralph Waldo Emerson

Like footfalls in T. S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton," books echo in my memory, inextricable parts of my biography. Books read and not read, books given and received: these are the themes of my life. Bonding with my mom may have begun at birth, but the deal wasn't sealed until the day she gave me one of her childhood treasures: a cerulean-blue Nancy Drew mystery from the 1930s. It was *The Quest of the Missing Map*; I was lost in those pages for days. When I discovered this book was part of a series, I embarked on a journey for years. To my mind, at the time, no other birthday or holiday gift—no Betsy McCall doll or cowgirl suit, ubiquitous in the 1950s—could in any way compare to a fresh, new Nancy Drew. After all the gift wrap and ribbons were thrown away, the promise of those printed pages remained. And never disappointed me.

There were other books in my childhood: *Little Women*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. There was my parents' gold-leaf, leather-bound family Bible, with its sumptuous illustrations and tissue-thin pages. At my grandparents' house, where my family went every Sunday, was a complete set of Charles Dickens's. These volumes slept behind a glass-doored cabinet, and I would stare at them with longing. Eventually, my grandparents took pity on me and allowed me to handle the books, and examine their engravings. Soon they let me borrow titles, one by one, to take home for a week to read.

Books spurred my independence. When I was ten, I would wander alone, through neighborhoods not my own and across a busy street to a small white house that had been converted into a public library. I can still recall the warm, dusty smell of those book-lined former bedrooms and the sunbeams streaming through the windows. I remember being stirred by the sheer *quantity* of books, with their infinite possibilities. To this day, I am always at home in a library. I seek them out to relax. They are havens to me.

In my parents' house, I discovered a hidden cache of paperbacks in boxes behind the sliding doors of the wooden TV cabinet. These turned out to be gothic novels passed on to us after having been read by relatives. For most of my pre- and early teen years, I lived in a land of dark castles and drafty mansions inhabited by governesses, as depicted by Victoria Holt and others of her ilk. I might be there still had not a neighbor rescued me with a copy of *Gone with the Wind*. I don't remember much what happened to me that summer of my fifteenth year. But I know to this day what happened to Scarlet, Rhett, Ashley, and Melanie.

When I was sixteen, I met the man who would become my husband, though it would be years before we would marry. He was an artist, and in his bedroom/studio were painted canvases and a storyboard based on Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock":

"Let us go then, you and I..."

And so I discovered poetry. But, during my college years, we broke up, and I turned instead to a man who was all wrong for me. I knew this almost instantly, yet stayed with him too long because he seduced me with language and literature, dazzled me in both English and French, read Proust out loud to me. One day, he read from Eliot's *The Wasteland*, a tactical error that resulted in this epiphany: I was still in love with my former boyfriend, the artist. I went looking for him, and when I found him, I discovered he felt the same about me.

"Reader, I married him," as Jane Eyre says.

But first came this supposed tragedy: my need for major surgery—a spinal fusion—due to a curvature of my spine. For ten months, I was destined to be an invalid, swathed in a body cast made of plaster of paris. Ironically, this turned out to be one of the best times in my life as a bibliophile. That was because, before my operation, I had time to turn my future sickroom into a well-stocked library. I bought hundreds of used books—everything I'd always wanted to read but had never had the time because of my high school and college studies; everything I might have been reading during the years I had instead been reading gothic mysteries. Thomas Hardy. Thomas Mann. Dostoevsky. I could read night and day, nonstop if I wanted. This was heaven for me.

Flash forward more than a quarter-century. Today I live with my husband in a college town on a quiet, tree-lined street in a house brimming with bookshelves he built for us. There, my books of literature mingle contentedly with his tomes on gardening, art, and photography. The beloved set of Dickens's, inherited from my grandparents, rests on a shelf in our dining room. While many couples spend their leisure time in restaurants and movie theaters, our preferred venues are bookstores and second-hand shops. Book bills—to my husband's chagrin—are the biggest expense in our family, which has expanded to include three now-grown sons.

"If I have a little money, I buy books," said Erasmus. *"If there is any left over I buy food and clothing."*

My philosophy exactly.

Some of my most satisfying moments as a mother, when the boys were young, was when all three at once were snug in their respective beds at night, reading. I mark their childhoods by their favorite titles: *Goodnight Moon*, *In the Night Kitchen*, *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*, *Redwall*, *The Book of Three*. Like Proust's madeleine-and-tea, these books evoke a flood of memories in me.

I can gauge my mental health by the degree to which books continue to speak to me. The year after a younger brother died, for instance, grief plunged me into clinical depression. Life and

breath were sucked from me. In this condition, the volumes on my bookshelves turned gray, and held no appeal. Read the late William Styron's *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* and you will understand how this feels. Styron wrote of a nothingness that seemed hopeless and unending. Then one day he heard "*a sudden soaring passage from the Brahms Alto Rhapsody: this sound, which like all music—indeed, like all pleasure—I had been numbly unresponsive to for months, pierced my heart like a dagger . . .*"

Similarly, I knew my depression was lifting when the books on my shelves regained color, and once again beckoned to me.

Books remain my emotional barometer. When I am excited by life, my books are a promise of pleasure held out to me endlessly. When my world view is not so positive, it saddens me to think that were I to read one book a day for the rest of my life, and live to be 120, I still would not have read everything I want to read, not learned all I want to know, and, as a writer, still could not write all the books I want to write, not tell all the stories within me.

When I feel such despair, it's usually a sign I have been working too hard, or am under great stress, and need to take a break. So I go for a walk. To the local public library. Or I drive to a bookstore. Or pull a beloved volume from a shelf at home and settle on the couch and begin reading.

Then, like some amazing grace, the words restore me.