

Harvey Araton

I grew up in a home without books, save for those required by school. Ours was a cramped three-bedroom apartment in a Staten Island housing project, diversely working class and chronically noisy, family disagreements often based on the unworkable formula of too many children and not enough cash.

I can't say that I gravitated to the neighborhood library due to curiosity, a craving for books, as much as I - the middle child between a young teenage and toddler sisters - needed a sanctuary of quiet when even own bedroom (my sisters shared) wasn't enough. I believe I was 11 when I took a two-block walk up Castleton Avenue and wandered for the first time into the West-New Brighton branch of the New York Public Library system, a one-story brick building perched atop a steep row of steps flanked by manicured lawns and two sets of lampposts.

Compared to the block housing of the projects and low-slung commercial strip around it, the library stood out in the neighborhood like a small castle. I brought my own reading material, a handful of Marvel comic books, and took a seat at a table in the back, relishing the privacy and anonymity. One day soon after, I returned with my schoolbooks to do my homework and this eventually became a weekday habit.

The middle-aged librarian always smiled when I walked in. I don't remember the place being particularly busy, or how long it took for her to approach me one day and introduce herself. Her name was Sally. She asked what I was reading for school and when I admitted that it was nothing at the time I found too interesting, she said the library was filled with other books I might actually enjoy.

"What are you interested in?" she said.

"I play baseball," I said, adding that I rooted for the Yankees, a flagrant understatement.

"We have books about baseball," she said. "May I show you?"

I followed her to the shelves, where she pulled a book and handed it to me. The title was "Switch Hitter." The author was someone named Duane Decker. I immediately figured it must have been about Mickey Mantle, who at that time, 1963, was my switch-hitting Yankees hero. But Decker's book was a work of fiction about a talented but rebellious

rookie named Russ Woodward, a story about hard lessons learned on the way to becoming a more selfless team player.

Not typically a fast reader, I became absorbed and read the book within days - on the school bus, during lunch break, in bed at night with a flashlight. When I returned it to Sally, she asked if I'd like another. Duane Decker, it turned out, had written a series of these books - 13 in all - about positional players and pitchers for a team called the Blue Sox.

The series began in 1947 and would end in 1964, the year Decker died. Before Sally allowed me to borrow another, she processed my first library card. In no chronological order, I wound up reading every Decker book the library branch had on its shelves, though according to the index file I searched after finishing the stock, a couple were missing.

It didn't matter. I soon transitioned to other authors and genres, a limitless supply of material that made the West-New Brighton library as much a place of escapist adventure for me as the baseball field, in addition to being my peaceful refuge. That was a half-century ago. At the intersection of Castleton and North Burger Avenues, in a neighborhood that has suffered painfully through drug and crime scourges across the decades, a library that was built in 1933 remains open six days a week.

The photo on its Facebook page still looks to someone who grew up there like a small castle on a hill and where, inside, literature can change a life.

Montclair resident Harvey Araton has been a longtime sports reporter and columnist for the New York Times and is the author of six nonfiction books and a 2014 novel, "Cold Type."