

Arthur Levine

The town I grew up in, Elmont, New York, had a famous race track (Belmont) a somewhat famous cemetery (Beth David) and no bookstore. I guess that wasn't so unusual; back then no one I knew BOUGHT books; the only ones I owned were given to me by my grandparents as special presents. But I loved to read more than anything else. I used to pray for rain so I wouldn't be forced to find a friend, go outside and get fresh air; I could just sit curled up with Madeleine L'Engle in my favorite velveteen living room chair. Every week my mom took me to the Elmont Public Library so I could take back the book I'd finished and replace it with something new. Books tumbled off those library shelves and into my thirsty arms like a literary waterfall, endless and powerful.

Once, for a fourth-grade assignment, I wrote a book of parody Halloween recipes called "The Way to a Warlock's Heart." It was part Betty Crocker, part Mad Magazine, and I "illustrated" it myself. (Oh, that I could have known Lane Smith back then!) Seemingly miraculously, my brilliant teacher managed to get my booklet displayed with some other students' work in the Public Library on a little table. I'll never forget walking in and seeing it: There was MY work, in the same sacred space as E.B. White, and Ezra Jack Keats and Julius Lester! I never forgot the thrill of that, and I'm fairly certain the experience is what made me want to be a writer and a publisher - to continue the pride and the excitement of making books that other people (strangers!) might read.

As I grew up, libraries continued to be my safe place, my refuge. I hung out in every library on the Brown University campus - writing poetry in the sterile carrels of the Sciences Library, reading classics at the "Rock," preparing myself to come out by scouring the shelves of the Sarah Doyle Women's Center library, studying every "Gay" book one by one. When I lived in Teaneck, the public library was one of the few places where all the town's populations mixed and therefore one of the few places I felt comfortable.

It's even fair to say that a librarian led me to Montclair. When my son was born and I was considering several towns in New Jersey as places to live, we wound up looking very closely at a northern New Jersey suburb that was... well let's just say not very diverse. I wanted to know if it would be an OK place for my infant son to grow up in. So whom did I ask? The town librarian. I felt that a librarian would give me reliable information, that I could count on her. And, as librarians have always done, she told it to me straight;

you'll probably be fine, but you WILL stick out. (Instead I headed straight for Montclair.)

So libraries have given me entertainment, my life's work, and my home. What more could I ask for? Now it's my turn to try to make great books to give to THEM as they have always given great books to me. As they have given great books to anyone who walks through their doors regardless of who they are or how much money they have. And it's my turn to help ensure that Libraries endure as a refuge for others, stocked with the stuff of dreams.

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