

# THE IRREGULAR LITTONIAN

Spring 2011, Number 42

## Spring It Is!

Springtime's bright blue ribbon flies  
Rippling on the air again;  
Fragrances of old begin  
To touch the earth with sweet surmise.  
Violets dream today,  
Soon they will appear.  
Hark, a harp's faint tone from far away!  
Springtime, it is thou,  
It is thyself I hear!

Eduard Mörike (1804-1875)

Greetings from the LITT Program! As always, the new edition of *The Irregular Littonian* brings you news and updates from our faculty and current and former students. This spring, we will also treat you to a glimpse of our faculty's formative childhood reading experiences. May their recollections put a smile on your face and spark your own memories!

Don't forget to join us for food, fun, and old friends at this year's *Really, Really Big LITT Bash* on April 22, 2011, at the Townsend Residential Life Center (4:30-7pm.)

## Student News

LITT alumna **Olivia Bellano** has joined the staff writers of *Patch*, Galloway.

**Phil Bennett** has been accepted into a program to study liberal arts and literature in Italy this summer.

**Stephanie Cawley** was accepted to the *Sweetbriar Creative Writers Conference* in Sweet Briar, Virginia for a four-day conference this spring. Kudos to Stephanie!

Alums **Thomas Earles** ("Milena") and **Donna Huneke** ("The Sous-Chef's Zigzag Cabinet") were finalists in the fiercely competitive November 2010 *Glimmer Train*

### *Fiction Contest for New Writers.*

Since graduation in 2008, **Maureen Egan** has continued her writing, and recently won top prize in the 2009 *Medford Arts Poetry Contest*. She is currently working as an assistant in the dean's office of Princeton University, and is thoroughly enjoying the juxtaposition of coming from a hippie school in the pine barrens to an ivy league institution in bustling Princeton town. When she is not busy writing, working, or playing with her cat Hamlet, she and her fellow Stockton alum, John Riggi, are planning their November wedding.

Poet **Kimberly Grey** is enjoying post-Stockton success in New York: <http://kimberlymgrey.com/2011/01/new-news/>. One of her poems was recently published in *TriQuarterly Online*: <http://triquarterly.org/poetry/x-y>

**Jenna McCoy**, a LITT Major, Writing Minor, and Writing Center tutor, has won second prize in the creative nonfiction contest of *Polaris*, a journal published by Ohio Northern University. The contest was open to all undergraduate writers nationwide as well as internationally. Jenna's winning essay, "Small," will appear in the 2010-2011 issue.

**Dennis O'Connell** had two poems published this past winter. [Cindy will provide publication info]

## ***Faculty News***

### **Deborah Gussman**

Deborah Gussman is on sabbatical for the Spring 2011 term and working on several projects related to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century author Catharine Maria Sedgwick. She will return to the classroom in the fall.

#### **Girl books!**

My most cherished reading experiences as a child were the encounters with the brainy, brave, and beloved girls I discovered in fiction. My favorite (unconventional) girls could be found in Louise Fitzhugh's *Harriet the Spy* and Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking*. Harriet spies on her neighbors in New York City, keeping a notebook of her critical and uncompromising observations as fodder for her future career as a writer. Being too smart for her own good gets her into trouble of course, but she learns important lessons about life and the limits of brutal honesty along the way. Plus, she gets to be *an onion* in the school play.

Pippi and her adventures are more bizarre: what beats the fantasy of being a child with superhuman strength who lives with a monkey and a horse and requires no adult supervision or school? How about Deep Valley, Minnesota? If Harriet and Pippi spoke to my interests in writing and rebellion, my future career as a 19<sup>th</sup>

century scholar may have been jump-started by the more conventional girls of my reading acquaintance: Betsy, Tacy and Tib. These girls appeared in a series of ten books by Maud Hart Lovelace that take place in the fictional town of Deep Valley at the turn of the (20<sup>th</sup>) century, and they follow the girls from early childhood all the way through Betsy's wedding. I can still remember small details that fascinated me in these books, from cutting out and playing with paper dolls (something my mother used to talk about doing as a child) to rolling up the rug in the parlor for a dance party (we had wall to wall carpeting in my home, so rolling up a rug, let alone having a parlor, seemed exotic to me!). Most of all, though, I think that the friendship and special world these girls created together resonated for me and spoke across the generational and cultural divide, and validated my own experiences and desires. Apparently, many others have a similar attachment to these books; I recently learned that there is an active Betsy-Tacy Society – you can find out more about it at <http://www.betsy-tacysociety.org/>. Who knows . . . maybe a field trip to Minnesota is in my future?

