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For the Love of Reading

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Budapest is the most appalling place in the winter. The white snow turns gray before it reaches the ground, and it forms black piles mixed with the dirt of the city as the snowplows push their way through the streets. The days are short, and the drab sunlight cannot penetrate the shadows cast by the dirty facades of century-old houses.

The day of my humiliation was just one of these winter days in the city. I had to push against a great number of long coats to get onto bus 78, and was on my way to the university. This was the day of my last exam for that semester, the exam literature students feared the most and I spent a whole month to prepare for: *Seventeenth Century Hungarian Literature*. I can still see the thousand pages long anthology bearing the same title in front of my eyes. Leaning over it, I had spent every single day of January 1995 in a dusty, social-realist style library on the outskirts of the city where I would not have to compete with other students for this rare book.

Every single writer in there was important, every single detail was to be remembered. The heroic epic of big battles between the Turks and Hungarians had invaded my thoughts. I had deeply sympathized with these heroes; I had felt as helpless in trying to remember the most trivial details about the writers and their work as the sons of our tiny nation must have felt facing the gigantic Turkish Empire. The clanking of swords and blasts of cannons kept taking me back to the past if I drifted away.

"The blue sky covers me, if not a coffin / My last hour be decent with no thunder / Whether a wolf or crow feeds upon my skin, / Everywhere the sky is above and the dirt under" (Zrinyi 284.) [1]

On the day of my battle, getting off the bus and walking towards the university in the icy wind from the Danube, I felt prepared, even though the professor holding the exam was known as one of the most heinous at this old-style, prestigious university. Plus, I also counted on my luck. Wearing my lucky clothes, a long, striped skirt with white lace on the seam, and a white blouse, I might just be fortunate enough to take this oral exam in front of an assistant professor instead of the department chair himself.

Needless to say, I ended up in his office anyway. My soiled skirt lace with spots from the puddles of melting, dirty snow must have spoiled my luck. There I was, sitting on the black, faux-leather sofa in the yellowish office of the professor. The walls may have originally been painted white, decades ago. The curtains, gray from dust, blended in with the view of the neighboring, colorless building. The high ceiling gave way to an eerie silence while I was gathering my thoughts about my assigned author, Kelemen Mikes. Yes, his letters from Rodosto, where he followed the rebellious nobleman, Rakoczi, into exile. His description of their life abroad. The recipes of cabbage soups. Their longing for the home country. I could even cite a short passage from these letters. I was ready for the battle.

But this was not what the professor wanted to hear. He wanted to know who made the sculpture of the first publisher of Mikes' work. I couldn't answer. He wanted to know what is the name of the railway station where I would get off the train when I wanted my future students to visit the writer's birthplace. I couldn't answer. "You probably don't need to know these," he added with a demeaning voice "Judging from your looks you would not lower yourself to the profession of teaching. You are probably shooting for a brainless TV announcer position." Then he continued in the same humiliating tone;" I will not give you an F, you did not even deserve that." And he left the room.

I was so taken aback, that I could not say a word. Never in my life had I been treated with this much disrespect. Also, I had never failed an exam before this. I thought of myself as a book lover with a good memory, but now I was vanquished. I started to question how I got into this situation. Oh, yes

because I always loved reading. I thought of those endless nights when as a teenager I couldn't put down the books before I finished them. I pictured my red and white writing desk, where under a biology or chemistry textbook there was always a novel hiding. I recalled being the proud owner of a wall size bookshelf filled with my favorite authors. I recounted the different periods of my changing taste in reading: sci-fi, Karl May, short stories, historical novels, diaries. I clearly saw the cover of some of my most loved books: *Young Adult's100 Best Loved Poems, The Stars of Eger, The Little Prince.*

As I went down the corridor away from the infamous office, I was still enshrouded in my thoughts. Slowly, I started to grasp the injustice of this whole episode. How was it physically possible that I failed this exam after spending every single day of a whole month reading and studying? In all of my other classes I received As or Bs with much less preparation. I felt my anger grow against the professor. How could a learned man show off his knowledge in such a pitiful way? How could he so shamefully deter literature students from their very subject? I didn't have a good answer. Perhaps he did not have anything else in his life but century old dusty poets, and the humiliation of students was the only thing that brightened up a life as uneventful as a moth's in a library. Or even more likely he just wanted to keep his field, for himself. No intruders, especially not one, wearing a skirt.

Reaching the red marble stairs, rage was filling my every vein. I wanted revenge. I wanted scandal. I wanted to put an end of this academic tyranny. No more students will walk out of that office hiding the tears in their eyes. In my head, I drafted a complaint letter to the Dean, or maybe even to the State Department of Education. But out in the cold when I waited for bus 78 on my way home, I knew I would never write these letters. He was too high up in the university hierarchy, and I did not want to jeopardize the four years of hard work I had invested in this degree. Being so close to my diploma, I buried the thoughts and emotions of this day deep into my memory and devoted my study to the more concise field of linguistics.

