

# Intro to Reading and Writing and Me

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*I*

I've been splitting my time between both of my parents' houses for as long as I can remember. I stayed with my mom during the week, and my dad filled in the gaps on the weekend. It felt like pressing play on my favorite playlist every time I stepped out of my mom's car and knocked on the door of my dad's condo.

He'd take us to Ross, and my sister and I made up this game where I was the oven and she was baking some sort of pie or pastry. It was never explicitly said what we were cooking, and the type of baking dish we decided to use was never consistent, but what happened afterwards was always the same. She'd put something in the "oven" and I would stick my arms out to look like a tray. My sister would then get distracted and I would start vehemently beeping. It would get louder and louder and louder until, eventually, she would start taking the dish out.

We didn't just go to Ross. We'd also peruse the aisles of Target while splitting a large bag of popcorn. I distinctly remember my dad not understanding the strange mystery that is buying jeans for girls. From what I've been told, guys can just pick a pair of jeans and wear them for the rest of their lives. When those jeans wear out, they can just get the same pair again. No one at the store had the heart to tell me or my dad that the next time I wanted to buy jeans, there would undoubtedly be a new type of jean in fashion, and I probably wouldn't find the ones I found to begin with, even if I tried.

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On Fridays, my dad, sister, and I would sit on a tablecloth in the living room, eating pizza from Papa John's and watching on rotation *Some Kind of Wonderful* and *Pretty in Pink*, among a precious few other movies and shows coming from an 80s vault. The newest piece of media we ever consumed together as a family was a reboot of an old cop show, *Hawaii Five-O*. I loved that show, but that show was also the reason that, for a good portion of my life, I believed most people died by homicide instead of any sort of natural cause like old age or disease. I figured it would be great if I could die by something simple, like in my sleep, but I would most likely suffocate to death or be burned alive. Let's just say I didn't think about death all that much.

Trips to Books-A-Million were always my favorite. My dad would go straight to the gun magazines, and I went straight to the children's section. I would look at each and every book and mull over the annoyingly bright covers. Each one was a possible adventure I wanted to go down. I would then read a couple pages of the books I found suitable to my standards and chose my top picks.

I sat on the multipatterned floor of the bookstore, narrowed down my choices even further, and then asked myself which one I chose to read. If I really couldn't decide, I looked at the price and chose the cheaper one. Or I just chose the cheaper one, because why not? Once the winner was chosen, I would go to the back of the bookstore, where the gun magazines and my dad found their natural habitat. I would show him the book with my outstretched arms that just barely reached his navel and express how interested I was in the plot that lay within.

Afterwards, my dad and I started a round of choreography. I would tell him I liked the book, and my dad would ask me if I wanted it. In the most innocent, nonchalant voice a ten-year-old could muster, I would say, "Yes, please."

My dad would then start walking towards the counter to check-out. The sun would hit my face as the automatic doors opened, and I would walk out feeling like I'd cast a spell or performed a trick with my black and white plastic bag swaying in the wind.

## II

I'll never forget the first Geronimo Stilton book I encountered in the second grade. I'd seen my sister trying to read this book called *The Karate Mouse*, and I immediately had a deep desire to see what it was about. But because my sister was two years older than I and an additional grade beyond that ahead of me, I was intimidated by the prospect of reading it. I thought it was for older kids. I didn't see all the fun, colored fonts or the entertaining pictures. I just saw that it was a chapter book and my sister was reading it, so obviously it was above anything I could achieve at such a young age. So I didn't ask.

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But I couldn't get it out of my head. I talked to my best friend Kathy Brickle about the books, and she informed me she thought the author's name was pronounced "Geronimo Stilton," but I thought that was stupid because g's don't make that sound. So, I asked the teacher. Needless to say I was wrong. I eventually went to the library and asked if they had any books by someone named "gher, ger, o, gher-something st-, st-, ylelilton."

I'm not sure which Geronimo Stilton book was my first, but I'll assume I tore through it. The series of books always included plenty of pictures for me to refer to, alongside colorful fonts that made each word or phrase a new surprise. It was like a silent competition between me and my friend Kathy over who could read more.

I had already been reading quite a few Rainbow Magic books about different types of fairies, but this was different. This was the start of a movement among my classmates. Eventually, the publishers came out with larger volumes with more harrowing adventures. They even came out with a line of books aimed at young girls following Geronimo's sister, Thea. I don't know what started first, the chicken or the egg, but all I knew was that over the span of just one school year, my class went from one or two people reading these books, to the whole grade.

