

Kate Zernike

My hometown, Rowayton, Conn., was sort of a smaller, beach version of Montclair; a former oyster fishing village, it had been colonized by creative and media types.

Crockett Johnson, the author of “Harold and the Purple Crayon,” lived around the corner. His wife, Ruth Krauss, and their friend Maurice Sendak took the definitions for their 1952 book “A Hole Is To Dig” from interviews with kindergartners at the town’s elementary School.

Its first library had been set up by the publisher George Palmer Putnam, a summer resident, in the basement of the local grocery store, using his own books and remainders from other publishing houses. That went out of service after Putnam left town, but residents started a new collection, first in the former hook and ladder station, then in a one-room storefront on Rowayton Avenue, and finally in the Tudor-style stables of an old estate in the middle of town, where it was when I arrived in the late 1960s.

I was the youngest of three children and the only girl, in a neighborhood dominated by boys. My oldest brother hijacked the beautiful wooden doll carriage my mother had bought for me and made us push him around the street in it. The library, then, was the first place that felt like mine. I still vividly picture the gray pageboy and the broad smile of Miss Johnson, the librarian who was about halfway through her five-decade career there when she gave me my first library card. I would wedge myself on the floor of the car between the front and back seats to consume my haul; my mother complained I read all the new books by the time we arrived home. But there was so much potential in the stacks, so much texture, so many worlds to be discovered.

Libraries became an anchor for me. When we moved to Westchester for a few years, my mother took me early to the library, where I later got my first volunteer job, restacking shelves. In Boston for my first real job, I lived a few blocks from the majestic public library and spent countless Saturdays wandering the stacks and tiptoeing into the basilica-like reading room of the old McKim building.

Little surprise, I guess, that I would become a writer. Most writers begin as avid readers. But I recall it as an aha moment when someone suggested I might try newspaper writing. A place for me? The idea was as thrilling, as affirming, as the smile on Miss Johnson's face when she greeted me by name. At its best, journalism is a public service not unlike a library: opening minds to new worlds, new ideas, allowing people to recognize the tragedy, the comedy, the poetry of everyday life.

These days libraries everywhere aspire to be more than just books: a place you can rent musical instruments or meet a friend for coffee. The renovations to the Boston Public Library include retail space and a "hang out" lounge for teenagers.

In Montclair, I once again live a couple of blocks from the library, and I appreciate the talks and children's events, I love that I almost always run into someone I know when I walk into the sunny atrium at the front, and that in the great post-Hurricane Sandy blackout, people in Montclair sought the library not only as a place to charge their phones, but also as a kind of haven. But I still cherish libraries most for the private discoveries in the stacks, the sense that you might just feel your mind swell slightly when you crack the spine of a book.

When I wrote a book five years ago, I got a call out of the blue to talk at the Rowayton Library – an old neighbor had tipped them off. My second grade teacher sat in the front row. The new electronic library cards featured the artwork of Ian Falconer, the author of the "Olivia" books, whose father designed the houses I grew up in. So I was not the most famous, but I still smile when I look at the poster from the event, now in my office, that identifies me as Kate Zernike, "Rowayton Author."

Kate Zernike is a National Education Reporter for the New York Times, and the (Montclair, too) author of "Boiling Mad: Behind the Lines in Tea Party America."