But the books kept coming back into my life. My next battle around them took place six years later in West Michigan as part of a College Reading class. Only this time, I was on the other side. Claiming my authority from behind the lectern, I was the beholder of knowledge, the tireless advocate of books. Much was at stake. I did not only have to make sure that my students leave wiser than they arrived, but I also had to do this without abusing my authority as my professor did.

So many years later, I still couldn't comprehend what an incompetent teacher this widely approved researcher was. Holding up the status quo of older males in his field, his only weapon against young women was demeaning them. How could I avoid misusing my authority? And what authority did I have at all? I was young, a woman with a foreign accent. What right did I have to talk about reading and books in a language that wasn't my own? My only excuse was that I loved reading. And the love of reading does not know any borders. Or so I thought.

As this was my first semester teaching the course, the College advised me to use the syllabi of established faculty members. I only made a few changes. Most importantly, I replaced the titles of required reading with books of my choice. As the original books were typical pieces of young adult literature, my books came from the same realm.

Nothing but one of my all-time favorites, the *Little Prince* by Saint-Exupery, headed the list. I was sure of success, and could hardly wait for the first day of our book discussion. But before that day, I had to learn a great many things about my students. Most of them were not willing learners. They were put into my class because they had low reading scores but felt no need to improve themselves. Most of them just wanted to get this class behind them. I was faced with a huge task. Since they did not seem a bit interested in my lectures and exercises focused on learning strategies , my only hope for a relief was the book discussion

When that day came, it was anything but a relief. Having entered the always-cold classroom of the Automotive Center, twenty faces – all boys –

were staring at me with a suspicious look in their eyes. Twenty Little Princes, standing on their tiny planets amidst several suns, moons and stars were lying lifeless in the furthest corner of each student's table. The tightly closed book covers guarded the secret of a little boy and a fox. The air was frozen. I could see my breath recounting some of my favorite lines from the book while I placed my things on the table.

" 'What does that mean-'tame'?"

"It is an act too often neglected," said the fox. "It means to establish ties."

"To establish ties?"

"Just that," said the fox. " To me, you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you, I am nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world…' "*(Saint-Exupery 64)*

But I could see that the Little Prince, the fox, the well, and the flower did not tame my students. I could feel that these boys were not able to see the elephant inside the boa constrictor and perceived the author's drawing of a snake from the outside to be a hat. I fearfully started the discussion with the question: "Well…What did you think about the book?" Silence. Only one boy seemed to be squirming on his seat. He then reluctantly raised his hand and asked, "Mrs. Palmer, why did we have to read a children's tale?"

Our book discussion went downhill from here. My efforts trying to explain why this is not necessarily a children's book were fruitless. The students reacted with blank faces. When I read aloud my favorite scene with the fox, some of the boys could hardly hold back their chuckle.

" 'One only understands the things that one tames," said the fox. "Men have no more time to understand anything. They buy things all ready made at the shops. But there is no shop anywhere, where one can buy a friendship, and so men have no friends anymore. If you want a friend, tame me…' " (Saint-Exupery 65)

Powerful belching interrupted the silent pause I intentionally made for the message to sink in. I quickly finished the book discussion section of the class meeting and fled into the security of our textbook's exercises. My attempt to tame these students on behalf of reading failed completely. They never had taken the time to make friends with books, and I was just another teacher who was unable to help them pass the border into the land of book lovers.

I couldn't make sense of all this right away. I blamed the students. I blamed the university for accepting them. I blamed the whole educational system. I even blamed myself. Only, I didn't exactly know what for.

The semester ended and left me with a feeling of emptiness. For I knew that teaching these kids reading strategies they will surely soon forget was not the answer to their problem. The only way I saw for these students to make it through college was for me to invite them into the circle of readers. Maybe I would get the invitation right the next time.

Before I had to set out to teach a new semester, Nancie Atwell came to the rescue. In her book, *In the Middle*, she describes how to turn a classroom into a workshop where teachers become facilitators rather than the authority behind the desk. In this environment, students and teachers create the curriculum together and children are free to choose the books they read.

I was amazed at this inspiring agenda. I admired the atmosphere Atwell created to promote her young readers and writers. I envied her for the hard-working, intelligent students in her school. Having her classroom filled with books and comfortable places to read became a dream of mine. If I could have these circumstances, I surely would succeed. But I knew this could not happen at the university. And later, I realized that her secret was not in the material conditions of her classroom.

I was hoping that giving my students the choice of what they want to read is much better than

assigning books according to my taste. This way my old professor would also disappear from behind my back. I will no longer want students to show interest in my favorite things, but I will let them develop their own taste in reading.

So the next year, in my syllabus I replaced the sentence "Throughout this semester you will be required to read the following two books" with the sentence, "Throughout this semester you will be asked to read two or more books of your choice, altogether at least 500 pages."

With this sentence, I have forsaken the right to influence my students' tastes. In this course, the great writers of literature will not lead the way to literacy. Instead, I exchanged my authority to define what good books are for a chance that my students will actually like what they read. I took a risk, but it paid off.

