

# The Literacy of My Life

A Blog

by Alexis McCauley

*From childhood bedtimes stories to a moment in Print.*



Figure 1: Berggren, K. *Grace and Growth* Dec 15, 2017, [www.kmberggren.com](http://www.kmberggren.com)

My affinity for the written word could almost be called inherent. My parents have always been avid readers who curtailed my brother and my's screentime on a regular basis while growing up. My mother was one of those who could be heard declaring "you have been too long in the house, it's time to find something to do outside." While this all seemed exceedingly unfair as a child, I now appreciate what she was trying to encourage in my behaviors - the ability to entertain myself. As my friends escaped into the world of television, my brother and I had to find our own diversion. When weather or loneliness brought us back indoors with nothing to do, it was always my mom's immediate suggestion we go grab our book and read for there were always new reading materials at hand. Many children may not have been foisted off so easily with this suggestion but as kids, we had already developed a strong connection to reading. A connection that I can thank my parents for. A connection that has continued to grow and change with me. I may have trouble describing exactly what literacy means to me, but I can recognize the most essential moments in my search for my personal literacy success.



*Family Reading Adventures*

My first (and I believe most important) positive connection to reading comes with the memories of family bedtime stories. As far back as I can remember, my parents- mom and dad - would pick a book from their collection and corral my brother and me into their bedroom. We would race to make it to the bed first as the winner got the best seat. This would sometimes lead to wrestling, pushing, and bickering over the seat next to the parent reading that night each wanting to get the first glance at the book selected. However, no matter how riled we got or how we argued, as soon as my parents sat against the headboard, quiet would prevail.

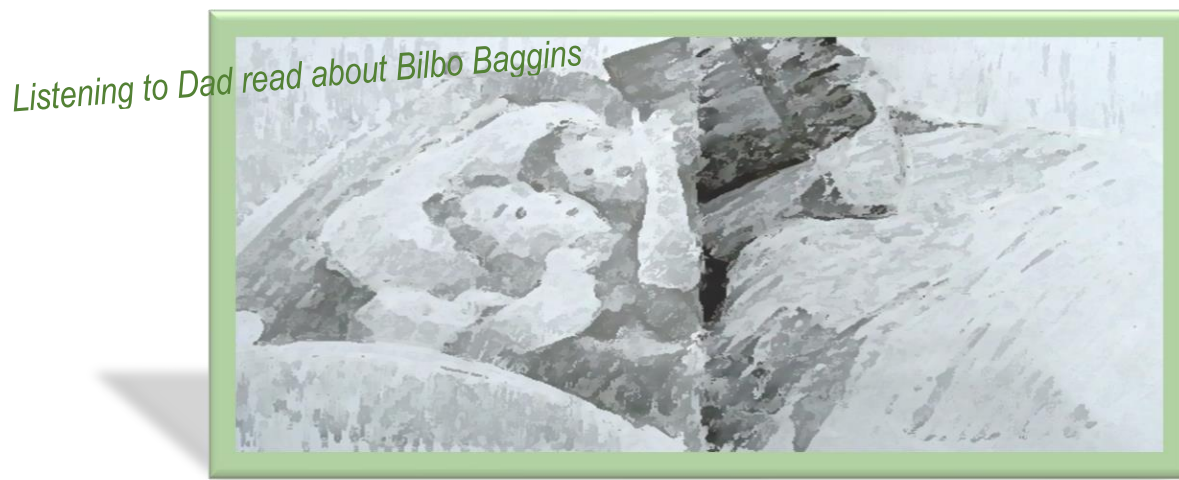


Figure 3: Cope, Adam. *Bedtime Story 3*. Graphite Pencil, <https://www.artists-atelier.com/bedtime-story-3/>

I have vivid memories of snuggling together in my parents' massive waterbed, rocking to the motions of the mattress while listening to my dad read about Bilbo Baggins and his magic ring, laughing when he used this ring to disappear from his own party. My dad would pause at just the right moment, when tensions were high, things looked grim .... and he would ask us what we thought was going to happen. My brother, mother, and I would try to outdo each other with bigger trials, scarier villains, and new powers abound as we anticipated what was to come next. Each night only one chapter was read before it was time for bed, often leaving us to wonder about Bilbo, then later his nephew Frodo, as we waited to fall asleep. Many nights I would lie awake imagining how the hobbits would keep the ring away from the Nazgul or where next they would find an ally.

