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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Lynn, this is beautiful. What a gift your fifth grade teacher gave you with that field trip. I thought your first paragraph didn't quite work with the rest of the piece, so I omitted it; if you feel strongly, I can be convinced to restore it. I found the Steinbeck paragraph a little confusing so I nudged that a little more. The Wilfred Owen quote and the Latin was a little confusing and appeared to be a direct quote, so I hope I clarified that a little. All the best, Jeff

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 My lifelong love affair with libraries

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 A first trip to the library fostered lifelong values of self-
3 reliance, imagination, and the belief that people can change and
4 lead lives of possibility

####END SUBHED####

5 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

6 IT WAS 1945. The year the Nazi concentration camp at
7 Buchenwald was liberated by the United States, Congress
8 officially recognized the Pledge of Allegiance by name, and

9 Branch Rickey signed Jackie Robinson to play for the Montreal
10 Royals.

11 I was 10 years old, and about to make the most amazing
12 discovery — a discovery that would affect my entire life. Our fifth
13 grade teacher took us to the public library.

14 It was a windy day. We were all buttoned up and hatted.
15 Two by two, like Madeline, we walked from the school to the
16 Kearny Public Library. It was all stone, like a church. We walked
17 up the steps and entered the magic door.

18 * * *

19 RECENTLY, I was part of a discussion on values: Where did
20 we learn the values that defined our lives?

21 I'd always thought I had learned mine in the Baptist
22 Church as a child. I had loved the stories they told in Sunday
23 School, especially when they were told with the help of a flannel
24 board; I would get caught up in the plot and the movement of the
25 figures.

26 But, I thought, much as my imagination was caught by
27 the plots — the flood, the miracles, the Cain and Abel story —
28 had I ever seen myself in the stories? No, I never had.

29 I did learn by my parents' example. They were hard
30 workers, children of the Depression. I learned to not spend what I
31 didn't have and to appreciate the value of education.

32 But where did I learn the other values? Back to 1945 and
33 the public library. I learned the values I live today in the books I
34 discovered there.

35 * * *

36 THAT BRINGS ME to Alec Ramsey. He was the hero of *The*
37 *Black Stallion* and its series of sequels by Walter Farley. He was a
38 boy, but no matter — I could replace him with myself in my
39 imagination easily.

40 For a city kid, there is nothing so exotic as a horse.
41 Especially one that comes from Arabia and lifts me off our city
42 streets as easily as a wayward wind.

43 Alec taught me self-reliance. He taught me stick-to-it-
44 iveness. He taught me the value of friendship, especially with
45 unlikely people. Henry, the retired jockey, wasn't the most
46 glamorous of characters. But, like Alec, I loved him.

47 Alec's adventures cemented my friendship with Shirley,
48 another city kid who lived down the street from me. We spent
49 hours, weeks, years riding imaginary horses all over town. We
50 became avid readers, looking always for new names for new
51 imaginary horses. We could recite long lists of exotic names:
52 Satin, Sultan, Sand. We became hotshot spellers.

53 * * *

54 IT WAS NOW 1948. I was 13 when, somehow, I wandered
55 into the front of the library and found the adult collection.

56 As I browsed the shelves, there weren't many women
57 writers I could stumble on: a few poets and Pearl S. Buck. I read
58 everything Buck wrote, but the book I remember the most is, of
59 course, *The Good Earth*.

60 This book globalized a kid who had rarely been off her
61 street. I learned that I could relate to someone in faraway China,
62 sometimes better than I could to someone who lived next door. I
63 totally identified with O-Lan, lived her story.

64 It never occurred to me how strange it was for an
65 American teenager to identify with an oppressed woman. I know
66 now because I knew about oppression. It was unspoken and all
67 around me. It is not surprising I have spent my life learning to
68 speak for myself and for those who are voiceless around me.

69 Let me not neglect the men. I read all of John Steinbeck,
70 whose *East of Eden* gave me one of the tenets that was the
71 backbone of all my teaching.

72 Steinbeck used the Cain and Abel myth for his central
73 theme. For two generations, his protagonists — Caleb and Aaron
74 — the myth remains the same. Caleb (Cain) is the bad one; Aaron
75 (Abel), the good one. But in the third generation Cain changes
76 the story. He does not follow the pattern.

77 And I absorbed and believed: People can change. When
78 you believe this, your approach to life is one of possibility for
79 yourself and others.

80 In an early English class, I read “Dulce et Decorum Est,”
81 by Wilfred Owen, a poem about World War I by a poet who died
82 in the war.

83 Wilfred Owen graphically describes a gas attack, and
84 people choking to death; if the reader saw it, they wouldn’t say
85 “The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori*” (“It is right
86 and proper / to die for your country”). I totally believed him, and
87 he sent me on my way to pacifism and anti-war marches.

88 * * *

89 TODAY, in my 90th year, I continue to visit the library
90 almost every week. I continue to add to my knowledge, rearrange
91 my priorities, and learn from others both local and global.

92 I get all this from the Brooks Memorial Library in
93 Brattleboro.

94 No, it’s not the Kearny Public Library — except, in my
95 imagination, I am still climbing those stairs into the sacred
96 sanctum.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

97 **LYNN MARTIN** is an artist and poet.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

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