

Return to the Great Books

Libraries and books are often associated with knowledge and learning. More than that, they sustain a learned and calm human passion for literature, discovering the world, and in appreciating our existence. Wilfredo Pascual, a published poet and author of a novella, wrote the following article after participating recently in an intensive programme on Creative Non-fiction at New York University. He reminisces of his childhood discovery and joys of reading, particularly the Encyclopaedia Britannica and the Great Books of the Western World.

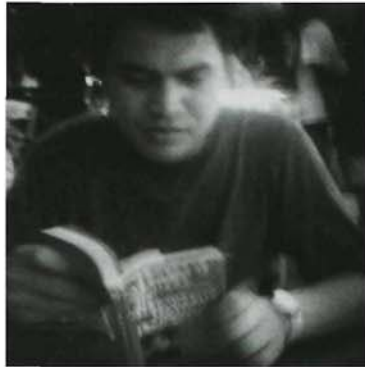
When I was a child, I would often go to my grandfather's study room, and stand on a sofa to reach and pull aside the sliding glass of a three-level hanging shelf. In this room, my grandfather kept his treasured books, which included 32 volumes of the Encyclopaedia Britannica and 52 volumes of the Great Books of the Western World.



From the Philippines to Thailand, the journey of some of the author's books end or shall we say begin again at the annual Pra Athit fair in Bangkok where he puts them up on sale.

Until the age of twelve, I turned to the Encyclopaedia Britannica merely for reference. But I knew they were special. They were unlike the brightly coloured and illustrated books I read in school or those that my father bought for me. I was intrigued by that “something important” compiled within the dark brown leather-

bound covers. As I turned its light pages, the curious child in me tracked down information through alphabetised indexes, the uninitiated mind perpetually on the verge of new discoveries. Each time I reached out to pull a volume, I had grown taller. I carried its immense weight with a mixed sense of pride and a vague melancholic feeling that I would no longer be the same when I put them back on the shelf: I would be transformed. I would no longer be ordinary. I would carry secrets inside me. I would have powers no one will know about. Knowledge would be my refuge, my armour and my weapon when the world turns itself against me.



While waiting for the train to depart at Hua Lam Pong Station, the author reads an autobiography, "The Education of Richard Rodriguez: Hunger of Memory".

Meanwhile, the other set, the Great Books, mysteriously beckoned. It was as handy as the books I read in school but when I opened them and turned the pages, I was floored. The consistently small font sizes, the narrow leading and the rigid two-column layout from cover to cover, from the first volume to the last, gave me early on an idea of what my grandmother meant whenever she complained of an attack of vertigo. It had no pictures. The arrogant layout raised an eyebrow. I tried so hard to read them but the letters grew smaller and shrunk to microscopic proportions until entire pages were reduced to blurry lines.

There is no catalyst more powerful in liberating the mind than an early tragedy, the

ones that put a premature end to childhood. The year I turned thirteen, the world pushed me to walk on a path littered with broken glass. That year, my family lost the political power we held over our town for more than half a century (my grandfather was mayor of the town); my father killed a man and disappeared; my uncle was killed in front of his children, an event that turned us into a family on the run; that same year my heroes fell. I was even too young to articulate the questions that hounded me. I just wanted everything back as they were. And knowing that it would never be, my instincts demanded that I increase my capacity to understand and accept all the events that had taken place. Like a bird on its first flight, it had to trust the invisible wind.

I returned to the Great Books. They were colour-coded: Blue for History, Politics, Economics and Ethics, from Plutarch to Marx; Red for Philosophy and Religion, from Plato to Pascal; Grey for Mathematics and Natural Sciences, from Euclid to Freud; and Green for Novels, Short Stories, Plays and Poetry.

Blue bored me. Red exasperated me. Grey, I totally abhorred and avoided.

