

Valerie Wilson Wesley

The Babcock Public Library was my oasis when I was a kid. I grew up in the 1950s in Ashford, Connecticut. We were the only African-American family in a rural, all-white town. If my parents were confronted with overt racism, they buried their anger and kept it away from the kids as black parents have always done. But children can usually sniff out the truth, especially if it comes through your kitchen window in the shape of a brick. Pat, my younger sister, and I certainly knew what *that* meant. But we also knew that our father would protect us no matter what.

My father was a decorated Tuskegee Airman who had fought in two wars, earning the Distinguished Flying Cross and numerous other medals. He'd paid hard-earned money for his fourteen acres and the house he'd built on them, and he'd be damned if some rural racist was going to chase him off his land. So there we were, and there we stayed. There weren't any more bricks, as I remember, not the kind that hit you anyway. Connecticut, even in those days, was known for tolerance. My sister and I succeeded in school, joined 4-H, and some of our neighbors became life-long friends.

New England was a far cry from the segregated South where my father spent his childhood, the place he never talked about or visited except for funerals. In his day, many black parents, keenly aware of the fate threatening their children, kept their daughters out of white men's kitchens and sent their sons up North far away from Southern "justice." So my father spent his teen-age years in Harlem and attended DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, which may be the place where he dreamed of becoming a writer.

His first dream, though, was to become a pilot, and with skill and determination he achieved that one. He never attained the second but passed on his love of books and respect for writers to his daughters. Most of the books he owned were anthologies, the "Collected Works" of famous authors. I went through those quickly--half reading some, bored by others--until one afternoon I discovered Edgar Allan Poe and fell in love. I was fascinated by mysteries and the macabre, but my parents' taste ran to bestsellers and Reader's Digest selections. That was when I headed to Babcock library.

I was a self-conscious, fearful child wary of adults I didn't know who didn't look like me. I've forgotten the name of the librarian at Babcock, but I remember she welcomed me warmly, quickly letting me know that this place belonged to me as much as to anyone else. She must have been a voracious reader, like I was, and when I'd show up each week having devoured the books I'd checked out, she'd comb the stacks for new ones. Had I read Bullfinch's Mythology? she asked. I shook my head but was attracted to its bulk. She assured me I'd love it so I hauled it home. She tempted me with Nancy Drew, but I was addicted to Poe--the hard stuff. Finally, she introduced me to Agatha Christie, and Agatha kept me reading for months.

Like all wonderful places, libraries and the people who run them rescue those in need unaware that they're throwing a raft. At ten, I'd climb two flights of stairs to the second floor of a timeless Town Hall and enter a world filled with warmth, light and more books than I could possibly read. More than fifty years later, I still smile at the memory.

-Valerie Wilson Wesley is the author of mysteries, adult-themed novels and children's books and a former executive editor of Essence magazine. She is the author of the New Jersey-based Tamara Hayle Mystery series.