My mom says I was the reason these books became popular in my grade, but I guess we'll never know. I guess I have no choice but to just roll with the title of trendsetter while I wait on the jury.

### III

My dad taught me to read when I was five. I mean, my teachers were also teaching me to read, but I had that lightbulb moment with him in his bed. We were sitting on his blue sheets and he was asking me to read *Hop on Pop* by Dr. Seuss. I told him I couldn't do it, but he told me I should try anyway.

I didn't want to let him down by not being able to read, but I also didn't want to prove him right either. Half of me knew, *If I can read it, then that means I was wrong and I can read*. But then I guess at some point my better judgement took over when I realized it was better to be wrong and literate as opposed to right and illiterate. I tried reading *Hop on Pop*. It was both a triumph for my education and a failure of my pride when I was able to do it.

Then I tried reading other Dr. Seuss classics such as *Mr. Brown Can Moo! Can You?* I even upgraded to a small picture book, which I like flipping through to this day, about a little pink cottage that gets taken over by capitalism called *The Little House*. The pictures made me feel alive, and I felt so terribly for the house and the things that happened to her. When her windows started breaking, and people started moving in on the green space around her, it made me long for her simpler days. No one told me I was living out mine. When she was able to move to a new meadow, it felt like a victory.

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I'm giving a lot of credit to my dad for giving me a love of story and reading, but it wasn't just him. Each day before going to school, my mom would read me and my sister a devotional.

At night she would read us a bedtime story. We read a book about a quaint family called *Five Little Peppers*. I don't remember what the plot or story was, but I do remember how the books made me feel. I don't remember the words, but I remember the soft gentleness of my mom's voice reading me to sleep. My appreciation was lacking then, but now that I'm an adult who has to open her own can of chicken noodle soup, it's those memories my thumb likes to dance over.

What also sometimes happened during my younger childhood were times that both my dad and my mom were too busy to watch me, so it was up to my Gigi to bring entertainment. In addition to shopping in the Avenue and going to the movies and eating lunch, she'd also read my sister and me The Berenstain Bear books.

We'd go to the kids room upstairs in her house, and I would go through a big stack of them she had. My favorites included the one where Sister Bear had stage fright and had to grow into her confidence. Another one of my favorites was one where Brother Bear created a club house where no girls were allowed, but then Sister Bear created a rival club house where all bear cubs were welcome. I'm pretty sure Brother Bear and his friends ended up joining Sister Bear because Sister Bear's clubhouse had snacks. Perhaps free food truly is the answer to sexism.

## IV

It was in middle school that, in addition to my love of reading, my love of writing blossomed too. My seventh grade English teacher, Mrs. Lenarz, captivated our class each week with a new sentence we got to dissect together frog style. On the first day, we'd point out the subject and the verb as well as add proper punctuation to the sentence. On the second day, we'd diagram the sentence. It felt like searching for treasure, and each time was pure magic, as she'd point out something we hadn't yet learned. On the third day, we'd diagram the sentence even further. On the fourth day, we'd label the clauses and what type of sentence it was. Fridays were always reserved for vocabulary quizzes, which were also somehow fun. It was probably the pictures we got to draw at the bottom of the page. Who doesn't love a good doodle?

The beautiful thing about Mrs. Lenarz, was her ability to pick books I'd actually want to read, regardless of whether I was being forced. I still have fond memories of reading *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* alongside *The Pearl* and *The Hiding Place*. She delivered the lines of the book well and was always able to capture our attention. I think a teacher's ability to choose good books is sometimes slept on for its difficulty because she needs to somehow balance what the curriculum requires with what people need to learn, and yet she did this flawlessly.

And I wasn't the only person discovering a passion for putting fingers on the keyboard. A big group of students in my grade were obsessed with a website called Storybird.com. Back in the day, Storybird was a free platform where anyone could publish their stories. It was understood that we were all extremely young, fresh and aspiring writers seeking an audience. Storybird was a cleaner, more family-friendly version of Watt Pad that had, and still has, a team of moderators that approve of all the stories placed on the site. It's still available, but just like my good friends Quizlet and Kahoot, it is now behind a paywall.

