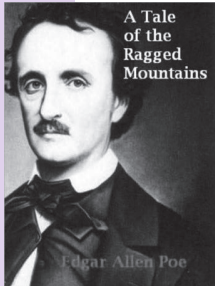


WHEN YOUR QUEEN MOVES YOUR CHEESE

by Justin Stauffer

Editor's note: Every year, students in RBC's composition class write a literacy narrative, a piece that describes how reading or writing has had an impact on the writer's life. Here is a delightful example:

It may be impossible to determine just where my love affair with books began. It was in full bloom during my teens as I began to devour the classics. I hid in the bushes with Scout and Dill, watching for Boo Radley. I memorized a passage from *A Tale of the Ragged Mountains* so I could impress a grown-up female friend with my knowledge of Poe. Pip's story of unrequited love resonated as my crush on a girl several years older was known only to me. I could hear the call of the conch as I despaired over Piggy, and I got my first glimpse into politics on the Farm with the Animals.



A deep affection between us (books and me, I mean) was evident in pubescence. I wore Mom out with many trips to the library for anything by Burroughs, Seton or Kjelgaard. Sometimes I would ride my bicycle over seven miles round trip to pick up the next book in the series I was currently reading. I vividly remember my introduction to Tarzan by my older cousins, my mother's stern disapproval, and my sly satisfaction knowing that Dad also enjoyed Frazetta's fantastic art, since the incredibly muscled characters on the covers reflected his own work. Soup and Rob from Vermont were my imaginary companions as I "painted" the inside of my grandfather's shed with tar "to keep the rain out," or saddled my uncle's hogs for a wild (though smelly), rodeo with three of my cousins and a friend from Phoenix.

Before I could read on my own, one of my favorite memories is swirling down a river in a wild barrel ride with a company of dwarves. My wide eyes and troubled look interrupted the journey long enough for Mom to come in from the kitchen and ask, "Charles! Are you sure he's ready for that?"

I was sitting on Dad's lap in the corner of the living room. Dad, laughing, asked my permission to go on. Our parents read to us often. Mom stuck with Bible stories, but Dad read me nearly anything. His favorites included the dictionary, World Book encyclopedias and the Bible, but he would also read us excerpts from Stephen King, Charles Dickens and James Michener. My earliest memories include being read

to by my cousins, Bev, Karen and Cindy. They took endless turns while we sat in Grandma's living room on her old green couch. We snuggled down, protected from the coarse fabric by a nest of afghans crocheted by ancestors now long since departed, reading Little Golden Books over and over. I can still feel the clasp from my engineer overalls against my chin, and the soft wool of the brown sweater that Mom knitted for me against my cheek. That sweater shows up in every picture taken when I was two years old. The *Three Little Kittens* was a favorite then. Family legend states that by that age I had learned to recite it, and would "read" it to my aunts and uncles.

The very first book I read on my own was *Reddy Fox* by Thornton W. Burgess. I was in first grade and more than a little proud to have it finished before Christmas. At that point, books started to be Christmas presents, birthday presents, rewards, and a problem. My voracious appetite for them, coupled with my natural tendencies toward collections, put a strain not only on my parent's finances, but also on all the extra space in our little two-bedroom house. Dad built a huge bookshelf in the bedroom I shared with my sister, and it was filled in no time. The addiction only deepened over the years. I was a thrift and bookstore junkie first, then a thrift store manager; I later co-founded a nonprofit with my wife that was funded by a thrift store of our very own. My access to books was virtually unlimited, and things began to get a little crazy. I believe I reached the peak of book collection insanity at well over 5000 volumes.

Around that time, my Queen discovered Josh Becker and his theory of minimalism. It was time to reduce, reuse and recycle, and first on the list was my life's work.

"Do you really need every James Patterson novel ever published?"

"Yes! I want to read them all."

"How many have you read so far?"

"Um, well..."

"You haven't even read one of them, have you? Not one!"

“But I liked that one movie...and I think I listened to a couple of his on tape...”

“How about all these Dickens? You seriously have three copies of *Great Expectations*!”

“I know, but this one is valuable, so I don’t like reading it, and the one with all the creases on the cover is the one I loan out to friends, and that other one is my reading copy.”

“So let your friends read your copy and get rid of this old nasty one.”

“It’s not nasty! In fact, it’s kind of my favorite. See, there’s still a note from Marcel in it. That’s the first copy I ever bought. It went everywhere with me. I took it to Oregon, Iowa, and Virginia. It was Dad’s. He gave it to me when I was, like, thirteen. It’s a sentimental thing.”

“You realize how ridiculous this is? You have a problem. There must be thirty or forty boxes of books out in the shed under an inch of dust. Something HAS to change!”

So I stopped bringing all my treasured finds home. I just stored them at various places around the thrift store. I had a few boxes stored in the dressing rooms, some in the trailer out back, and six or eight boxes behind the counter. I used them as a makeshift sorting table to disguise their true identity. Everything went fine for a while. We got rid of a lot of stuff. My Queen helped me purge my closet and I gave in to the occasional childhood treasure being donated as a token of my support. But the books were held in reserve. We both knew better than to talk about them. Josh Becker kept preaching minimalism. My wife kept listening. But she stayed gentle, and she seemed understanding. Until that morning when she went in to work at the store, and I went to a board meeting.

Apparently, things were a little slow, and when things are a little slow, my Queen finds things to do. Those boxes in the dressing rooms had been bothering her for quite some time. Not to mention the ones in her way behind the counter. I arrived back at the store shortly after noon to a great surprise. Not only had my stash been disturbed, but My Sweet Little Thing had priced and prepped them and My Pride and Joy was stocking the shelves of the library with them.

“Um, I was going to read some of these,” I ventured.

“Okay.”

I took a few off the shelf.

“All those?” she asked.

“Yah.”

“You don’t even read anymore.”

“But I’m gonna start.”

“When? And why don’t you start with that stack at home on the desk?”

“Tonight. I’m gonna start tonight.”

“What’s that book on top?”

“*Who Moved My Cheese?*”

“I’m about to.”

“About to what?”

“Move your cheese.”

My Queen put her hands on her hips. “You may not bring another book home,” she said. “Not unless you bring one back into the store first. And you are going to clean out the shed. If you can’t fit them all into the house, you have too many books.”

“Is this one of your ‘Josh Becker the Minimalist-Extraordinaire things?’” I thought, but I didn’t dare ask it.

I knew then that things were getting real. My Queen is not in the habit of telling me what to do unless things are real. And this was real, *very* real.

I immediately began to negotiate. Negotiating is my thing. It’s the key to success. It says so in the mouse and cheese book, or maybe the rhinoceros book. Or in one of those books about smart animals that tell you how to live your life.

It took some time, but that’s when things began to change. Over the next year I found religion, or some new form of it that I had never practiced before. I sent my sister a box of books. I had a huge yard sale. I took my borrowed books back to the store. I gave books away, especially books about mice and cheese and fish markets in Seattle. I got rid of half my books. When we decided to move, I got rid of half of those books.

Finally, Josh Becker convinced us that if we couldn’t get all our books onto our bookshelves, we had too many books. We filled the bookshelves, six of them. Then I separated out specific books that I really wanted to read and I started reading again. And that is the best part. Just like the minimalists say, life is about quality over quantity, not getting crushed under the burden of things, but taking time to enjoy the things we have. So I’m reading more than I have in a very long time. But every now and then I find a book that I just need to have. So I buy it. But not before I find one that I’m willing to part with.

Justin, Diana, and their three boys reside on the edge of campus at Rosedale Bible College. They still love books and maintain a “small” personal library.