### **Adalaine Holton**

During the Fall semester, Adalaine Holton worked with LITT major Bethany Finn (now an alum) on an independent study on the Harlem Renaissance figure Zora Neale Hurston. Bethany produced an innovative weblog on Hurston's often-overlooked plays, which she shared with the Stockton community at the March 2011 Day of Scholarship. This summer, Adalaine herself will be steeped in all things Hurston: she will be writing a book chapter on Hurston's ethnographic novels and planning a co-curricular event related to Hurston's work for the 2011-2012 academic year. On another note, Adalaine's essay on the New York Puerto Rican writer Jesús Colón was recently accepted for publication in the journal *MELUS*.

### **Beach Readings**

Each summer since I was a small child, I have taken a weeklong trip to the Delaware shore with the same group of family and friends. While the core of the group has stayed the same over the last thirty years, we have doubled in size over the last ten with the addition of spouses and children. We are all big readers, and tend to spend lazy vacation days reading on the beach. Midweek, we usually have an informal book exchange as we finish the books we brought and look for new ones. I rarely return home with my own books. Looking back, the days of reading on the beach with my family and friends are some of my fondest childhood memories of reading—toes in the sand and a cherry Italian ice in hand. My first “beach books” were those from my tween years: Carson McCullers's *A Member of the Wedding*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*. I'm not sure yet what books I'll bring to the beach this year, but I am looking forward to what I might discover once I get there.

## Lisa Honaker

Lisa Honaker is still on a sabbatical she started in last fall. She is working on a project on the *Man Booker Prize* and the development of postcolonial Commonwealth fiction. She is currently reading novels from the Man Booker short lists and recording her impressions of that reading at <http://www.readingthebookers.com>.

One of the great joys of being on sabbatical is getting to read so much new fiction. During the semester, I try always to get a few new books into my courses, but mostly I reread books I've read many times before. Sometimes I have to put a course or a book on extended hiatus when I just can't bear to read it again, but mostly, I like to reread. It's nice to return to texts I know well and be surprised by something I hadn't noticed before. There's always something.

### **On Reading *The Outsiders***

Of all of the favorites that I've reread over and over--*Huck Finn*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Great Expectations*, *Middlemarch*--one stands out. It stands out not because it was the first book I ever reread. Not because it was the best book I ever reread, but because, for a time, when I was a teenager, I *couldn't stop* rereading it.

The book was S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*. It is the only book I've ever had a crush on. I couldn't live without it. I'd turn the last page and immediately start it again. I never wanted to leave its world. I once reread it four times consecutively. I literally could not put it down, carrying it with me everywhere for weeks like some sort of talisman.

The book had it all--main characters with names like Soda Pop and Ponyboy and Dallas, teenagers living on their own, supporting each other and having fun despite the hardscrabble nature of their lives. It had class conflict between the sympathetic outsider Greasers and the rich, snotty Madras-shirt wearing Socs. (I never see a Madras shirt or even hear the word Madras without thinking of the book.) It had a smart, thoughtful hero in Ponyboy, who ended up having to go on the lam with his friend Johnny--the two of them hiding out in a church, eating bologna sandwiches and drinking Pepsi. It had Robert Frost: Ponyboy recites "Nothing Gold Can Stay" to comment on a particularly beautiful sunset, and the poem resonates thereafter, providing commentary on the characters' lives and fates. It had a tragic ending that had me crying my teenaged eyes out.

At this point, I haven't read the book for over 30 years, but I still remember it with all the wistful affection that early love demands. *Huck Finn* may be my favorite novel, but *The Outsiders* was my teenaged soulmate--even though I doubt that I'll ever read the book again. I don't want to disturb the place it has in my reading life. It taught me well that "nothing gold can stay."

