

Lynell George

Marginalia

As a very young child, I imagined bliss as a house built of books, furniture made of softcover titles with wallpaper you could read and vivid color plates standing in for framed artwork. This I know must have come from growing up in a household where books reigned. We lived with them, not the other way around. Not only did they crowd ceiling-whisking shelves, but they also grew in stacks like tall tropical trees, separated into ‘groves’ by genres.

This living library was curated by my mother, who built her life on and around books. That affection was passed to me by both osmosis and example: the excitement of entering its world, the suspension of inhabiting and trusting the story.

My mother taught English, composition and literature to junior and senior high students here in Los Angeles for more than 30 years. She set to the task with an explorer’s enthusiasm; she was able to transfer that reverence of language and the never-expiring passport that a good book promised.

That deep engagement transferred to our home life. My mother carried books along to just about everywhere: our doctors’ appointments, picnics, even to the movies (you could get a little extra reading in before the lights completely dimmed). Books were stowed away in the car’s trunk, in the guest powder room and in a delicate stack (poems and short stories, usually) always by the side of her bed.

Reading rituals aside, it was the discussion of books that brought them alive, took them out of my head and opened the doors of the narrative, allowed new perspectives, like a new wing of rooms. She always asked about what I was reading – from the years of picture books to my college studies and beyond. Her questions weren’t just a way to keep count or catalog my interests, but they also were a method to get me to think about how a book moved, to understand the power of literature, of self-expression.

Talking about books – the metaphors, the layered imagery, the object lessons – was at the core of our communication. When I was very young, she read those books, plucked from those precarious stacks, to me – not just at bedtime but also whenever she encountered a particularly

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Studies in the Maternal, 5(1), 2013, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

moving passage, a mind-bending premise or a startling turn of phrase. She'd dip at mid-page, mid-thought, the pleasure or surprise shimmering in her voice.

The unusual thread in all of this was that my mother, who otherwise treated her wild garden of a library with white-gloved reverence, had a habit of marking in her books. This I found extremely perplexing for someone who often described herself as an 'everything-in-its-place Virgo,' who patiently showed us how to create handmade covers to protect a book, how not to bend books backward and break their fragile spines. She'd trace faint pencil notes in the margins of Langston Hughes' poetry, dog-ear the page of an exchange between Laura and Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*. Or, next to these lines of Gwendolyn Brooks she simply penciled the word 'truth':

What

We are to hope is that intelligence

Can sugar up our prejudice with politeness.

Politeness will take care of what needs caring.

For the line is there.

My mother grew up in the South in a complicated time. Her notes were a re-reading of the culture, an author's words, quiet voicings of her experiences in them. They were mappings of engagement and inquiry. They were her arguments or examples, or a new avenue of thought. If I borrowed one of my mother's books, I had to be careful. All manner of ephemera might slip free – like an elaborate, unpunctuated sentence. If she were working her way through a Toni Morrison novel, for instance, there would be her brackets, her underscores and on-the-page conversation, also clippings from newspapers – profiles, Q&As, book reviews and sometimes front-page news briefs giving the borrower a sense of the theater the book existed in. This arcana presaged hyperlinks – and I realized only recently, who would need them anyway if you ended up with a copy of one of my mother's books? You were able to read the book and glimpse the world around it.

These open-ended conversations – about books, ideas and the craft of writing – extended well into my adulthood. Now that I was writing and often writing about literary life, she enjoyed the role swap, that I was now introducing her to new writers, ideas and genres – calling her to read a passage – well turned or baldly proactive – just to hear her considered reaction.

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My mother's death two years ago seemed at first to mark a certain end to this ritual of words. It was one of the more devastating layers of loss. This was a silence like no other: It was less a sensation, more like dark, rutted territory.

In the weeks and months afterward, I didn't experience the impulse that so many bereaved speak of: the strange muscle memory of picking up the phone upon hearing news to share or just the reflex of the ritual 'good night.' I knew quite concretely that she would not be on the other side of the line. The absence, already huge, felt as if it would keep widening, like a hole in fabric left untended and consequently worked to ruin – unfixable. Concurrently, as illogical as it might seem, the objects most redolent of her – her jewelry, her reading glasses, her books – were the things I feared getting close to.

At first.

Last New Year's Day, I gingerly began making my way through my mother's stacks of books – the cookbooks only – with a small though specific goal in mind: I wanted to make gumbo – her gumbo – a New Year's week ritual. Though she never made gumbo from a committed-to-paper recipe (hers was verbally passed down from various great- and great-great grandmothers), she sometimes, however, made notations in the margins of old books, little directives, asides, reminders – 'Check for crab legs at the fish market on Vernon.' 'Go Mondays for Andouille.' I was just feeling rusty about the order of tasks, the ingredients. More accurately, I felt uncertain without her. I sifted through kitchen stacks, but I couldn't at first put my finger on the thing – a beautiful old book about New Orleans cooking traditions that I'd grown up with. I almost gave up, until I landed on a pile of misshelved books with antique recipes from the city's old-guard restaurant palaces. I opened one. In the margins, next to one of the recipes for stuffed mirlitons, she had written, 'Lynell's Birthday ~ 1984.' I flipped pages and found other notations – directions to augment this roux or the rules about preparing or consuming gulf oysters.

