

## Ross' Rave: Full Circle

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A gazillion years ago, my then 12 year old daughter sat at the kitchen counter shoveling spoonfuls of Rice Chex into her mouth with uncanny speed. While she was the hands-down, cereal eating champion of the household, she won on volume, not grace. Soggy carbo-bits splattered her flannel PJs like buckshot.

“What’s a proper noun?” she said in between gulps.

“Excuse me?” I asked, sponging the floor around her chair.

“Pork-butt (her un-endearing, yet not unwarranted, nickname for her English teacher) wants us to memorize all the parts of speech. Verbs and adjectives and stuff,” she slurped.

“Uh huh,” I said opening another roll of paper towels.

“She said we had to know all the parts of speech before we could begin our writing unit. You’re an English teacher, so I figured you would know.”

I was stunned. Ms. Johnston had an English class of 28 pubescent students memorizing grammar definitions, learning about semicolons, and dangling modifiers when she could have been focusing on the much bigger picture like the joys of reading, and the discovery of writing. Of course, I didn’t know the background, or context to any of this “What is a proper noun?” nonsense, but my hunch is some back-to-basics, kind of readin’, ritin’, rithmatic school board figured the best way to get Johnny to Read (or write) was to hunker down.

As I mopped the counter, it occurred to me that I was pretty much doing the same thing. That very day, a clutch of gagging fresh-persons would be subjected to my ramblings about LC subject-headings and the proper way to cite a chapter in an encyclopedia. I sighed, but did nothing.

Twenty years later, Jetson-like, I sit a half a world away chatting with my pixilated granddaughter, Jay, as if she were in my kitchen.

“Where is Bruce?” she asks. For some reason (wink wink) she thinks I ride a camel named Bruce to work every morning.

“He’s in the shower,” I tell her.

“Are you going to see Miss Eleanor today?” I ask, as my daughter plucks Cheerios from her daughter’s sticky hair.

“We’re going to the library,” the little nipper happily shouts, a spoonful of oatly milk dribbling down her chin. Behind her I see her Mom make quotation marks with her fingers.

Several years ago this not-so-little, Texas town overwhelming defeated a critical library bond issue, because, as one vocal, local, talk show caller put it, “We’s got the inner net, whach we needs with a liberry?”

“Library?” I asked perplexed.

“Borders,” my daughter mouthed quietly behind her daughter’s back.

My heart sank. Two decades had passed since the English class “proper noun” incident and we were all paying the price for our folly: an entire generation, raised in a world of trees, incapable not only of seeing the forest, but worse, of even imagining its existence.

The cartoon devil on my left shoulder poked me. “You reap what you sow, mister. What do you expect? This is the Lost Generation. A generation raised in an overstimulated, numbed, dumbed down, keep them fat and stupid culture, weaned on instant, pseudo-self-gratification, nurtured by care-less corporations and shepherded by false prophet, eunuch politicians with “No Child Left Standing” mentalities.

Hopefully, I turned to my right for another voice. Sadly, my library avatar was busy watching pet bloopers on YouTube, drinking a Mr. Pibb.

My two-year-old granddaughter is growing up thinking Borders is a library!

When I ask my students why they come to the library, they tell me the chairs are comfy. In the last two years, I've been through two major library building projects. In both, a major consideration, by librarians and architect alike, was where to put the coffee shop. Don't get me wrong, I'm all for comfy chairs and a latte, but what of the forest?

Part of me is nostalgic for Richard Armour's library ("Here is where people... lower their voices and raise their minds."). And yet, part of me loves the noise and energy of today's libraries. Part of me aches for row after row of long, worn oak tables, in great hushed halls where there is reverence for seriousness, concentration, and learning. Another part of me wants to curl up on the couch, browse Craigslist and eat lemon scones. I miss the dogged-eared catalog cards joining me, tactilely, to a thousand other searches and a thousand other searchers; but I also do love the speed, ease and forgiveness of a crisp connection.

Yesterday on the trip through the desert to our campus' latest venture, Yousef, the driver, was characteristically chatty.

"I'm a technician," he said calmly dodging semis loaded with boulders. "Before this, I was trained technician. Refrigerators, heating, air. Own shop, people."

"What made you change careers?" I asked.

"Today, all parts. Pieces. A compressor breaks. Replace it. Technicians take the old one out, put the new one in. They teach them good, that. They know what to do but they don't know why they do it. *Why* is the big question. If they know *why* the rest is easy. Today, no one cares, *why*."

Full circle.

At yet another information literacy confab, around a white clothed table, I asked my friend and idol, Ilene, if we should simply declare victory and retreat.

"We've been whooped by the likes of Google and Borders and Amazon and Starbucks," I said, feeling burned out and defeated by a lifetime of Sisyphean efforts.

"But we have to keep trying," she said, ever the champion. "If we don't, who will?"

Writing is not about grammar and spelling and punctuation. It's about expression and discovery and the beauty of language. Libraries are not about Boolean searching, truncation, or APA, but about reading and curiosity and learning. Borders and Google have their place, but it's the libraries that know the *why*.

At breakfast tomorrow, I'll ask Jay if the nice librarian at Borders read her some books about camels.

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