## **Marion Hussong**

This semester, Marion Hussong enjoys teaching a fun course on the European Novella. She recently proposed a new graduate course on Nazi Art and Propaganda for the Master's Program in Holocaust and Genocide Studies. The course will run for the first time next spring. Next to her teaching, Marion keeps busy serving a two-year term as the coordinator of the LITT Program. She is looking forward to returning to her research on the literature of Austrian resistance in the summer.

### **I, Marion, the Compulsive Reader**

When I was nine years old I had a stuffed rabbit called Tiberius Claudius Drusus Nero Germanicus Augustus. The toy was named after the title character of a novel that I had just devoured: Robert Graves's epic story of imperial Rome *I, Claudius*. I had found the book on our living room shelf. I loved *I, Claudius*, and as soon as I had finished it for the first time I re-read it from cover to cover.

In a pinch I would resort to calling my stuffed bunny by its short name, "Germanicus." In the novel, Germanicus was Claudius's brother and one of the few positive characters in a saga of betrayal and greed. But when asked by friends or neighbors what my toy's name was I would earnestly and gravely recite the toy's official full name. Nerdiness emerges early, I guess.

I was not talented at math and struggled with the multiplication tables around the time when I first discovered *I, Claudius*. Before that, in kindergarten and in the early elementary grades, it took me about a year longer to learn how to tie my shoelaces than most kids, and for much too long I could only tell my left from my right hand because of a faint red birthmark on the base of my left index finger. My mother had told me to remember: red birthmark, left hand.

I did like to read, though, and from an early age. Books absorbed me completely. My mother recalls a 10-hour trip by train from my hometown in southern Austria to Munich, where my grandmother lived. Mom swears that I was so involved in my reading that I hardly said a word until we reached Salzburg, 8 ½ hours into the journey. Salzburg was always my favorite part of this familiar train ride. You see, in Salzburg one could buy delicious sausages with mustard, freshly ground horseradish, and a crisp roll from a vendor who would pass the delicacy on a paper plate through the train window. To me, these sausages had the flair of adventure and fleeting delight. I looked forward to them and relished them, dipping my sausage into the mustard first, then the fresh horseradish shavings. The best part was that I could handle the sausage with one hand without relinquishing my hold on my book. So I sat, munching and thumbing through my novel, utterly blissful.

By the time we arrived in Munich, I had finished my book and was ready to start on another novel, which I had brought along and would have to sustain me on the long return trip home after visiting grandma.

My family members tell me that I was often strangely uncommunicative while reading. I simply did not hear when people spoke to me. I would also forget time. Often, I was assigned a chore but would get so engrossed in a book that I procrastinated until it was too late to complete the task in a timely manner. I remember one particularly egregious reading binge. I had been assigned to do the lunch dishes, a job that interfered grossly with a crisis that Robinson Crusoe was currently experiencing on his island. The dishes remained untouched in the sink when I heard my parents' car pull up in the driveway. Terrified, I filled the sink with water and detergent and immersed the frying pan, still partially filled with noodles, in the water. As the key turned in the front door and my mother made her way into the kitchen I appraised at the situation at hand. It was critical, nay, catastrophic: A sudsy mess of fettucine floated in a sink full of untended dishes. There was no way I could pull off the illusion of having worked on my chore, and I was prepared to face the worst.

My mom was not a woman to be trifled with, but sometimes miracles do occur. She looked at the mess, then over to the kitchen table where *Robinson Crusoe* lay open and said: "You've been reading and you forgot the time, right?" I just nodded. She said nothing more as I began to scrub the dishes. I was very, very grateful.

Many years later, already married, I recommended *I, Claudius* to my husband when he was looking for a good read. He loved the book and I loved him for it. We took out the BBC series from our local library – I had never watched it before – and enjoyed the television adaptation immensely. I told him about my stuffed rabbit and how this book had fascinated me at an early age, transporting me into the world of ancient Rome.

Fortunately, my husband is very good about doing the dishes. He knows that I simply must read, and that when I am absorbed in a really good book, everything else disappears around me.