Finally, after some time deciphering the faint pencil strokes, in her elegant English teacher cursive, and the staccato shorthand in which she'd inscribed the directions, I realized I heard her voice – both its rhythms and intonation. I was 'listening to' my mother.

It didn't stop – nor had it started there. I realized I had already been given a sign that I'd not so much ignored but didn't reflect upon deeply enough. Months back, when I had been asked to find a poem to include as part of my mother's memorial service, I had at first panicked. My mother tended to stay away from phrases that began 'The best ...' She didn't think in

absolutes, so how on Earth would I find ‘the perfect one?’ I’d gone to the shelves and just stared. My hand went for her first-edition, green-and-black hardcover copy of Langston Hughes’ *Selected Poems*, and the book, it seemed, simply opened to a poem titled ‘Fulfillment,’ its place marked by a yellowed 3x5 card. My eyes zoomed in on the final two stanzas first:

Day
 Became a bright ball of light
 For us to play with,
 Sunset
 A yellow curtain,
 Night
 A velvet screen.
 The moon,
 Like an old grandmother,
 Blessed us with a kiss
 And sleep
 Took us both in
 Laughing.

It was as if she’d led me to it, and said: ‘This one.’

When it came to reading those books, she tended to live in them herself. Not quite in the book-fabricated house I imagined – but she left her mark in them. Not always just a simple underscore or a dog-ear – though she did that too. But check marks, faintly penciled conversations with the author, notes to revisit other books, a brief shopping list (‘tarragon, dish soap, Witch Hazel’), a frayed, mimeographed ‘save the date’ reminder for her children’s first piano recital.

In her hardback copy of *Ulysses*, I found a shocking thing: Not only a list of names it appears she’d considered giving me but also my baby footprint in fading black ink – the beginning of my story. The marginalia confirmed, with evidence, what might have seemed improbable – that she deigned to take this weighty volume to the hospital when she was tackling the first complex chapter of motherhood.

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She's left evidence of her life's journeys – from a dreamy young girl in New Orleans to work-a-day wife and mother in Los Angeles – in other ways: airline boarding passes, itineraries for tropical islands slipped inside well-worn paperbacks of Françoise Sagan or James A. Michener. She left lesson plans folded inside a copy of Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift*, an eloquently outlined memo to her school's principal in her copy of Doctorow's *Ragtime*. In an 80-plus-year-old copy of Paul Laurence Dunbar's poetry (once belonging to my grandfather, Frank), its cloth cover protected in plastic but its spine limp from wear, a brittle paper transfer from New Orleans for the Esplanade and St. Bernard lines marks a place in the poem

'To a Dead Friend':

It is as if a silver chord

Were suddenly grown mute,

And life's song with its rhythm warred

Against a silver lute.

It is as if a silence fell

Where bides the garnered sheaf,

And voices murmuring, 'It is well,'

Are stifled by our grief.

It is as if the gloom of night

Had hid a summer's day

And willows, sighing at their plight, bend low beside the way.

At first, I thought these discoveries were flukes, perhaps just coincidental consolations to ease the early, sharp stings of absence. But as they continued, I realized they were something more subtle – a form of reassurance, those brackets, fields of asterisks, the margins full of check marks – a way for her to continue to gently guide me.

Consequently, I've been keeping up with the sentimental ink spilled, addressing the vanishing art of letters, of marginalia. Electronic re-imaginings of writing and reading alter our relationship with the page, in that we don't see the associations, the connect-the-dot process of how thought 'blooms.' Over the last few months, what has struck me dramatically is how different this loss would feel if I hadn't stumbled upon this unexpected interaction – hearing a

voice across the impossible chasm of time and space, seeing my mother's thoughts about issues or events that held meaning in a particular moment, notes about what she would have shared if she had been able to pass the book to me herself. But now it isn't just books themselves that I'm hungry to read; it's the between-the-lines intimations of encouragement, to write a daily story, to have that conversation.

We don't know how our last chapter will resolve our story, so there is something to be said about leaving your mark in the pages of another. A map of not just your reading, but an accounting of where you were at the time in your life: the daily streetcar you took, the couplet that made you cry, the children you thought you'd have, the dimensions of the dining room table, the bolt of fabric for breakfast room curtains (eyelet, gingham, calico?) – the life you set out to create, the story you were writing every day of your life.