These nights of wondering led to an early desire for my own stories, with their own characters. Often, I was displeased when we would return to Bilbo and his journey; finding that his adventure while having its own obvious wonders, did not always meet my expectation. Upon mentioning this to my parents one night and sharing the now-forgotten elements I had developed while I probably should have been sleeping, they encouraged I start writing my ideas down.

"Who knows, maybe one day you could write your own *Lord of the Rings*," my dad said.

"Exactly, then one day it will be *your* story someone is reading to their little girl," my mom chimed in.

My parents quietly withstood the theft of their notepad paper. I must have ‘stolen’ one of those legal sized, yellow notepads out of my dad’s briefcase every night. Yet every night, he left it in our ‘fish tank room’ in plain sight and unlocked. (The fish tank room consisted of a nook in the hallway of our tiny apartment that housed our favored salt-water fish tank and our oft visited bookshelf.) Our trash can would overflow with the crushed remains of my amateur accounts to mimic Tolkien. My room was often littered with different pages, each with remnants of words that I attempted to put together in a similar fashion to whatever writer I was reading at the time. (I gave up trying to sound like Tolkien and moved on to those authors I was reading on my own: Mary Downing Hahn, Tamora Pierce, and often R.L. Stine.)

## Survey to English Literature ENG 221 class at ASU the summer before my senior year in high school

*Mark but this flea, and mark in this,  
How little that which thou deniest me is;  
Me it sucked first, and now sucks thee, (lines 1-3).*



Fig 4: Official ASU logo from  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arizona\\_State\\_University](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arizona_State_University)

Last night’s reading had me questioning my ability to interpret poetry. Everything we discussed in class in preparation to read his poetry, had portrayed Donne as a ‘ladies’ man’. My instructor, Mr. Johnson, ensured us that we would find Donne much more exhilarating - *no double-entendre there* — than those we had already covered: Milton, Pope, and works of ‘middle English lyrics of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, I read and re-read about Donne’s flea and found much to be desired. Maybe poetry just wasn’t for me. Poetry had seemed like a collection of vulnerabilities or piety to me; this was not a collection I could ever teach myself to appreciate. Mr. Johnson’s summer English lit class illustrated that I had been neglecting an entire genre that could appeal to almost anyone. At least I thought...

*And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;  
Thou know’st that this cannot be said  
A sin, or shame, or loss of maidenhead, (lines 4-6)*

The idea that older ‘books’ were long, epic poems forced me to alter my opinion about the poetry genre. Sir Gawain’s beheading of the green knight. The knight immediately picks up his severed head, which continues to issue challenges! Chaucer’s tales of false seduction, vengeance, murder, and wives controlling husbands...I had been very wrong about poetry. I could now see their entertainment value even as these readings involved up to 120 pages written in an English I had not ever heard outside of Shakespeare’s theater. Each riddled with allegories I was never going to understand on my own. They were ciphers meant to be dwelled upon and pieced together slowly. And, I began to enjoy doing this. Yet, this time Donne’s grandeur escaped me. This was ingenuity?

*... as he beckons her to envision their entities mingling  
within the belly of the flea*



Fig 5: Fed Flea image from [https://i-love-png.com/flea\\_png28.html](https://i-love-png.com/flea_png28.html)

*Where we almost, nay more than married are.  
This flea is you and I, and this  
Our marriage bed and marriage temple is; (lines 11-13).*

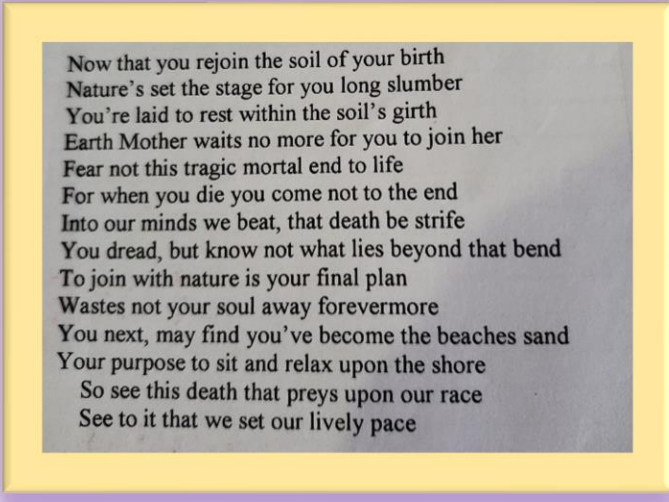
I must be missing something. This was a poem about a flea. How was this exhilarating? Bugs are gross, especially those that embody the filth of an environment like fleas. Not to mention the diseases they carry. I admitted I did not get it as I walked to class.