### **Kristin Jacobson**

Kristin Jacobson's book, *Neodomestic Fiction* (The Ohio State University Press), was published in November 2010. In January she presented part of this research in Los Angeles at the Modern Language Association's conference. She is beginning research on a new project that looks at contemporary extreme adventure stories. In the spring Dr. J will attend the American Literature Association's conference in Boston and chair a panel she organized about lesser-known contemporary American women writers for the Society for the Study of American Women Writers. Dr. J spent much of the winter break preparing for two new classes that she is teaching during the Spring 2011 term.

### **Reading's Rewards**

On my refrigerator at home I have a faded newspaper clipping. The clipping is a picture with a short article about me winning a "reading pillow" in the fifth grade. Students earned chances to win the huge floor pillow by reading books. For every

book I read, my name was entered in the drawing for the reading pillow. This was the perfect contest for me because I have always loved to read. And, the contest meant that I had an additional excuse to read anywhere and everywhere. Although, long before the contest I was bringing books to read to family gatherings, to my brother's basketball games, or wherever I was headed. Winning this contest was the first material reward I received for reading. Now, I get a paycheck along with the intangible rewards that reading brings to my life every day.

### **Cynthia Arrieu-King**

Cynthia Arrieu-King went on two book tours in the fall of 2010 after the release of her first book of poems, *People are Tiny in Paintings of China*. First she traveled with Lily Brown and Claire Becker to four California venues: Claremont, Merced, San Francisco and Santa Cruz. She loved California's diversity and largesse. After the semester ended she toured the East Coast with Julia Cohen and Lily Brown through Philadelphia; New York City; Providence and Amherst. Evocative New England was full of poets' tombs and people knitting scarves. Cynthia's reading dates in the spring include two in Washington, DC and one in Kingston, New York. Hearing people's interpretations of her work makes her feel like the book is finally finished.

Fall 2010 was Dr. King's favorite semester so far. She had fun teaching Senior Seminar; students wrote thoughtful, wry, culturally trenchant epic poems and scholarly papers well past the minimum page requirement. They were exhausted and ecstatic when they reached the final class. Her rhetoric and composition course wrote beautiful papers about a positive belief including one student who said that thinking about what he believed upset him and that in the end, he decided to believe in peace. And finally, the Advanced Poetry Workshop made huge leaps forward in their poetry writing, developing some strong original pieces. Having students write a poem a day for a month turned out to be a huge success and each student confirmed this was the best way to teach them to let go of their limiting controlling minds in the creative process.

### **A Love For Letters**

As someone who teaches about the intersection of art and writing, and someone who embroiders pieces of text, I recall especially the way I became obsessed with the letter-books we got in kindergarten. Each week, the teacher passed out our booklets on the next bold glyph in the alphabet. The letter O was for Octopus and a giant purple one spread out across the yellow cover and inside, I could manage and paste oranges, oars, dozens of things that started with O. They were so dazzlingly full of graphics and power. I am in love with letters and how they are made, with handwriting, shorthand, dadaist graphics of letters, as much as I am in love with novels and epic poems and reading, with meaning and its shortfalls. To me, letters keep their value too as beautiful handmade, historical, and endlessly various

examples of style. As Gertrude Stein said, change one letter in a word and the transformation is mystical: worm, warm.

Literature nerds unite! :)

### **Tom Kinsella**

Tom Kinsella would like to get back to the research he was pursuing during his sabbatical last Spring, but a busy Fall term and the promise of an even busier current term means he'll have to wait for summer before he returns to the joys of bookbinding. Right now, he is teaching for the first time *Punctuation: History & Craft*. This is that "second" grammar course that so many of you have asked for over the years. The course will introduce students to the shifting conventions of English and American punctuation ranging from early Renaissance punctuation, in both manuscripts and printed texts, through the vagaries of eighteenth-century punctuation, codification in the nineteenth century, and the progressive lightening of use throughout the twentieth century. The class will also theorize about the impact of electronic media, specifically phone texting, on current and future usage. Kinsella is focusing on grammar and punctuation because he finds them deeply important and widely under taught. These topics may seem dry, uninteresting, even daunting, but the analytical skills used when parsing sentences and the decisions made when choosing meaningful punctuation don't have to be uninteresting or daunting. In fact, a solid understanding of the decisions inherent in grammatical analysis and punctuation are important to any one who aspires to excellence in writing, and in reading too. He expects to help students gain mastery over the ways that punctuation means today and to help them become stronger writers because of this. He is tickled to report that the Punctuation course quickly filled during pre-registration. Actually he is flabbergasted, but it's true.

