

Mark Porter

Throughout my childhood, I was the new kid in town.

There were lots of towns.

In my first several years of existence, I ricocheted from my birthplace in Rochester, N.Y., to the rural suburb of Webster, and briefly to my grandparents' home in the equally rural suburb of Fairport. My grandparents' acreage abutted the Erie Canal's embankment, and the distant air-horn blasts of self-propelled barges wafted through the sky above Fairport.

Along with a historic canal wending its way through rural suburbs, Upper New York State boasts other indigenous quirks, the most significant being white hot dogs. These edible oddities, white hots, are closely tailed by the region's manner of speaking, termed by some linguists as the "inland north dialect."

As coined by other linguists, this "northern cities vowel shift" or "inland North American English" dialect blew in from Lake Ontario, in the process dissolving some vowels, to imprint itself on Rochesterians. Short though they were, these years linguistically tattooed the Rochest-rr vocalization into me. Embossed in the sentences I uttered, my dialect-imprinted discourse was anything but fun-etic. The vowel shift assured schoolyard conflicts for years to come.

My series of hometowns in Upstate New York vanished in a childhood move to Connecticut, and I meekly and introduced myself to the social strata of a garden-apartment complex in East Hartford. Then, as a fourth-grader, I had barely settled into piney Point Pleasant on the Jersey Shore when my parents launched our family northward to Montclair.

Friends in my young existence? There were few. Due to the Porter's family's migratory pattern, friendships were tentative and transitory. I would categorize as nonexistent my comfort level of being the neighborhood's shy and obsessively smiling new kid who possessed the Upper New York State inflection in my utterances. Asking for a can of "pop" prompted comments of "what country are you from?" followed by a push or a punch.

Upon arriving at Grove Street School in Montclair, I tested well enough to gain gratis Montclair School District-sponsored cello lessons for two years and, coincidentally, a free cello on which to perform. Coupled with my inland North American English dialect, lugging that cello to grammar school guaranteed two years of merciless harassment.

For me, there was a sanctuary. I found succor in the Montclair Public Library.

Amid tons of tomes, I sought to read many books. Many Saturday afternoons, after viewing a James Bond movie or sci-fi matinee in the Wellmont Theater, I would beeline it along Bloomfield Avenue to the library to read about ... bees. Ants. The bathyscaphe, the Battle of Gettysburg. "The Caine Mutiny" and "The Cask of Amontillado."

Still agog at watching a Rod Serling half-hour creation on a little black-and-white TV, I'd visit the library to immerse myself in Ray Bradbury's imaginative short stories. I devoured every Freddy the Pig book in the library's coffers. Ensnared in a chair near a first-floor window's wide expanse, perusing a book, I found a respite from harassers and teasers.

When I finished the final chapter of one volume, I explored the library's aisles to find another treasure. Each row of shelves held an unimaginable wealth of knowledge. And I could read the books in the library's sanctum without fear or ridicule. Whether penned by Raymond Chandler or Robert W. Service, Robert Louis Stevenson or Bruce Catton, books and short stories

captivated me.

Through the literature I discovered in the Montclair Public Library, I rejoiced at being the new kid in towns and places existing only in books. I was the new kid in an exotic oasis that sustained T.E. Lawrence; I was the young visitor in a village ensnared in Dracula's flitting shadow; I was a fellow castaway on an island providing shelter for the Robinson family, a couple of them kids like me.

Montclair's two library branches in 2012 are far more than repositories of books and other printed and digital reading material. As affirmed in the recent prolonged electric-power failure afflicting much of Montclair, and as exemplified by its array of artistic, educational and cultural offerings, the Montclair Public Library provides a center for our community. And for many visitors, whether chronologically young or mature, the library is the sanctuary that always welcomes the new kid in town.

---Mark Porter is Editor of the Montclair Times