

My Mother's Books

By : William George

Written as a practice response for English Extension 1. It used the stimulus of a photo of a room filled with books. It's not great literature, and because I was writing to a time limit it includes inaccuracies like my switching tenses half-way through. The idea is that she's been telling this story to DOCS who have broken into this private library where the kids have been abandoned - but by this time the three children have developed their own language no one else can understand.

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Normal 0

This vast library, with its rooms stacked with books, is home to my brothers and me. We have lived here our whole lives, but we have not always lived feral as we do now, crawling on the chairs and leaping off the tables. Once, we had a mother and a father, distant and inscrutable figures who were always too busy for us. Much of the time they spent in wordless contemplation of one or another of the books. They would take it off the shelves, running a finger down its spine as they â when they thought they were alone â sometimes touched one another. They would sit it on their laps as they sometimes sat us upon their laps. And they read, communing psychically with the intelligences that lurk even now in these books.

I have taught my brothers to read â it keeps them from causing mischief while I search for bookworms. When I have collected two fistfuls of the wriggling grubs, I throw them on the smouldering fire we keep forever burning. Some of the thickest of the books take days to burn, and it is not as if we will run out of books anytime soon.

Eventually, the bookworms have shrivelled and let out their last tortured death rattles (one must imagine the death rattles â some day we will have food large enough that these rattles are audible). I take the most burned of the finger-tip-sized grubs, and scratch a few letters onto the torn-off covers beside the fire. These â when burned â let out a horrible stench so instead we keep them as tablets on which to record the teachings of the Authors.

I return to my brothers with the grubs and a couple of tablets. I ask them what they have learned today while I have been gathering. Cain is the youngest and the cleverest. Abel doesnât understand reading â he will pick up one book, and stroke it so much that he tires of it, and cast it aside, and pick up another, and bore of it, and so it goes. He often whines, while Cain neatly and politely continues the book he has faithfully read since almost forever.

Today is no different.

â Rebecca, I do tire of this reading. There are all these thoughts clamouring in my head, and I want to speak them, but Cain shushes me and I must keep them inside until they grow hard and dry like a bookworm stored up for too many days.â

As always, I frown. It is difficult being an older sister.

â Cain, is reading hard?â

â No, Beccy,â he says, speaking with the honesty of youth.

â But it is!â Abel announces, and pushes a weighty tome to the floor.

â Abel! Respect the books.â Cain kicks him, a spontaneous religious expression I was very impressed with. If only heâd picked up the book, Iâm sure the Authors would have smiled upon him. Maybe they would not have cursed us with what would later steal the Authors from us. But enough of that, I must tell this story in order, like a book â one page follows another.

Abel had been much chastened, but still muttered under his breath. In a moment I had caught his ear

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“What did you say?”

“I said there’s never enough food. I could help you rummage for bookworms instead of looking at these stupid squiggly stupid letters.”

That had not been what he had said. I dragged him bodily into the one room of the library where there were no Authors. The walls were empty of bookshelves – this was truly Hell.

I did not try to keep control of myself now, for there were no Authors to blaspheme. I kicked him savagely until he was huddled on the floor.

“Tell me what you said,” I yelled, although to be honest I did not want to hear again the horrible things my brother had said.

“It’s not read!”

I kicked him.

“Uh,” he coughed and spluttered and cried. “It’s not reading it’s just squiggles and I don’t know what they mean and!”

I kicked him.

“You don’t know what they mean and!”

I kicked him again.

“Why can’t we be happy with us and ignore the Authors and tell each other stories? Cain told me, he told me secretly he doesn’t read either, he just looks at the pictures!”

I punched him. My leg hurt.

He spat out spit – some blood, but mainly spit.

“You’re a dirty liar,” I told him. “Most of the time he doesn’t even read picture books. He’s not *illiterate* like you!”

I didn’t want to say it, didn’t want to use that word, but it’s the damned truth and I don’t care if it upset him. Imagine, an illiterate in a library. It was like a room with no books, like this Purgatory. For a moment, I considered locking him in here. He deserved it. No, he deserved worse.

I called Cain into the room. He’d been waiting just outside, although I’d heard him run off to fetch a book without pictures when Abel made that disgusting accusation. Even when he tried to fool me I loved him, for he was trying to please me. He should have known that the Authors want you to appreciate their pictures along with their sacred words. There’s no shame in that.

There was enough shame in my other brother. I seized one of his arms, and Cain the other. We dragged him into the room where the fire smoulders, but now we built it up into a great blaze. I could see the words dancing and skipping in the flame, and I inhaled the smoke of these geniuses deeply. Then I calmly picked up a chair and broke it over the head of my illiterate brother.

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Cain giggled excitedly, but Abel said nothing. There was no thought in that dumb, illiterate mind, only splinters after Cain followed me with a chair of his own.

Eventually, Abel stopped even snuffling self-pityingly. Cain and I dragged his deadweight into the flames and listened until his death rattle pleased the Authors. Then we fell upon him, forgetting even to take him into another room, and consumed him until we were satiated.

Here, I'll show you him. You may eat too, he's only a few days old and bookworms stay tasty for weeks, if a little chewy.

What?

Why are you looking at me like that?

What gibberish are you speaking?

You understand me, don't you? You'll speak to me now, won't you? Using words I understand?

This is our library. If it takes a chair to knock some sense into a babbling intruder, I'll use it. My brother may have been illiterate, but at least he could understand the language!

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