### **The Joys of Children's Journals**

I can dig book titles out of my brain and call them formative, but most came late in my youth. *The Lord of the Rings* was deeply significant for me. Starting when I was fourteen I read and reread the trilogy about every six months for years. But if I try to reach back further, I have trouble identifying books. I remember reading quite a few comics, *Archie*, a range of DC comics, *Spiderman*, and *Mad Magazine*, but probably more important was my early magazine reading. When I was a little guy I always read *Highlights* magazine cover to cover. I loved looking for the hidden pictures on the Hidden Pictures page. I also enjoyed reading "Goofus and Gallant" and "The Timbertoes." At eight or nine years old I moved on to *Outdoor Life*. I can't say that I read it all the way through, but I always leafed through it and avidly read "This Happened to Me," a monthly feature that described woodsmen surviving terrible snow storms, canoe crashes on rapid rivers, and near-death battles with sturgeon. By the time I was ten or so, I graduated to *Reader's Digest*, the reading of which has been a family habit over several generations. My family had a run of *RD*

that stretched back at least to the 1930s. On warm summer nights at the cottage I would lay in my bunk reading issues and sharing the best parts with my brothers and sisters who lay in bunks nearby and were also reading. "Laughter is the Best Medicine," "Life in these United States," and "Humor in Uniform" were all favorites features. This early experience, I suppose, helped me to associate reading with relaxation and fun, and doing it in a family setting kept reading from becoming some isolationist act. When I get together with family and friends I still love to gab about what I'm reading and to listen to what others are reading – we still share the best parts.

### **Adeline Koh**

In February, Adeline Koh gave a lecture at Stockton called "The Politics of Classical Tragedy in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*," as part of *The Classics in World Literature* series hosted by the Classical Humanities Society in South Jersey. She is also taking part in a panel on the use of digital tools in feminist pedagogy at the Mid Atlantic Women's Studies Association meeting in April.

What she is looking forward to the most is the launch of her Asian Film Series at Stockton College (<http://wp.stockton.edu/asianfilmseries>). This series is dedicated to screening films from different parts of Asia, and will focus on different themes every semester. This semester's theme is "Gender in Asia." Koh has also organized a special event under the series which highlights how Asians today are responding to the Orientalism within popular films such as *Eat, Pray, Love*. This special event features a public Skype interview with Amit Virmani, director of *Cowboys in Paradise*, a film which documents the growth of the male sex trade in Asia because of films like *Eat, Pray, Love*.

### ***Tintin in China***

When I was little, one of my favorite things to read was a comic book series by the Belgian comic book writer, Hergé, called *The Adventures of Tintin*. Tintin was a young Belgian reporter who traveled the world with his dog, Snowy. Together, they had amazing adventures in exotic territories. One of my favorites of Tintin's adventures was *The Blue Lotus*--where Tintin traveled to China in the 1930s. The China represented in *The Blue Lotus* was beautiful, exotic and alluring, and the Chinese people much the same way.

Only when I arrived at college did I realize that the Chinese people in *Tintin* were supposed to represent people like me. It created quite a disconnect--why did the people that Tintin was describing appear so faraway from Chinese people as I knew them? The China, and the Chinese in *Tintin* are quite imaginary, yet their seductive exoticism continues to be very real in Western images of the Orient. This disconnect between "real" Chinese people and the alluring stereotypes of them that

abound within Western texts and images has led me to my research today in postcolonial studies.

### **Nathan Long**

Nathan Long spent much of the winter break designing a new course, *Queer American Literary Tradition*, and is enjoying launching it this semester, to a class full of lively LITT majors. The readings for the class include writers such as Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, James Baldwin, Rite Mae Brown, Michael Cunningham, and graphic novelist Alison Bechdel.

