

Christina Baker Kline

I am descended from a long line of teachers on one side and millworkers on the other. For my mother, going to the library was as routine as going to church in her small North Carolina town. For my father, the first in his north-Georgia family to attend college, stepping into a library for the first time (the first time!) as a freshman at Furman was a magic carpet ride to a world of wonder. My mother, true to her origins, became a teacher; the country boy she married became – to everyone’s surprise – a professor of history who published a dozen books. Is it any surprise that these two very different people – joined by their love of learning, of libraries – raised their four daughters to be a writer, a university fundraiser, a therapist, and a librarian?

In the early 1970s, before my mother went back to work, my father made \$13,000 a year as an assistant professor in Maine. Books were prized in our household, but considered expensive treats. On my birthday each year I received one, dated and inscribed in my mother’s elegant cursive and my father’s pointy scrawl: *Blueberries for Sal* when I was six, *Little House in the Big Woods* when I was 10, *Ariel*, Sylvia Plath’s dark final collection of poetry, when I turned 16. Most of these were already favorites, books I’d taken out of the library again and again. They were a reward for reading. I felt as if I’d earned them by loving them.

Our house was filled with books, but most were on loan. On Saturday mornings my mother would pile all four girls into our trusty wood-paneled, rust-rimmed station wagon and deposit us at the Bangor Public Library, an imposing old granite structure with soaring ceilings and librarians who treated our many requests and questions as interesting challenges, not as annoyances. It was astounding to gain access to such a mind-bending bounty of books, all free and available as far as the eye could see. I never quite believed it possible – and still find it hard to believe – that in a library you can pluck a book from a shelf, or half a dozen, if you wish, and take them home with you. And you can do it again. And again.

As it had for my father, the library became a portal to a world beyond my imagining. Wherever my curiosity took me, I could find a book to satisfy it. Just as often, the opposite was true: I'd stumble on a story, a topic, a world I knew nothing about that led me in a direction I didn't anticipate. In the library I learned to be guided by instinct, not certainty; to be open to ideas, to allow myself to be surprised. I learned that peace, quiet, and contemplation are all you need to let your imagination unfold.

These early lessons have served me well as a writer. As I did when I was a child, I relish tracking down obscure or little-known stories and exploring my obsessions, guided only by a willingness to allow one thing to lead to the next.

My sisters, too, were deeply influenced by their experiences in our small-town library. Cynthia's profession involves funding programs, building collections, and upgrading infrastructure in the libraries of a major research institution. Catherine, who was drawn primarily to nonfiction (adventure stories at first and later memoir, social science, feminist theory), became a psychoanalyst who writes and lectures about these lifelong passions. And Clara's path needs little explanation: she runs a small village library on the craggy coast of Maine.

It is both gratifying and perhaps not surprising that our own children have enthusiastically embraced their family legacy. "Gotta go, Mom," my son Will, a college sophomore, said at the end of our phone call last night. "Just stepped into the quiet room at the library so I can get my research paper done. It's a no-phone zone, you know?"

I know, I think. Good luck on your own magic-carpet ride.