One of my friends followed more of the Pixar model and constantly asked the question, "What if blank were people?" Another wrote stories about superheroes and villains. Our entire group of friends even came up with a story idea where we were all supervillains. We'd slam out ideas into one Google Doc assaulted with so many neon colors and different fonts that you'd probably need to sign a waiver before reading it.

I basically wrote whatever came to my mind first. Some of the prophetic sentences I came up with around this time included: "Ice walks in with blue glasses and her blond hair went to her feet, she had a blue dress, and purple heels. Her dress was purple."

Please stop me from gagging. I'd like to say it's only now with my snooty college eyes that I cringe at the words on the page, but I knew then too. Oh, the insecurity that comes from being a seventh grader putting her bleeding heart full of love for writing and story out there for all to see. But looking back, I know my friends felt that insecurity too.

There was one instance when my friend came up to me and asked, "How do you avoid using the word 'I' too much in your writing?"

Because I knew I didn't know how, I answered with, "I don't."

This morning, I found myself perusing different chapters I'd written on Storybird. Part of me wanted to travel to my middle school self and tell her she was doing okay. If I could, I would travel to her on a paper boat with a toothpick sail and tell her that her ideas are fantastic and wonderful and totally valid.

Knowing me, it wouldn't work. But it would be worth a shot.

## V

In ninth grade, I was writing an essay on *The Illiad*, as one does for a literature/composition course. I thought my writing was solid, my quotes were integrated perfectly, and the citations were on point. My seventh grade English teacher truly had to have taught me everything there was to know about writing, and I couldn't possibly entertain the idea of learning more.

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I went to my teacher, Ms. Harbison, to ask her if she thought I needed any improvement on my essay. This was a practice I picked up to justify either watching *Shark Tank* later or honestly just doing anything but homework. My soul needed the go ahead. My heart needed my teacher to say it was okay to stop writing and editing and rearranging.

Instead of affirming what I already knew, that my writing was perfect, she instead took a sticky note out and started drawing.

At first there were two dots and she started to explain, “Zara, this point is where you are and the other point is where your readers are. To get your message across, you’re going to want to get from Point A to Point B.”

After that she drew a squiggly line in between the two dots and said, “This is you trying to get your point across. You take all of these winding paths when I really just want you to be more straightforward.” She finished her illustration with a line that went directly from the first point to the next before telling me to sit down so I could continue working.

I learned an important lesson that day: *don’t ask questions you don’t necessarily want the honest answer to*. What I wanted was permission to watch shows when I got home. What I got was extra work so my paper could be better fleshed out. To my ninth grade English teacher’s credit, I made the edits and am better writer for it.

## VI

When I started applying to colleges I was throwing arrows in the dark. I put on a blindfold and stood a few feet away and let my choices fly. With reckless abandon I just chose schools that sounded good and started going for it.

Presently looking back, I find myself digging to think about all the stress I know I had. In my head I know my grades were stressing me out. I think my dating relationship was stressful?

Additionally, I also knew hearing back from the universities and picking my major had to have caused some heartache, but with it all behind me I can’t muster up the emotion. It kind of just feels like one big blob of time where I eventually decided to come to The University of Alabama. I guess this is why grown-ups always tell you to write the memories down.

I never thought of myself as a creative writer, but when I saw that as an option to take for my Fine Arts credit during Bama Bound, I knew. My orientation leader wasn’t convinced and told me I should take

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Intro to Listening instead because it was the easiest option. He was correct, but I was stubborn, and stalked the drop/add period until one of the slots became available for a creative writing class. The rest is rather cliché, and to stop myself and you from rolling our collective eyes, I'll make it short and sweet. I took the class. I loved it. I'm continuing to love it.

I'll end this section with two lessons my professor taught me that semester that have stuck with me. 1) Wage war against cliché and 2) writing isn't typing, writing is editing.

### VII

Writing for journalistic purposes is a very specific form that teaches you many things. Masters of journalism aren't skilled artisans only needing to learn AP style. Journalists are multitaskers and jacks of many trades. Journalists are responsible for managing deadlines and interviewing CEO's and going to press conferences and writing with brevity and learning to talk with varieties of personalities and people and building trust with audiences and interviewees and generally holding people accountable and never staying off the clock. It's a never-ending fight for a byline only we care to read. It's a fight for recognition and acknowledgement. The process can either humble you or fill you with arrogant pride.