Several new stories of his have been accepted for publication since the last *Irregular Littonian*: this spring, "Pulse" will appear in the *Bryant Review* and "Clam" will appear in the *Sakura Review*; in late summer, "Keeping Us at Bay" and "Genre" will appear in *Marco Polo Quarterly*. In addition, a revision of his essay, "Living on the Body of the Mountain," which first appeared in *Tin House*, is due out in the anthology, *Dancing in the Moonlight: A Radical Faerie Reader*, March 2011. Long's is planning a year sabbatical next year to work on his short story cycle *The Sleep of Reason*, which was conceived while teaching his Senior Seminar on the short story cycle last Spring.

### **Staying Warm With A Good Book**

The book that most vividly reminds me of childhood is the D'Aulaire's illustrated *Book of Greek Myths*. For several years--from when I was in 4th to 8th grade--my family lived in a 3-room antebellum log cabin in rural Maryland. Even with the tiny Franklin stove on full blast, the upstairs never stayed hot in winter. My two sisters and I, who shared a 10 by 16 foot room, often went to bed with all our clothes on and a thick pile of blankets on our beds. I remember bending my knees up under the covers and propping up this large, hardback book against my legs, so I could read without having to have my hands out from under the blankets.

The stories of Greek Gods and Goddesses pulled me in, as did the simple charcoal and pastel drawings of various Greek heroes and victims (there's a lot of misery in those tales). I soon forgot about the cold and didn't want to stop reading. But when finally I did, and my sisters had turned off their lights, there was always another secret pleasure: I would run the wool sleeve of my sweater across the wool blankets and watch the static electricity spark across the bed, like lightning or stars.

### **Adam Miyashiro**

Adam Miyashiro has been working on developing a new interdisciplinary minor in Pre-Modern Studies at Stockton College as well as being the new advisor for Stockton's two literature groups: *Sigma Tau Delta*, the Literature Honors society, and *Idols of the Tribe*, Stockton's student Literature club. He is currently teaching his first Senior Seminar at Stockton this semester, entitled *Literatures of the Medieval*

*Mediterranean*, whose main purpose is to put the Mediterranean Basin into the broader context of European and Middle Eastern literary and cultural interactions. He is also teaching a new upper-division course, *Comparative Medieval Literatures*. Students in this course have been reading literatures from East to West – from T'ang dynasty poets of China, classical Japanese literature, the Arabic Golden Age literatures, to canonical European literatures. Both of these courses address Stockton's call for greater global consciousness in our curriculum across the college.

Continuing on his research undertaken in Spain over the summer, Dr. Miyashiro will present preliminary findings at this year's American Comparative Literature Association meeting in April in Vancouver, Canada. This past January, he presented a paper at the Modern Language Association which details ways in which junior faculty members may conduct collaborative research given the increasingly tightened budgets at colleges and universities around the country, and emphasized the need for technology to play a greater role in bringing scholarly communities around the world for collaborative teaching and research goals.

### **How I found Medieval Studies; or, how Medieval Studies found me**

Medievalists have been known to ask or be asked one question: how did you decide to be a medievalist? This is usually a difficult question to answer, for most of us. However, I can attribute directly my interest in Medieval Studies to a book my father bought for me when I was 10 years old. As we prepared for what seemed to me an interminable flight from O`ahu to Kona, on the Big Island of Hawai`i (admittedly only a half-hour flight), I asked my dad to buy a book for the plane at a bookstore in the Windward Mall in Kane`ohe, the “big” town next to my little town of Kahalu`u. I chose Morris Bishop's *The Middle Ages*, an introductory historical text about the European Middle Ages, published in 1968. It examined social and institutional structures from monarchies to peasant life. In stodgy black-and-white photos of funeral effigies and descriptions about serf life in medieval villages, I had apparently found my calling. I read and re-read this book for the next five years, memorizing virtually all of the French and English royal dynasties, and taking this book as my “travel manual” when going to visit my European family – kind of a medieval *Lonely Planet*. With this book, I found deserted medieval villages literally 100 meters outside of the modern village in rural Sweden; local museums which held mostly minor (but the most interesting) medieval artifacts from daily life; and I even found, as a teenager, the site of London's medieval debtor prison, the Clink, and Geoffrey Chaucer's neighborhood in Southwark, just down from the London Bridge. Growing up in Hawai`i, where local archeologists were uncovering Hawai`i's earliest populations in my backyard and getting to know the South Pacific archeologists from the US and Europe, I was instantly drawn to parts of the world that to me seemed exotic and filled with questions: the Near East, the Mediterranean, and Europe. Morris Bishop's 40-year-old book gave me introductory knowledge about these places, their interconnectedness, and left me with questions that I continue to pursue, even now.

