

## Benilde Little

What is there to say about the value of libraries, other than of course they're valuable, as important as ideas, as imagination, as creativity. Of course, I take for granted that everyone values these things and of course that's not true. But, for now, I think, I'm preaching to the choir.

My earliest memories of the library are going to a brick federal structure on Osborne Terrace in Newark. It was the Weequahic branch. I can still feel the cool on my thighs as we sat on the marble floor during circle time. It was the early '60s, before I was old enough to go to school. There was no pre-school back then, you entered school in kindergarten at age 5.

My mom was a working mom, but she moonlighted as a '50s housewife, exhausting herself to be PTA president, Cub Scout Leader and make time to take me to stuff like story-time. I remember looking across the room at my mother, dressed in her sensible cotton shirtwaist and pumps, drinking coffee with other mothers, housewives who came as much for the coffee klatch.

I got my library card before I was old enough to read. I wasn't an especially early reader, but there were great picture books. I remember the officiousness of the lady who sat at the checkout desk, stern but friendly enough, perhaps adjusting to the changing neighborhood.

Weequahic (pronounced wih-Qway-ik), called Week-way by the locals, was still primarily Jewish. My parents were the first Black family to buy on our block and while the complexion was changing, the striving was not. It was Philip Roth's neighborhood and many of his stories were set there.

When you read about this section of Newark, though, it's either about Roth, Weequahic High graduating more Ph.D.s than any other school in the country (in the 1950s), the riots in the '60s or about how Weequahic's principal, the late Ron Stone, wore a bulletproof vest to school during his tenure in early 2000. The decade between, the 1960s to the '70s, when my neighborhood greatly changed, is when I came of age; that time made me a writer.

Mom introduced me to the library, this magical-seeming place, where with the flash of a cardboard square, one could carry home a stack of books. I loved, love, the quiet of the place. For me there was something enchanting about a place to think, to make up stories, to live in my head without anybody interrupting, calling my name, asking me what I was doing locked away in my attic bedroom.

I still get a kick out of finding just the book I've been wanting to read and getting to take it home by merely handing over a piece of plastic with my name on it. Now my local library is a modern three-story structure in Montclair, my adopted home of 15 years. The place where my toddler-aged children attended weekly programs either with the babysitter, or me, both of us thrilled to have somewhere stimulating to go, especially in the winter. But unlike me, by the time my children reached pre-school age, they were in school fulltime: one at the Montclair Co-Op, the other at Parkside.

Recently I was standing in line to check out a book and I was thrilled to see a woman holding a copy of my first novel, "Good Hair." She was returning it. She was talking with the librarian and I was straining to hear if she was saying what she'd thought about the book. But she was speaking in a proper library voice and I told myself, it was just as well.

It's still a magical place to be.

Benilde Little is the author of four novels and the upcoming memoir, "Welcome to My Breakdown" (March 2015/Atria), an exploration of herself and her mother.