Mr. Johnson required a mere ten minutes of discussion before all in the class began to see the significance of this work and its flea. He suggested the intimacy that Donne alludes to with the lovers' mingled blood. How there were hints of sexual intercourse entangled within his words of their marriage bed. We saw how Donne romanced his lover as he beckons her to envision their entities mingling within the belly of the flea, a communion the two cannot attain without the nit. My instructor just illustrated how poetry and talent, created an ugly, bloodsucking, disease-ridden flea into a symbol of love (well, at least infatuation and lust). I saw how words, in any format, put into a particular order could arouse one's mooning over a drop of blood mingled in the thorax of a parasite. I was enraptured!

*Find'st not thy self nor me the weaker now;  
'Tis true; then learn how false fears be:  
Just so much honor, when thou yield'st to me,  
Will waste.... (lines 24-27) \**

\* Donne, John. "The Flea." The Norton Anthology: English Literature.  
Edited M.H. Abrams, W.W.Norton & Co. 1993, pp. 1090-91.

It was soon after this, that Mr. Johnson assigned us with the creation of a Shakespearean Sonnet. I endeavored to weave my own persuasive piece whose words would stir a reader's regard for the unpleasant. Nervous, and a little embarrassed about my piece, I submitted it to my older, college classmates. This poem that embodied all my vulnerabilities, that I had not even let my mom read yet, was to be reviewed and graded. *Ugh!*



Now that you rejoin the soil of your birth  
Nature's set the stage for you long slumber  
You're laid to rest within the soil's girth  
Earth Mother waits no more for you to join her  
Fear not this tragic mortal end to life  
For when you die you come not to the end  
Into our minds we beat, that death be strife  
You dread, but know not what lies beyond that bend  
To join with nature is your final plan  
Wastes not your soul away forevermore  
You next, may find you've become the beaches sand  
Your purpose to sit and relax upon the shore  
So see this death that preys upon our race  
See to it that we set our lively pace

### My Shakespearean Sonnet "Incomplete Elegy"- 1998

Our sonnets took forever to grade, and I cringed at times as my mind envisioned my failure. I have come to understand that with a lot of writers, there is a certain level of an emotional connection we have with our pieces. Their rejection is our rejection, their weaknesses ours as well. I have also come to understand that there is no getting over this, each time a work is submitted we stew in an endless cycle of enthusiasm and dread. My first submission ever, my "Incomplete Elegy" sonnet did turn out a success, despite my misgivings. My instructor liked it enough to request permission to use it as an example in future classes, *not bad for a high school student in a college class.*

## Creative Writing Class

With a seedling of confidence sprouting within me from my summer, I signed up for an elective writing class the next year of high school, my senior year....



fig 7: academic writing from <https://www.thedigitalvibes.com/blog/four-unconventional-ways-improve-academic-writing/>

"I'm handing back your poems. These were, I have to say, a good beginning for most of you. You can see me after class if you have any questions about your grades."



in life. I want to see sunshine and pretty flowers once in a while.” He emphasized this request with jazz hands, his fingers making ‘sparkly’ motions to further support this idea. “Believe me; I know what people like to read. My story was just published in an anthology and I can tell you, that would not have been the case if I had written about death and depression. Most of your assignments are about the same and I am tired of reading it. As an author, your job is to appeal to your audience, and you are not appealing to me. I had no choice but to give you a ‘D’.”

How could he give me a ‘D’ because my poem was morbid? I admit I was not the happiest of teenage girls. I was definitely an angsty young woman, but that was not grounds to fail me. “But that wasn’t listed as a requirement for this assignment. If you wanted sunshine and rainbows, why not say so?”



