

R for READING

The only books I had as a young child were my father's old encyclopaedias (some volumes missing) in which naked black women, wearing bracelets around their long necks and plates stuck in their ear lobes, stared out of the pages. A few 'Holier than thou' Christian novels completed my limited reading choice. They featured ailing children lying on chaise-longues in a state of terminal decline until the angels bore them away to higher things.

My little friend May and I held hands as we crossed busy main roads to present ourselves at the Central Library. I returned the same day clutching the pink membership form, signed reluctantly by my mother, and chose two Milly-Molly-Mandy books which were mine for two whole weeks. The fortnightly library visits were supplemented by school reading books about Old Lob the Farmer and Percy the Bad Chick, followed by Beacon Readers- retellings of familiar fairy tales and Greek Myths and Legends.

My small home library began to grow with birthday gifts, Sunday school prizes and Christmas presents of Beano Annuals and Rupert Bear.

"Oh, yes, our Margaret loves reading," I heard my mother say *"She never has her head out of a book that one."*

My Mum was never seen reading anything weightier than 'Woman's Realm' or "The Reveille". My Dad would fall asleep in front of the fire with the 'Daily Mirror' covering his face. My Nanny, a great aunt, who was a fixture in our living room due to her arthritis, was the one who listened to me reading aloud, helped me practice my spellings for the weekly classroom test in which the last one standing was the winner, and told me stories of her own childhood.

Our classroom library consisted of a few shelves of books locked away in a cupboard and only revealed on Friday afternoons. Orlando the Marmalade Cat was a favourite. A big ginger tom gazed at me from the front cover. I loved Sam Pig and Little Grey Rabbit stories. Further up the school the classroom cupboard contained a row of Arthur Ransome's books in uniform bindings but I could never relate to stories of girls called Titty who spent their summers sailing. Strange then that I could relate to tom-boys like Jo from 'Little Women' and Katy Carr from 'What Katy Did'. I learned about playing the 'Glad Game' like Pollyanna and 'making the best of things' like Heidi. The story of Rosalie who lives a hard life in a family of travelling circus folk in "A Peep Behind the Scenes" also impressed me with her optimistic outlook.

I was a big Enid Blyton fan. My friends and I would hide Enid's books behind others on the library shelves on the few occasions when there were more Blytons than we could borrow at one time. We fondly hoped they would still be there when we returned. I blame my avid delight in Miss Blyton's adventures for my poor eyesight as I used to read in the light from the stair landing that shone on to the wall by my bed. On one occasion I so frightened myself by an adventure on Kirren Island that I was sitting on the bottom stair at 10pm when my mother returned from work and my father from his chapel meeting.

My favourite day of the whole year was not Christmas Day nor the Sunday school Christmas Party but the Sunday School Prize Giving which was held on the Sunday before Christmas. I could hardly contain my excitement. It was a foregone conclusion that I would be awarded a first prize. With a chapel-going family, missing Sunday School was not an option. There, on the platform, stood a table covered in green baize and groaning under piles of brand new books. With the Christmas tree lights winking softly in the background I waited to hear my name called. I mounted the steps, shook the hand of an elderly person and received in return a book in crisp new covers with paged yet unturned.