Morris Bishop's *The Middle Ages* remains, as it has since I was 10 years old, in my medieval section of my bookcase at home.

### **Ken Tompkins**

My mother got me a library card when I was five. I actually have the card among my personal treasures. I don't remember the library nor going to it to get books though I'm positive I did.

My parents were not, as I think about them, readers; I also don't remember any books but mine around the house. They were probably there but did not enter my world.

My interests were broad but boy things. I had when I was a bit older a series of five books on Indians that I loved. They were about a boy my age so I'm sure I imagined myself on the plains hunting buffalo as he did.

I grew up during WWII and had coloring books of submarines, planes and tanks that I colored laboriously and as accurately as I could with the very small and basic Crayola collection I had (try making khaki out of the basic colors!).

I've thought about books I had at school. Nancy Tompkins learned from Dick and Jane but I don't remember them in school at all. I read *My Weekly Reader* – for which my mother gave me a penny each week – but, of course, there were few stories about Indians or nasty Nazis.

One other thing that I collected and read were, strangely enough, the cards between the rows of Shredded Wheat bisquits – a popular breakfast cereal. These cards had instructions for making such things as Indian headdresses, beaded belts and dyed Indian “clothing.” I must have had forty or fifty of these cards which I read and dreamed about constantly.

My earliest recollections of stories I read come from two books: *Ping* (1933) and *Paddle To the Sea* (1941). The first – *Ping* – is a story about a Chinese duck which leaves its family on the Yangtze and is left when they move on up the river. It has many adventures including one that I still vividly remember. Ping meets a family that uses “Snake Birds” to catch fish. The birds had rings around their necks so they couldn't swallow; when pulled back to the boat they disgorged their catches into a basket.

China, to me, was on another planet. My brother-in-law was in China after the war and I wrote to him asking him to send me a small package of dirt because I was convinced – so foreign were they to me – that it would be different from the dirt around my house. The Ping story showed me humans living vastly different lives than I did and I had great difficulty understanding that fact.

The second book – *Paddle* – was a favorite. It is the story of an Indian boy who carves an Indian in a canoe during the winter. During the Spring thaw the model flows from the Canadian wilderness through the Great Lakes, St. Lawrence river to the Atlantic. I “read the spots off the book” as my mother would say. It literally fell apart from reading it.

Reading for me – growing up in the primitive world of pre-WWII America – was a way to imagine other places and other peoples. The same thing happened when I read *The Seven League Boots* (1935). The blurb on Amazon captures this sense of boyhood adventure:

*Richard Halliburton started entertaining the world in the early 1920s. "Seven League Boots" was his fifth, and last, book and details his epic adventures in a variety of remote places. The resultant work doesn't have a dull page. It details how Halliburton dined with Emperor Haile Selassie in Ethiopia, interviewed the infamous assassin of Czar Nicholas II in Russia, tried to sneak into the forbidden city of Mecca, and finally, rode an elephant over the Alps in the tracks of Hannibal. It is Halliburton at his best, reckless and romantic.*

*He was the most dashing, handsome adventure traveler America ever had. During the roaring 1920s and 1930s he traveled the world like a whirlwind, risking his life performing daredevil stunts like swimming the Panama Canal, or diving into the accursed Mayan Well of Death, not once - but twice. He was welcomed by royalty. He lived on Devil's Island. He enlisted in the French Foreign Legion. He flew a bi-plane upside down over the Taj Mahal. He was born in Tennessee but called the world his home. His name was Richard Halliburton, and today that name is sadly forgotten.*

It is hard to imagine a more perfect boyhood and I owe most of it and of myself to books.