I first dipped my toes in journalism for *The McIntosh Trail*, my high school's student-run newspaper publication. I started out as a staff writer, but eventually made my way up to being both the managing and features editor. Also, when needed, I became the social media editor. My teacher Ms. Woolf helped me build my confidence and made me realize that the combination of passion and profession was actually possible. I always thought of my future as just getting a nine-to-five that paid the bills and figuring out the rest later. Who knew I could build my career around something I was actually interested in? It was news to me.

I continued my journalistic career as a contributing writer for *The Crimson White*. I think I fell head over heels in love with interviewing different people and helping share their stories. I loved hearing praise from my editor, and I took each of the edits she gave me to heart. She didn't just help me make better articles, but she helped me become a better journalist. Her trust in me made me want to step up my game with every story I turned in.

My passion for journalism seemed like an endless well I could get all happiness from. I won awards for my work and participated in competitions. I never got acknowledged at GSPA for anything spectacular and I'm far from a Pinnacle Award recipient, but I did win some things, and I know I helped other people win their awards.

Here are some hot takes that I don't think are really all that hot. Arrogant journalists will feel as though they are giving a voice to the voiceless, but I think people already know how to talk. Humble journalists

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give a stage for those who want it. They're a megaphone for the activist, a platform for the meek, a distraction for the bored, and a caution sign for the woefully ignorant.

I loved my time in journalism, but all good things must come to an end. I'm grateful to all the editors and my fellow contributors for teaching me things about life, new perspectives, and going out of your way to help the little guy. Even though my time as a reporter has come to an end for now, the newsroom will always hold a special place in my heart of hearts.

### VIII

In my poetry class, we read a book called *Madness, Rack, and Honey*. In the book, the author includes a quote from Zen teacher on the oneness of everything.

"At the first level on the path he saw mountains as mountains and rivers as rivers. On the second level of the path he saw that mountains are not mountains and rivers are not rivers. And at a third level he saw once again mountains were mountains and rivers were rivers. I don't think there will ever be a time where I feel completely confident in my skills as a writer. There's always that one way I could change a piece. One aspect I could improve. Each essay and poem and novel idea is the result of a Hail Mary I threw, and I am extremely unsure of how I'm supposed to 'recreate the magic.'"

It's hard to not feel insecure. There are days when I just feel inadequate. I find the sharp grammar skills I used to have dull. My ability to read and comprehend information just isn't where I want it to be. I just want to get better.

Whenever I feel bad about my writing skills, I go backwards. I look at the first story I posted on Storybird. Then I look at the last. I also look at the prose and poetry pieces I turned in to my Intro to Creative Writing Class. I look at the pieces I've published on *The Crimson White*. I even peruse the stories I published on The McIntosh Trail if I really want to cringe. I look at the work I was delving into at the beginning of the semester. I look at what I'm writing now.

We'll end this section with a quote from a wise football coach, "This is not the end, but the beginning."

### IX

When I was a child, I talked like a child. I walked like a child. I reasoned like a child. I read books like a child. When I became a teenager, I put all books behind me. I started studying more and hanging out with my friends more and scrolling on social media more, and I stopped reading. What used to be oxygen, became a burden of thoughts.



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But then in college, I started writing again. I went further along the path and learned reading was not just reading, and writing was not just typing, and both of them combined were not just independent thoughts.

College has taught me that writing is a labor of love. An intense passion for reading and writing isn't something that's just created out of thin air, only existing in a vacuum. Lifelong readers are created by encouraging mothers, supportive fathers, loving teachers, and equally excited friends who are just trying to learn more about the world around them.

1 Corinthians 13 talks about what it means to truly love and truly be loved. I can be one of the most prolific readers and writers of all time, but if the source of my talent isn't love there isn't really a point. I could write essays upon essays that get published by fancy literary journals, and I could even get skilled enough to work for a publication like *The New Yorker* or *The Washington Post*, but if all my success is born out of selfishness, then there's no soul.

True love is a seventh grade English teacher who takes the time to meet her students where they are at. True love is a ninth grade English teacher who shows her students how to be effective communicators through reading and writing about *The Illiad*. True love is a father who always encourages a love of reading in his daughter. True love is a mother who carefully examines everything her daughter has ever written and reads her to sleep every single night. It's a slow, long-term investment to create a reader, and I'm so grateful for all the people who helped make me one.

When I was a child, I talked like a child. I walked like a child. I reasoned like a child. I read new books like a child. When I became a college student, I didn't read as consistently as I did when I was a child, but I am trying.

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*Header art by Katie Kilburn*

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