But Green! I turned the pages of the Green-coded books with the reverence of an acolyte entering the sacred temple of literature. Even when the passages reached

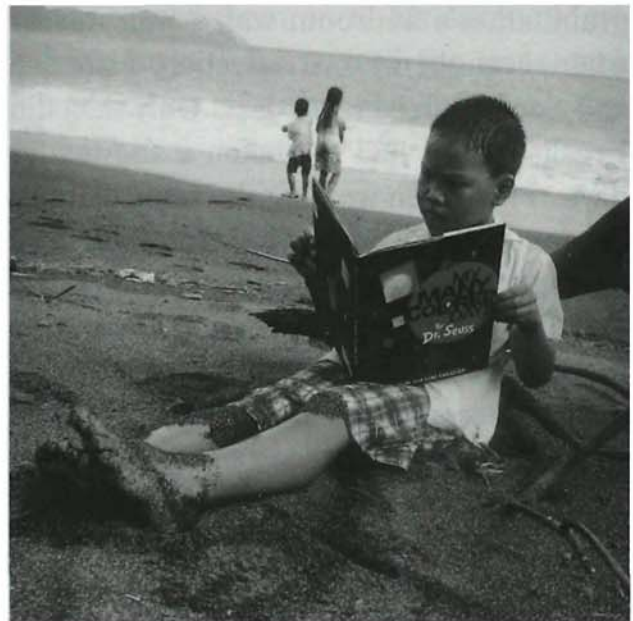
incredible levels of indecipherability, I laboured through each obscure word. The Great Minds claimed me as if I almost sensed salvation in the imagined story.

While my high school classmates grappled with Algebra and Trigonometry, I wrestled with the archaic language of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. I tortured myself to get over the first page of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* knowing that I had to punish myself with hundreds more. I underlined passages. I wrote marginal notes. In the end, I was rewarded. I stood at the edge of a dark forest in the beginning of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and I knew there was no turning back from *Inferno* to *Paradise*.

I read Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, and his complex treatise on evil and goodness, and was religiously converted by his stubborn faith in man's humanity. I read his short story, *White Nights*, a sad love story about the secret meetings of a woman waiting for her lover with a stranger who kept her company, and whose dreams were crushed in a devastating ending that left me weeping for weeks. I read Gogol's *The Overcoat*; soared with Shakespeare; and in no time, with my mind and heart open like the vast landscape of an unmapped country, I was ready to venture through the Blue books, and chart the course with my imaginative faculties, broadened by minds that I trusted and never betrayed me. I read Sir Francis Bacon's essays on *Truth, Death, Love, Youth and Age* ("A man that is young in years, may be old in hours, if he have lost no time"), *Parents and Children* ("The joys of parents

are secret; and so are their grief and fears"). From there I began reading the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* with greater interest on subjects that fascinated me, mostly biographies such as those of the composer Antonio Salieri, whose life and genius were made richer under the shadows of the more talented Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

One afternoon, my grandmother told me the story about my grandfather's youngest brother, the other writer in the family who also locked himself in his room and read a lot. He lost his mind and was often heard rambling in discourses with himself. He died at the age of sixteen, his legs mysteriously covered with sores, as if he had just com-



Back home, the author's nephew in the eastern coast of the Philippines reads Dr. Seuss' My Many Colored Days.

pleted a terrible journey on foot. After his death, his father burned all his books and cautioned his other children to be guarded about their reading habits. After hearing this

story, I became very depressed. With no friends to turn to, I ended up seeking solace once more from the books. I pulled an Encyclopaedia Britannica volume and read the biography of Arthur Rimbaud, the precocious boy-poet of the French symbolism movement, who died at the age of nineteen after his legs were amputated.

After reading Rimbaud's biography, I returned the book to the shelf and walked to my grandfather's bedroom to rest. Everyone was asleep. To reach my grandfather's bedroom, one had to pass through a tiny bedroom where in the old days, armed men kept guard (assigned to protect my grandfather – who was town mayor – and his family). Right beside the door that led to my grandfather's bedroom was a wall mirror where I caught my own reflection. I stopped and slowly walked towards it. Only then did I realise that I had not taken a shower for days. I had been wearing the same clothes, my grandfather's maroon knitted sweater and my father's green and white striped pyjamas (I wonder, why was I wearing them?). I looked closer to examine my face as if I was trying to recognise a stranger's face. I raised my hand to touch my face and it frightened me how I slowly moved like a tired old man. Tracing the premature lines on my face, I was conscious of a thousand lifetimes passing. I have aged, I told myself. The souls of those who have departed and the great minds I have read have added years to my youth.

There were other books on the shelf, including the Britannica Yearbooks I never read and a huge white leather-bound Bible. The

biggest books consisted of a three-volume dictionary. There was another Encyclopaedia set of discourses on art and politics where I read about the Marshall Plan and the United States' covert plan to crush communism. There was also a cheaper Encyclopaedia set in white leather binding. It had thicker paper and coloured pictures, but they weren't as informative as the Britannica.

