

Judy Newman

Just a few dog years ago, when I was a kid, one thing I craved was my own library card. I could get this amazing all-access pass for **free** as long as I could sign my name in cursive. I practiced over and over until my signature was perfect - until even that tricky capital N in my last name looked just right.

I carried my new library card, with my name on it, tucked in its own special wallet. This card unlocked new worlds for me, and was my first badge of independence. I could be *dropped off* at the library and stay there for hours alone, with no parents. Later I could ride my (blue banana) bike there by myself, choosing one of several safe routes to get there. The whole place just oozed freedom.

Once inside I could search the shelves, pick out a book, evaluate the cover art, read the inside flap copy, check out the number of date stamps on the card in the back to judge how popular this book was, and put it back if it didn't suit my mood or interest that day. I carried the books to the librarian's desk—eight was the limit—and these were my choices, my reading list for the week. Where else in my ten-year-old world did I have that kind of power?

I read those books, each wrapped in its plastic library cover, all week long. I never read a book twice and I never didn't finish one--behaviors I only recently modified. The characters in those books became the heroes, the inspirations, the stars of my childhood: the omniscient (but now I see it, somewhat insufferable) Mrs. Piggle Wiggle; Pippi Longstocking, whose father just let her *live by herself* and who wore exactly what she wanted every day; and the twelve children, their time management, inventor Dad, and the whole cast of the original it-doesn't-really-have-much-to-do-with-the movie *Cheaper By the Dozen* by Montclair's own Frank Bunker Gilbreth, Jr. and Ernestine Gilbreth Carey. There were my favorite bad boys: Johnny Tremain, Henry Huggins, Homer Price and Bilbo Baggins; Sara Crewe and Mary Lennox, girls who could be my friends if only they lived nearby in time and space; heroic real people I wanted to help like Karen Killilea and Anne Frank; and families I would love to have been a member of (sort of) like the Peppers, the Wilders, and the Moffats. I met each and every one of them in the public library.

I read serious books and books for fun. Not everything was great literature but some of it was.

A lot of things have changed since I was ten years old. But the power of the public library to offer free and curated access to reading material for everyone has not. I am just as allergic to a lecture on what is "good for you" as the next person. But the power to choose what you read (and the fact that you *must* read—no matter what you choose!) is not only good for you, it is essential. I like a marathon Angry Birds session, an episode of "Girls" or "Homeland" or the "MTV Music Video Awards", and a juicy issue of People or Vogue as much as anyone. But I can enjoy them all better; I can understand their context and have informed opinions (and often people actually listen to those opinions), because I am a reader.

It was the public library in my hometown of Newton, Massachusetts that invited me in, encouraged my tastes and my own preferences, and helped me develop my ideas, my goals, my sense of who I am and what I can do. The reason I live in Montclair is because here we believe in encouraging people to be the individuals they can be. We pride ourselves on being diverse, informed, and open-minded. I bet we are home to way more readers than most communities. Thankfully, we have the Montclair Public Library with its arms wide open and its unique power to change lives to be the best community full of readers that we can possibly be.

----Judy Newman is executive vice president of Scholastic and president of Scholastic Book Clubs