

MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD READING

Beverley Naidoo

I have a mixture of memories and feelings about my childhood reading. I have always loved losing myself in a story. How amazing to sit with a book and forget where you are because your head and heart are somewhere else! Stories can take you to any place in the world, real and imaginary. You can travel backwards and forwards in time. You can even go *inside* other people, learning their innermost secrets and thoughts. Extraordinary, nê?

I especially remember four volumes of fairytales, each with a different coloured cover. I still have my copy of the *Blue Fairy Book* in which Andrew Lang brought together tales from earlier great story collectors, such as the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault. These tales could send shivers down my spine and I loved them! In them I learned about anger, jealousy and hate as well kindness, loyalty and love. But these tales were largely set in far away Europe, just as my Enid Blyton's stories were all set in England. Most of my books opened windows onto far-away lands. The exceptions were the animal tales with pictures where the landscape was like our South African bush.

It was only years later that I realised the problems with my childhood reading. It was like discovering that some of the 'sweeties' that I had eaten contained serious traces of poison. In consuming my books, I had also consumed a good deal of colonial racist stereotyping. Most of the characters in the stories were white and when there were black characters, they tended to be shown as savages, servants or comic buffoons. It still disturbs me to think how easily children's minds can be influenced and distorted while they are being entertained. When I became an education adviser, it became part of my mission to encourage teachers, librarians and young people themselves to think about questions of representation, stereotyping and underlying messages in books for children. I became committed to critical reading because I had been such an uncritical reader as a child.

But there were also book-related incidents while I was growing up that did puzzle me at the time. Believe it or not, the library at my school was kept locked! I cannot recall once going inside and choosing a book for myself. What's more, in my matric year, when I asked our vice-principal to sign a form so that I could join the Johannesburg city library, she refused. I can still hear her voice with her Irish lilt...

'And what would you be wanting to read more books for, Beverley? Have you not got enough with your text books already?'

I was baffled by her refusal, but later I realised that the nuns who had taught me felt that it was their duty to control the books we read. In class, when we read a story, a poem, a novel or a play by Shakespeare, we were told what the author meant. Our teachers told us to write down what they said and learn it. To them, teaching included teaching us what to think. Reading was certainly not about encouraging dialogue! So at least I was lucky to have some books at home that I would read for pleasure and where my imagination would roam.

This was all well over 50 years ago, but the idea of keeping young people away from books and controlling their ideas still angers me. I was a white child in a whites-only school and none of my white teachers encouraged me to ask questions, let alone question apartheid and the racism all around us. It's a bit like we children were little donkeys with blinkers who had to follow instructions from teachers and adults who also wore blinkers.

After I left school, I was very fortunate to make friends at Wits University with people who helped me tear away the blinkers. It was the year after the Sharpeville massacre and, for the first time, in my late teens, I began to read books that invited me to see the world around me in new ways. I was given a banned copy of Es'kia (then known as Ezekiel) Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue* about his childhood in Marabastad. That wasn't so far from where I'd grown up but it could have been on another planet. My eyes opened as he took me down his streets and into his home. I began to realise that our country was like a vast prison for black South Africans and I began to ask the questions that I'd never asked before. What I saw now was shocking, but at least I was beginning to choose my own journey... and books were vital 'mind food' along the way.

It was many years later that I began writing for children. Our family was living in exile in England and I wanted to find a way for our two children, and other young people, to imagine what apartheid was like. If I could tell them a gripping story, they might want to know more...

That was the beginning of *Journey to Jo'burg*. Once it was published, the story quickly travelled around the world in many different languages. I began to receive hundreds of letters from readers telling me their thoughts and asking me questions. But there were no letters from South Africa because the apartheid rulers banned it until the year after Nelson Mandela was released from jail.

Not having books is not always just about lack of money. It's also about those in power recognising how important and valuable books are as 'mind food'. We need to remind our leaders that young people should have the freedom to read, imagine, think and ask their own questions about the world which is already passing into their young hands.

Beverley Naidoo, 13th January 2009 - for the 'Little Hands Trust' in South Africa