I would like to see these books again, the same volumes that kept me company when I cocooned myself. I want to reread the notes I have written, the passages I have underlined years ago and be enlightened on what it was that left indelible imprints in my deepest subconscious, turning me into the person that I am now. The collection is no longer complete. A couple of volumes are missing. I know this because I had taken them with me whenever I ran away from home and lost them. I remember passing on the volume of Dostoevsky's *White Nights* to a cousin who like me, fell in love with the story.

One day my father called me to the office. He was with an uncle and an aunt. The couple wanted to borrow some books and my father, upon checking, found that some volumes were missing. My father hurled painful words at me that I have since blocked out from my memory, solid words that humiliated and crushed me. I remember standing in front of them, and staring at the floor. I told him that I no longer remember where I left them. I was stuttering. When I looked up, I couldn't even look at my father. I looked at my uncle and my aunt. They looked away.

Much, much later after my grandfather and father had died, I found the certificate of ownership of my grandfather's collection of books together with a wall map of the world. I showed them to my grandmother. They are very, very expensive, she said. It took us years to pay for them. They can never be replaced. My grandfather's collection was a rare edition now out of print. The latest edition, revised in 1990 has added three more volumes to the Great Books. Of the original 130 authors that were included in my grandfather's edition, sixty more from the 20th century were added. The entire set now costs a thousand dollars. The 2002 thirty-two volume Encyclopaedia Britannica set, whose production heritage date back more than two hundred years, now costs US\$ 1,400. With interactive CD ROM versions of these books now available, I wonder if people still buy them.

Long before we moved into my grandfather's house where I first set eyes on my grandfather's collection of books, my father and I sat one morning on the red abaca carpet of our living room in our old apartment. In front of us were huge white carton boxes. He opened them and took out a complete set of Walt Disney's twenty-volume, 1971 first edition of the Wonderful World of Knowledge and the complete collection of Dr Seuss' books. My parents claim that I started reading at the age of three and was reading newspapers before I entered kindergarten. It may be true, otherwise I wouldn't have any memory of reading the books my father bought me that day and these all happened before I went to school. When I tell people

that my mother used to be a teacher, they easily assume that it was she who influenced my reading habits. The truth is, it was my father. I remember my father and I reading together Dr. Seuss' Mister Brown Can Moo, Can You? I would give anything to hear my father moo again. My favourite was And To Think I Saw It On Mulberry Street, about a boy on his way home from school imagining fantastic stories he would tell his father. I read all the books over and over until the bindings loosened and pages fell off. I reread them when I grew older because of the memory it brought back and what it stood for, the most valuable and lasting legacy of a parent to his child – information, knowledge, wisdom and above all else, love. Years later, thinking that we had outgrown the books, my father passed them on to his sister. More significantly, I appreciate the important things that my father has given me, those that cannot be taken away.

I am now thirty-five years old and it has been a long time since I left home. The last time I moved to a new apartment, my own library filled twenty-five boxes of books. Recently, I went to a Book Fair in Bangkok and found a stall selling used books. On top of one shelf was a set of familiar volumes that made my heart jump - the complete set of Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Knowledge. When I pulled out a volume, I realised that it was a much later edition because of the cover illustrations. Still, just by looking at the numbers on the spine, I knew by heart its contents. Volume 14 was a collection of fairy tales told by Dopey, Volume 4 was on Transportation by Peg Leg Pete, Volume 2

was by Daisy Duck on Nature, and so on. I opened the book and just by looking at the pictures, I recognised them without reading their descriptions. I recognised the photo of Trafalgar Square in London, the yellow lichens, and the human anatomy where I first learned what the esophagus was. I bought the books not only because they were second-hand and cheap but more importantly, I knew that at one time they had captured a child's imagination and made him less lonely.



A self-portrait of the author in Khon Kaen.

I have stacked the books right next to my bed in memory of my father and the nights he read to me, and left me sleeping with the most wonderful dreams.

Wilfredo O. Pascual, Jr. is working on a "memoir". He has also written scripts for television (award-winning) documentaries, in the Philippines. Currently based in Bangkok, Thailand, he is the Publications Officer of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) Secretariat.

Raising awareness and appreciation of Southeast Asia's Cultural Heritage through conservation & development



www.seameo-spafa.org

Cultural Resource Management

Information Dissemination

Research Publications

Seminars

Library Services

Workshops

Training

Consultancy

Archaeology Architecture Fine Arts Visual Arts Performing Arts