

Adaora Udoji

I am an obscenely curious person. I've been curious about people, places and things my entire life.

My earliest memories of learning about life beyond my own came from books. Every book I have ever read, the true stories and the made up ones, have offered a window in to another world. Some of them came from a special place. The library.

Perhaps, it was in the genes. My mom, Mary Liz or Buttercup as some call her, was a librarian. As kids, my brother and I spent a lot of time reading books and lots of time in libraries.

My parents read to us religiously. They read and read, often the same book many times over. My mom can't even remember how many times she read me, *Where the Sidewalk Ends* by Shel Silverstein. It's my anthem. I'm still that kid trying to understand how the world and universe and galaxy work.

When my mom was getting her masters in library science, we used to hang out in the stacks at the University of Michigan. True Love. The smell of old books, the smell of new books, the aroma of ink on paper bound by cloth. One whiff reminds me of the hundreds and thousands of stories that await me. That magical feeling was exciting when I at 10 years old and it is just as exciting for me today, many decades later.

As a kid, I loved mysteries, untangling Nancy Drew's world or parsing the words of Agatha Christie. My mom turned me on to the Judy Bloom who taught me much about being a teen. Her book, *Forever*, was enlightening. I think about American pioneers and it immediately triggers visions of *My Antonia* by Willa Cather. I've read the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy four or five times. *Shibumi* by Travenian is where I learned about the art of simplicity. I devoured *Googled* by Ken Auletta. I learned much about the markets in *Buffet* by Roger Lowestein. Octavia Butler is my favorite science fiction author. I'm not sure I even knew she was an African-American woman until I was half way through her books. Learning that was thrilling and made me, a bi-racial kid, feel included in that world as a possibility for me. Octavia Butler was a role model.

Today, my mom and I sometimes swap books. But she tends more toward the literary genre and me, well I read a mix of mystery, biographies, non-fiction, literature and contemporary stories, does *Fifty Shades* fit in that category?

The magic is learning about the people, places and things in a way I might never in real life. The greatest gift books have given me the chance to see life from a different point of view.

I am grateful for the Montclair Public Library. It is a special place where my mom spends time with my daughter. We are passing on a legacy that continues to fill my heart, the love of the written word and respect for the power of information bound.

I still read books. Yes, I have a tablet. But there is nothing like holding a book, turning the pages. There is nothing like sitting in a library surrounded by wisdom and humor and love and facts and delicious tales.

Books and stories in them open our eyes to many things. I've been enriched in ways I could not begin to count by the thousands of authors I have read over the years. To them, to the libraries and the librarians that protect and keep these books safe; and make them available to everyone. I say thank you. Thank You.

-Adaora Udoji is interim president of News Diversity, a tech/media startup, and a former reporter for CNN and ABC News.