

GENERATIONAL PAGES: AN INHERITED LITERACY LEGACY

ENG W131: FIRST PLACE

Jordan Chance

Abstract

This narrative is a work of the author's heart. It is a journey through the author's rough start in life and how the woman that saved her—her grandmother—gave the author the gift of reading and writing to carry her through. Seeing how her grandmother's love for books came full circle with her own children made the author realize that love for literacy can be passed down through generations. The author now spends a lot of her time giving the same gift to her children, both as a primary way to bond and as a nod to her grandmother for all that she did.

As I lay in the safe and comfortable indent my body made in my grandmother's bosoms, the gentle sway of her rocking chair and the soft cadence of her voice reading my favorite story took me away from the chaotic world I had known before her. These moments nestled together would be where I first discovered the magic of words, finding solace in stories when life had initially dealt me a hand that I had no business playing at such a young age. This narrative illustrates the transformative influence of family connections, the power of literacy in creating resilience, and how one woman's love for books took on a life of its own, shaping lives across generations.

The story begins when I was four years old. I was abruptly woken up and taken to my grandmother's big blue house in Rockville, Indiana at three o'clock in the morning on a Sunday. Apparently, my mother had received a tip that Child Protective Services were going

to be coming on Monday to pick up me and my infant brother due to severe neglect and abuse. A few months prior to the call I had run away, and a report was filed based on what I said to the man who found me and called the police. My grandmother wanted to make sure that we would not end up in the foster care system, so she took us in. She already had custody of my older brother and sister at the time. The refuge that my grandmother provided all of us was something we had never known. Even without a lot of resources she made us feel loved and cared for. She would be the one to teach me how to cook, how to paint, how to make things from my imagination, how to read, and how to write. I would consider her to be my first and most impactful literacy sponsor. After reading Brandt's essay (1998), I learned that a literacy sponsor refers to individuals, institutions, or even ideologies that facilitate or influence the development of a person's literacy skills (p. 166). Little did my grandmother or I know, the effects of her teachings, grace, and love would carry further through time.

In the first year of living with my grandmother she taught me how to recite my ABC's, how to write her address and phone number, how to write my name, and how to develop reading skills. It was not solely about her actual instruction on the mechanics of reading and writing, though she was obviously great at it as I was reading and writing proficiently before I entered kindergarten. It was her unwavering emphasis on how far these seemingly simple skills could carry me in life. I felt how important she believed it to be for me to see the beauty in the stories, as well as the impact of my own storytelling. I vividly remember her doing little things to help me enter the stories, like cooking green eggs and ham using food coloring and serving it to me while we read the book together. She gave me an intrinsic motivation to read in the way that she celebrated my good behavior by giving me a dollar to walk down to the Dollar General and pick out a new book for my collection. It was mainly made up of Little Golden Books like *The Poky Little Puppy*, *Baby Mickey's Book of Shapes*, and *The Little Red Hen*. I remember feeling so giddy about it each week

and making sure that I did everything that I was asked to and keeping myself in check. I do not remember a time that there was ever a week where I did not receive the dollar for my new book. At that time, we did not have much room to add any sort of bookshelf for my collection so I kept them in a cardboard box in my room so that my siblings would not ruin them. There was just something magical to me about coming home with the book I had picked out and adding it to my box that brought me so much joy.

At some point around eight years old, the time with my grandmother came to an end when I moved to the city with my father and his wife. The financial burden had become too much for my grandmother to care for four children on her own with minimal income. My dad had painted himself to her as well adjusted and financially able to give me what I needed so she let me go. The love and joy I became accustomed to was quickly shifted to a shattered illusion and I was back in the hands of more adults who would prove to be my worst nightmare. The abuse of my stepmother began right away with her taking my box of books out back to the fire pit. I am thirty years old now, but even writing about it still brings tears to my eyes thinking of myself as that eight-year-old little girl standing there watching the flames dance around my precious collection. I did not understand the cruelty or what I did to deserve it, but I learned that it would not matter here what my behavior was like, I was an enemy. I noticed that my little brother and sister on my dad's side were not treated this way. The only reason I can think of now is that they had their mother to protect them if anything happened to them. I had no one to hold my dad and stepmother accountable. They had alienated me from my grandmother and other siblings by not allowing me to see or speak to them. I would be punished by my stepmother lying to my father about things I did not do to get him to beat me or even going as far as attempting to strangle me with a towel I used because it belonged to her daughter. I was pushed down the stairs, smacked around with a plastic cutting board that she drilled holes into, and eventually had my innocence stolen by

my own father down the line.

At this time, I was fourteen years old, and my father had been through about four to five more women, dating some and marrying others. I was successfully kept from my grandmother, and she did not have money for a lawyer to fight to get me back anyway. She legally still had custody but could not find me since we moved so often. I felt helpless and lost, but I did have the gift that she gave me. I spent a lot of time in my room engulfed in fictional stories of places grander than where I was. There was a trilogy by Scott Westerfeld called *The Uglies*, *The Pretties*, and *The Extras* that I read about three times each. I loved how the author used a fictional futuristic dystopian world and correlated that to issues in the structure of our country to create discussion. It was after reading these books that I began writing my own stories.

