Our Writing Lives

My Mom, A Croc, and Mr. Gourley
The Making of An English Teacher

By SHEELAGH STRAUB

"I'll yank your tongue out," my mother said, "if I ever hear you say 'Ain't.'" Or so she supposedly said. Although my mother claims she told me this when I was small, I don't remember it, and I think she's bluffing. She is, however, largely to thank for my use of correct grammar, appreciation for language, and love of reading.

As Scout says in To Kill A Mockingbird, I do not remember a time in my life when I did not know how to read. For as far back as I can recall, I remember sitting with my mom and taking turns reading. I remember most vividly sitting together reading discarded school reading texts that my father, a construction foreman, had brought home from the job sites of fire-damaged schools. The books could neither be sold nor given away, so he brought them home. Several of them were reading texts, and I remember liking them much more than the first grade readers that featured Mark and Janet, who were, apparently, the literary relatives of Dick and Jane.

We also read books together that we ordered from the Weekly Reader Book Club. Through these books, we met Lyle the crocodile, Mr. Pengacheosa and The Man Who Lost His Head. This last book was a strange tale of a man who literally lost his head and went searching for a replacement. My mom asked me recently whether I remembered the reference to the word apulent to describe the hair on the man's reclaimed head. I did. We agreed that this was an odd word choice for a children's book, but I am sure this was the book that introduced me to the word opulent. Other books added to my vocabulary. Harriet the Spy taught me that a dumbwaiter was not a foolish servant, and A Wrinkle in Time introduced me to the concept of tesserae.

My mother's own reading habits also served my vocabulary well. Gourmet magazine came to our house for many years, and I learned about clotted cream, scones, and cappuccino well before I tasted any of them. In addition, the "Drama in Real Life" features in the ever-present issues of Reader's Digest presented additions such as tsunami and abyss.

Long before I had the faintest thought of becoming an English teacher, my mom made sure I used Standard American English language and pronunciation; she wouldn't let poor grammar slide an inch. I do not recall the threat about using it, but from my earliest days, I knew that "ain't" wasn't even an option in our house. My mom was very unhappy, too, when I came home asking for a "pin" to do my homework, the way my third grade teacher who was from Mississippi said it.

While my mom was the main influence on my early (and later) reading and language habits, another person was influential in my writing. Sad to say, it was not until 11th grade that I felt challenged to really think about what I wrote. Haynie Gourley, my brilliant and goofy speech teacher, was also my English teacher for one semester of my junior year. I hated him, albeit temporarily, as he made us labor through version after revised version of papers whose topics ranged from Faulkner's Nobel Prize acceptance speech to Simon and Garfunkel's "Scarborough Fair."

"Dig deeper," "Get beyond the obvious," or "So what does this really mean?" were the comments I'd read on my papers, and I'd stomp up to his desk to whine about just what I was supposed to figure out in this, the third or fourth revision. He'd smile at my frustration, give me a few more hints and send me off. Eventually, through thought much deeper than I'd accomplished at any time previously, I realized what Faulkner meant by the fact that man would, "Not merely endure," but prevail. I came to realize the significance of the anti-war symbolism Simon and Garfunkel used.

Although this breakthrough didn't come until late in my high school career, I credit Mr. Gourley because it made me truly understand the importance of getting past the obvious in a piece of writing. I think of him every time I nudge one of my own students toward a deeper analysis. Sometimes I tell them the story of my own frustration with that pivotal assignment so long ago. They laugh but then want to know where to find this man who was largely responsible for inspiring the person who now, similarly, tortures them with thinking deeper. "So it's HIS fault that you're here now!" they howl.

Yes, it's true. Mr. Gourley helped me appreciate the value of pushing myself to write better than I ever had, which, ultimately, led me to teach English. He shares the blame, though, with my mom, who gave me the gifts of a love for reading and appreciation for language, not to mention the dread fear of using the word "ain't."

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