Fig 9: Flower #1363323 from <http://clipart-library.com/clipart/di9aM7nT.htm>

He rolled his eyes at me and sighed. “Most of your classmates didn’t need to be told to write about pleasant things. They just did. Andrea,” he gestures where Andrea usually sits, “wrote about her star role in the upcoming *Peter Pan* production. Mike wrote about the homecoming game. *These* are things high school students should write about; your date this weekend, your night out with girlfriends, something like that.”

“But my previous instructor gave this an ‘A’ *and* continued to use it as a solid example of a sonnet for other classes. That is a far cry from a ‘D’; I mean how can you grade me so low just because you didn’t like my subject matter? It doesn’t seem fair.”

Taking the paper, I was holding out to him, he scribbled out the ‘D’ and forcefully wrote a big ‘B’ over the scribbles. “Next time, turn in something more age-appropriate, and we won’t have to have this argument, got it?”

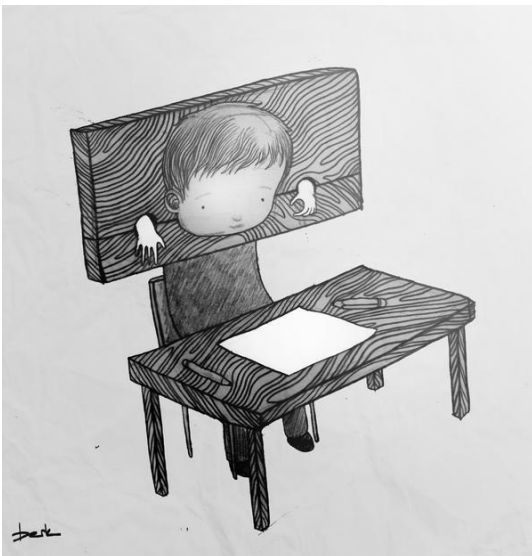


Fig 10: Censorship by berkozturk  
from <https://www.deviantart.com/berkozturk/art/censorship-301023850>

## Red Cedar Review

Several years passed and I filled an untold number of journals before I saw my first published story...

“Please respond by February 12<sup>th</sup> if interested. We look forward to hearing from you.”

I gasp. The sensation of my heart plummeting to my toes knowing it was February 15<sup>th</sup>, took my breath away and made my stomach tumble. I had been so close. The short story of a mother suffering from the worst of post-partum depression had almost had its moment. After so many submissions, so many comments about my readers needing a happy ending; someone appreciated my story. And yet, it was too late. My eyes burned and I was forced to step away from my desk. I was swamped in my disappointment and needed to take a moment.

As I walked and stewed, and walked some more, a little voice whispered that it was only two days past their deadline, not all was hopeless. That voice began to wonder...if I emailed them immediately, stressing my interest and disappointment, my “mother” could still tell her story. My stride lengthened and this voice grew louder as I composed the most solicitous email I could imagine.

I will admit I kept my email account open too long, and refreshed my inbox too often, but say what you will, it brought me good news. The 54<sup>th</sup> edition of *Red Cedar Review* literary magazine was still in the creation stage, and they were still “very interested in publishing “Downward Spiral Towards Motherhood.”



Thank you for sending us "My Downward Spiral Toward Motherhood". We love it and would like to publish it in the next issue of Red Cedar Review.  
I've attached our author contract to this email. Please sign and return it to redcedarreview@gmail.com by December 30, 2018. If

The spectrum of emotions I experienced with this news was unbelievable: the rush of excitement, the lightness as my pride soars, and the tingling in my fingers desperate to call everyone with my good news. Being at work when I finally heard back, I had the longest 12 hours shift that night as I grew more and more restless with my news. Those twelve hours, however, were nowhere near as painful as the next six months' wait. I was impatient to see myself in print. While my writing journey did not start with any desire to be a published author, the idea grew exciting. As I gained confidence in my characters and the stories I had to tell, this began to change.



Seeing my 'post-partum mother' from "Downward Spiral" in print, telling her story to those willing to listen, forced me to believe I needed to follow a different career path altogether.

What had started as a school assignment in my renewed pursuit of a bachelor's degree, became a desire to see something published and a reason to pursue a career in English.

Now the question is.... what comes next for me?



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