

Dorothea Benton Frank

When I was a very young girl there was no air conditioning in our home on Sullivan's Island. Now, you may have never heard of Sullivan's Island but it is said by learned folks across the land that during the month of August the only thing that separates the island from the bottom floor of Hades is a screened door. It's that hot. Many summer days are well over one hundred degrees and the air is so thick you can practically swim from room to room.

We lived a small life. I grew up in a clapboard cottage with a tin roof and a worthy front porch, the same house that was my mother's childhood home. Back then, most activities were dictated by the position of the sun, the whereabouts of the tide and the Liturgical calendar of the Catholic Church. Just as the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox was Easter, summer hours from eleven in the morning until after three in the afternoon meant quiet, tomato sandwiches and iced tea. After lunch I raced for the hammock on the front porch with at least one book under my arm. While the adults napped inside to the mesmerizing whir of a fan, I'd use my bare foot to kick off from the bannister to manufacture a tiny breeze. Then I'd lose myself in the world of *The Five Little Peppers* or *Nancy Drew* or the *Bobbsey Twins*. Books were my escape from the island and they allowed me to dream about the larger world over the causeway. With a good book I could go anywhere in my mind or learn about anything in the world. They saved me from despair because they gave me the ambition to try something more than island life.

In those days there was no Watchung Booksellers or Barnes and Noble. What books there were to be bought came from downtown Charleston and believe me, going to downtown Charleston was quite the ordeal. It meant my mother had to compress herself into some kind of loathsome elastic apparatus to enhance her assets and minimize her deficits, I had to put on real shoes and we'd board the un-air conditioned city bus for a two hour drive, stopping and starting what seemed like a thousand times. It made my mother cranky in the extreme. I'd watch her blot her neck and eyes with her linen handkerchief over and over, waiting for her to explode. We rarely made the trip except for back to school clothes or a dress for a special occasion.

Without the bookmobile I would have been lost to fits of temper and reduced to napping like the adults, an utter and complete waste of time in my juvenile opinion. Then the joyous day arrived when I had my own bicycle. Freedom! Now I could race through the hot air down the island to our little library. It was upstairs in a building that housed some other business like the island water department, making it feel that much more official and serious to my young mind.

The stairs to the second floor were pitched and creaky and at their top behind the door sat the stereotypical librarian in a silhouette of dust motes. It was dead quiet up there. Serious. Forbidding. If it had been a doctor's office I would have run away as fast as I could, imagining what horrors were waiting for me. But I knew where I was and I knew the rules. I could borrow three books for two weeks. If I returned them earlier I could have three more. It was insane! I could read to my heart's content and I did.

That funky little library and our rattle trap bookmobile shaped my life as much as any other influence. I learned to respect books, to understand their worth and that it was all right if I craved them. It was a healthy obsession.

Here's the point. We are so lucky in Montclair to have not one but two locations where people of all ages can go, relax and have access to the tremendous wealth of resources our libraries offer our community. A good library says something about its good citizens – that we value knowledge and that we want to grow as a people, learning from our past and finding our way into our future. Together.

---Dorothea Benton Frank is a best-selling novelist.