When the new semester started, I stood in front of my students with much more confidence than ever before. I was still only about ten years older than they, I still had a foreign accent, but this time I also had a plan that I believed in. My goals were more ambitious than the course objectives described in the catalog. These students, at least some of them, would have to fall in love with reading. Some time in the future, when they are wondering in their dorms about what to do that evening, they will think about reading as an option, and will pick up a book. Some of them will even have an open book turned face down next to their bed all the time. Some of them will become lifetime readers.

But as our first class meeting progressed, and we got to the point of discussing the required reading section in the syllabus, I knew this wouldn't be an easy job. A low whisper started to emerge in the third row of the classroom occupied by a young man in a baseball cap and three black girls. From the low whisper, I heard "500 pages" and then again "500 pages." Obviously, all they heard was the number of pages they have to read; they didn't show much excitement about being able to choose a book.

A blond girl, with braided hair and the typical look of a teacher's pet, found the thought of choosing a book by herself so appalling that she waited for me after the class, and insisted on my telling her exactly what book she should read. I could tell she was frightened by the freedom of choice. To offer her some comfort, I reminded her that we would meet in the library the next time where people who are undecided can find a book for themselves.

The visit to the library went better than I hoped. I did not expect much from the atmosphere; the new steel and cement library in its entire grayness looked like a research lab for physics and did not have any cozy, inviting reading nooks. The bookshelves, however, could not be overmodernized; their presence still assured us that books are here to stay. Once my students disappeared between these fully loaded bookshelves and were lost in searching for the right book, I had a better feeling about the success of our journey into the land of book lovers.

Soon, my students started to turn in their proposed reading lists. They looked promising. Just as I had students of different genders, races, ethnicities, and interests, so were the books of varying genres, styles and agendas. Among the names like Stephen King, John Grisham, and Dave Peltzer that we know from the shelves of supermarkets, there were others like Maya Angelou, Tolkien, and even Shakespeare.

Over the next fifteen weeks, I enjoyed responding to reading journals. Although most of these were restricted to the retelling of the plot, in some journals favorite characters started to emerge. Occasionally, I could almost feel the presence of Othello, Luke, and Frodo as their readers tried to justify their deeds in group discussions. Books were recommended and exchanged, names and titles were carefully copied from cover pages. In a few occasions, my students even forgot to keep checking the clock every five minutes.

Even though this sounds like a happy ending to my story, my invitation into the circle of book lovers did not reach everyone. Unfortunately, there were students who did not enjoy what they read and still did not make the effort to look for something better despite my encouragement. Others wanted to

get out of having to read by watching a movie and describing that instead of the book it was made from. Still others chose a book they read in high school and built their journal entries around their memories. Although initially I tried to fight against these negative attitudes, I soon gave up. I comforted myself with the thought that if only a few of them walk away from this class possessing the love of reading, I made a difference in their lives.

One of these students was Jake. Jeans, t-shirt, baseball cap: a typical freshman. He struggled to find a book at first, but then consulted the Internet list of best-selling books among college students. He then purchased *The Painted House* by John Grisham. Jake's reading journals have disclosed that his family was originally from the South, and that this book made it easier for him to envision his ancestors' lives. The story engaged him completely, the extreme hardship of the cotton pickers' lives made him appreciate his circumstances. "This was the first book I ever read from cover to cover" Jake confided in the hallway after the end of the last class. Then he continued, " I already bought the next book I will read after the finals are over" and pulled another bestseller with a shiny cover out of his book bag.

The other student, who passed the border into reading land, was Adam. He had a sad look about him, as he sat in the back row, next to the door. I could sense that his being there in the classroom was a fleeting presence. While in class, he pulled his hat deep into his dark brown eyes so they wouldn't disclose his secret. Adam decided to read *Tuesdays with Morrie*, a sport reporter's account of the visits and conversations with his severely ill professor. "Interesting choice," I thought while reading his first reading journals. Then Adam disappeared for two weeks.

The next time he came, he waited in front of my office and asked me what assignments he needs to make up from those weeks he missed. "My dad just passed away and I had to help my mom with funeral arrangements," he gave the explanation for missing class. Adam's next reading journal revealed some of what he went through lately. He wrote how he read his book to the end in the waiting room while his father was in cardiac arrest. He quoted the last sentence of the dying Morrie from the book: "Death ends a life, not a relationship" (Albom 174) Adam wrote that this meant a lot to him in those days and always will.

Adam, Jake and others showed me the real importance of reading. Books are companions; they are there to teach us something about our world, our past, our future and ourselves. Once they tame us and we become friends with them, they will be there for us. As I am writing these lines, I know that once you become a book lover, nobody can spoil it for you. Once you acquired the love of reading it stays with you all the way.

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(Footnotes)

[1] The poem was originally written in 1653. English translation is provided by the author of this paper.

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Zsuzsanna Palmer currently works as an adjunct instructor at Davenport University in Grand Rapids. She has a Master's degree in Hungarian Linguistics and Literature from the University of Budapest. She will receive her Master's in English Language and Literature from Central Michigan University next spring.