

52nd Storyworth: What Did You Read As A Child?

While I have no specific memory of any books, it is only reasonable to expect that I would devour anything technical at a level where I could understand it. So it would be unlikely that I would have read actual technical papers while I was in grade school, although I was sensitive enough about what I was NOT able to read that when I got to the 6th grade my parents pulled me from the Catholic school where they had not even cracked the spine of the Science book by Thanksgiving, while my peers in the public elementary school next door were reading about how jet engines worked.

It should be noted here that the very first jet, developed by Frank Whittle in Great Britain, had existed for less than fifteen years at that point, and for the first five of those was a highly classified accomplishment, so not very likely available literature for the average public elementary school. Of course, by that time it was well understood how ANY aircraft was capable of flight, by the effort of thrust vs drag and lift vs gravity. Also, rocket propulsion had actually been around for thousands of years before, starting with the Chinese and fireworks. But the only aircraft with any public awareness which was actually rocket propelled was the German Komet, which was an awesomely fast attack machine, but far more likely to kill its own pilot because of the corrosive chemicals used for fuel, than any action with the enemy. Few knew then about the US X Planes.

By the time I was in the 6th grade, which was pretty much my earliest cognitive time in memory, Sputnik had just been launched and that set off the “space race” which culminated in the lunar landings in 1969 and the early ‘70s. And being a technically oriented individual, there was no such thing as “too much” for me to read nor grasp. Of course, I was nowhere NEAR as developed in math at that point as needed to contemplate, nor frankly to even understand, the complexity of orbital flight. But basic forces I could grasp and pretty well explain already. So there was PLENTY for me to read.

That also meant that I reacted pretty much with a yawn to the idea of literature classics. So I was a bit of an odd fellow, in that my language skills, which had been hammered into me from the point of being a sperm by both my parents, and to this day I have barely a tangential awareness of the kind of thing which every student was expected to be able to read, and then explain, as part of most school curricula. In my case, the memory was retained ONLY just long enough to pass the test on that particular book before it would disappear into the ether, even as I could explain how a carburetor worked and why each component was the way it was.

Oddly, after my 9th grade fiasco with repeating because I had rebelled against taking French (stupid me! ;-) and the unusual track I took subsequently, I actually started to write poetry myself, some of which was eventually published by people far more learned than I. I seemed to be able to use my language skills to make sentence structures which were also rhyming and rhythmic. In fact, to this day, one of my favorite activities is to generate spoof lyrics, and I have often done it in real time, especially when I was singing the original tune. The most famous example of similar talent I can think of was Allan Sherman, as for example his “12 Gifts of Christmas” or “Camp Granada”.

Quite literally, the tonal quality of my first guitar was so bad, the \$25 wonder I bought as a Freshman at Clarkson because I desperately needed to perform (no, I have no idea why ;-) and nobody wanted percussion accompaniment with my trap drum set I somehow managed to lug to the Ratskeller, which led to my almost entirely doing parody music initially. But then I was in exactly the right place and time to obtain my 12 string I acquired after the music store burned and I returned from my Xmas holiday. Funny how some things change your life so completely. I still do spoofs a lot, but now they are interspersed with music which would not be described thusly by anyone.

Back to what I used to read. Pretty much anything I could which explained the WHY of how things worked as they did. As an example, most people don't have a clue how hard it really is to make a reliable jet engine because they never think past the ignition phase. After all, we are all pretty well aware that incoming air is compressed by an axial fan, then fuel is injected and ignited, so it squirts out the back to create thrust. Fine. But what makes that compressor fan work? And why doesn't that melt in the hot gas stream, much as an acetylene torch would cut through steel like it is butter? Remember Frank Whittle? Now you know why it took so long to make it right enough to be a weapon. And why I simply devoured such subjects' documentation.

I don't think it is too big a stretch to suggest that I could have made a living as a writer. In fact, my brother has been recently sending me some stuff he has received seeking Technical Writers, which I am pursuing as a financial fill-in if possible. Where I clearly don't fit is I have no DOD Security Clearance, so I know my opportunities will be substantially fewer than his. But, you never know ;-). After all, my career involved the development of lots of automation, which necessitated instructing floor personnel in the operation thereof, and so writing has always been part of that task, and something I have enjoyed as well.

But I also must have read some actual literature, because (ahem ;-)) I have been told by more than a few people how interesting they find much of my writing style. At least those who don't think I try to make "War and Peace" out of every short story ;-). And in the interest of full disclosure; no I have never read "War and Peace", nor most actual literature, although I can readily describe what makes some works easily readable and others difficult. Most technical manuals are NOT easily read because they tend more to the "just the facts, ma'am" rather than seeming like storytelling. So I guess I am simply lucky that my style tends toward the latter ;-).

And if you want examples of stuff I have read more recently, all I can suggest is the descriptor "Chinese manuals written by people who clearly did not like the British in Hong Kong, or never wanted to spend a dime trying to make the manual readable by anyone who spoke English". That about covers it, all too often ;-). But it does make life interesting because I often will get interesting technologies for pennies on the relative dollar because I can figure out what the manual was trying to explain. Not always, by any means, but often enough to make the effort worthwhile and the risks of failure minimal.

Oh. And about the subject header for this Storyworth; Since I am proud that I am still going through my FIRST childhood, I think those qualify, don't you? Well, those, along with political satire and the comics. ;-)

Joe Holzer 12/13/2021