When I got into high school, my homeroom was with the creative writing teacher. He would often give us writing prompts and time to write if we chose. I chose to write. I wrote stories that my classmates would praise because they kept them awake in class. The stories were typically scary or thrilling. I still have a flash drive with a ten-page short story called "Ocean of Envy." In short, a college-aged girl has a boy cancel their date to meet up with another girl. She sees them together and it causes her to become obsessive and murderous. She would go to great lengths to stay connected to him throughout their lives, and any woman he was with would die or suddenly vanish. I also wrote poetry that helped me express what I was feeling when there was no one that I could talk to about my life. I stayed cooped up in my room when I wasn't in school and spent most of my time on these hobbies. This allowed me to have a lot of practice over the years and became my new solace from the world as I knew it to be.

If we fast forward to my adult years, I still spend a lot of time reading and writing. I've built a very peaceful and comfortable life for myself far away from the atrocities I experienced, but that love has never left me. I am currently writing my own book about a zoomed-out

depiction of America as if she were a human woman. The goal is to take the reader through a self-awakening process to understand their role as a cell in the body of America. How does trauma affect us as individuals that lead to collective behavior? How has the trauma that our country has endured affected it as a whole? I'm also going through the systems of the body and correlating them to the systems and structures in the country. Through this process I was able to relate to the readings about writing threshold concepts. Particularly, the concept that states that writing is impacted by identities and prior experiences (Wardle and Downs, 2020, p. 12). My traumatic experiences and therapy gave me firsthand knowledge on how the body is impacted over time. I was also inspired by many books written by others from fiction to nonfiction. The joy that I get from perusing Goodwill for book finds or sitting on the floor of a Barnes & Noble bears resemblance to the feelings of the early days walking home from Dollar General with a fresh, new book. Goodwill, itself, became quite the literacy sponsor for me as I would find textbooks to study when I couldn't afford to stay in college. Like Malcom X (2020) told us in his literacy narrative,

I knew right there in prison that reading had changed forever the course of my life. As I see it today, the ability to read awoke inside me some long dormant craving to be mentally alive. I certainly wasn't seeking any degree, the way a college confers a status symbol upon its students. My homemade education gave me, with every additional book that I read, a little bit more sensitivity to the deafness, dumbness, and blindness that was afflicting the black race in America. (MX-8)

I was also crafting my own homemade education until I could get to where I am now with the ability to attend school again. Along the way, every book I read gave me more and more understanding of my own passion: exploring how trauma affects the body and a person's behavior.

My grandmother's love for literacy has also been passed down to another child through me. I have a two-year-old daughter of my own now, and I get choked up often watching her go pick out a book from her bookshelf, find a cozy spot on the couch, and babble while she traces the sentences with her finger. Or I have flashbacks of those moments in the rocking chair with my grandmother when I'm rocking my daughter and reading her favorite story. I started reading to her very early on, and I've captured videos as early as 10 months old of her reading to herself. I also have a bonus daughter who is seven now, but I met her when she had just turned four years old. There's something very healing about being the stepmother I deserved to have. We take trips to the library together and she sits snuggled up next to me while I read her *Goosebump* stories. Those are her absolute favorites. When she started kindergarten, she told her teacher that she was excited to start school because she wanted to be able to read like me, and I have loved watching her grow in her own literacy journey. When she is reading and acting out the character voices and using expanded vocabulary I just think of my grandmother and how far her impact has gone so far. I have carried her love for literacy, and I am actively passing it down to the next generation. It feels like the best thank you that I can give to her. I needed to show her that everything she taught me and everything she sacrificed for me was not in vain.

Through the written word and speaking our story, we forge a legacy of knowledge and love that can unite generations and create a ripple effect for the lives that come even after we are gone. I genuinely look forward to witnessing the impact of my grandmother's love carried down through literacy to my children, their children, and many generations to come. ■

REFERENCES

- Brandt, D. (1998). *Sponsors of literacy*. *College Composition and Communication*, 49(2), 165-85.
- Wardle E., & Downs D. (Eds). (2020). *Writing about writing for Indiana University East*. (4th ed.). Bedford / St. Martins.
- X, M. (2020). Learning to read. (A. Haley, Ed.). In E. Wardle & D. Downs (Eds.), *Writing about writing for Indiana University East* (pp. MX-1 -MX-8). (4th ed.). Bedford / St. Martins. (Original work published 1965)

Jordan Chance is a first-year online student and a stay-at-home mother to a three-year-old daughter in Indianapolis, Indiana. She completed one year at Ivy Tech eight years prior and returned to school at thirty to pursue a dream in Psychology. Her dream is to expand her scope of practice with her clientele as a wellness coach and facilitate an integrative approach to healing body and mind.