

SEEKING GOD IN THE LIBRARY



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By DAVID KLEMENT

“Nose in a book. He’s always got his nose in a book!”

That is one of the expressions by my late mother that I vividly recall, 70-some years later. That reading – a love for reading – would be a subject of scorn speaks volumes about the life of a child growing up in a farm family. If you were reading, that meant you weren’t working, doing some chore that needed doing, and there was a never-ending list of such chores on a dairy farm. But it wasn’t just during peak-production daylight hours when I might hear that remonstrance from Mom. Even in the evening, awaiting supper, if I was curled up in a corner of the kitchen reading, she might make that pejorative observation to my father or other family members. Certainly if I dared to open a book or magazine when visiting grandparents or uncles and aunts, I would hear the not-so-subtle rebuke of how I chose to spend my free time, rather than listening to the grown-up talk about crops, weather, aches and pains, and town gossip.

Not that my parents were against reading, or books. They read the newspaper, and Mom read her “True Confessions” and “True Romance” magazines in the evenings, before television came into the living room. Dad read farm magazines, “Texas

Dairyman,” or “Farm and Ranch,” to keep up with developments in his industry. But books were scarce in our home and sitting with one for hours at a time was just . . .unnatural.

I loved the written word from the time I learned to read, at around age 6. It was a secret passage into a vast world of adventure and beauty, mystery and romance. It was an escape from the loneliness of my limited world, seven miles from the nearest town and 80 miles from the nearest city, mocked by my siblings and friendless at school. A book in an obscure corner was my safe place, a world where I met and befriended countless heroes, villains and their accomplices in the novels that I read in my early primary years.

At first there were no books, just the farm magazines and maybe an occasional copy of “Look” or “Life” that Grandma might loan us at our weekly Sunday breakfast gatherings after church. So hungry was I for reading material that in first grade I would sneak my older brother’s fourth-grade reading textbook, folding it inside a magazine I pretended to be reading. I truly felt guilty reading so far ahead of my grade level and worried that I would be found out when I got to fourth grade and already knew the stories. Was it cheating? If so, it didn’t stop me from devouring the book – although progress was slow because opportunities were scarce. Occasionally my brother caught me “borrowing” his book, and of course he tattled to Mom, who gave me a good scolding for . . .what? Unauthorized reading?

I didn’t begin acquiring my own books until my first job out of college. I was a cub reporter on a mid-sized newspaper. The Sunday edition had a Book Page but could not afford to hire a Book Editor. The Book Page fell under the Features Editor’s purview. To provide copy for the page, she offered publishers’ review copies to any staffer who was willing to read the book and write a cogent review. I never passed up an opportunity to read and review a new book. It was through that process that I discovered a prolific young British writer named Anthony Burgess, whose groundbreaking dystopian work “A Clockwork Orange” would become a best-seller in 1963 and, a few years later, a sensational Hollywood film. A first-edition copy of that book occupies a place of honor in my home library, along with a dozen others that Burgess produced in the following decade. This is also how I obtained first-edition copies of Kurt Vonnegut’s “God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater,” and J. D. Salinger’s “Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters.”

At the same time, I joined a mail-order book club that offered discounts on popular and classical works. Soon the 10-volume “Story of Civilization” by Will and Ariel Durant joined the novels on my growing bookshelf, followed by the six-volume “The Second

World War” by Winston Churchill. Carl Sandburg’s three-volume biography of “Abraham Lincoln” soon was added, followed by “William Shakespeare: The Complete Works” in one massive volume and “The Family Mark Twain” also in one volume. I ordered a whole series of art books – big, coffee-table-size volumes that highlighted the works of the Old Masters, the collections in the Louvre, the Impressionists, and more.

And I haunted bookstores. Here my interest lay more in the book itself than the contents – something to add class to my shelves. I sought out rare books, especially if they were leather-bound, first-editions, or sets. It was thus I acquired a 16-volume set of the works of Tolstoy published in 1899, a 20-volume set of Foreign Classical Romances dated 1900, and a lovely little leather-bound, gold-leaf-edged volume titled “Sturm’s Reflections,” a series of essays on God and Nature by Christopher Christian Sturm, originally published in German in 1824. One of my favorites is “A Library of Poetry and Song,” an 1871 anthology of poetry, richly decorated with leather bindings, enamel frontispieces and engravings of 18th century landscapes scattered throughout its 789 pages.

Obscure? Yes. But precious to me. With that as background, try to imagine my shock and – yes, I have to say it – awe upon discovering an ancient library *bearing my name* that calls itself the most beautiful library in the world. That was my happy discovery this summer during a visit to Prague, Czech Republic, and touring the Klementinum. This amazing building complex, one of the largest in Europe, houses a splendid Baroque and Rococo room containing more than 20,000 books and geographical and astronomical globes. Now part of the Czech National Library that houses over 6 million volumes, the Klementinum was founded at the beginning of the 17th century by the Jesuit order on a site that housed the 11th century Chapel of St. Clement, Bishop of Rome in the first century AD and one of Catholicism’s first popes. Clement’s name takes on a K in the Czech language, thus the similarity to what I thought was my German-origin surname. Apparently, there were some Czechs among my forbearers.

The Klementinum literally took my breath away. It is a long, wide gallery lined with ornately carved and gilded bookcases, topped by an arched ceiling richly decorated with frescoes that depict allegorical motifs of education, including the Temple of Wisdom, along with portraits of Jesuit saints and luminaries of the city and the order. Disappointingly, I was not permitted to wander into the room to examine the books or globes that fill the room. Only small, carefully guided groups are permitted to stand in the entrance and take in the contents.

Standing there amidst this history and grandeur, I gained a new perspective on the appreciation of books that I must have inherited from the Czech ancestors I never knew I had. The room is akin to a cathedral dedicated to knowledge, a magnificent architectural vessel befitting scholars and educators who strive to unravel the mysteries of the universe, as the Jesuit founders of this institution so passionately did for centuries. Indeed, exhibits elsewhere in the complex demonstrate the extraordinary accomplishments of the scholars who studied and taught here. In the Meridian Hall, tour guides show visitors how the monks used a carefully calibrated hole in the wall to catch a beam of sunlight at the precise time of noon, said to be more accurate than the Greenwich Meridian in England. Also intriguing is the [Astronomical Tower](#), capped with a huge bronze of Atlas and used as an astronomical observatory until the 1930s. Jesuit meteorologists invented local weather forecasting here in 1775.

I was terribly disappointed that I wasn't allowed to at least get close to the books, if not open up a volume or two to skim the contents. Even though they are said to contain mostly foreign theological themes from the 17th Century, doubtless in languages I could not understand, I wanted to feel such stately books with my own hands, to admire the ancient printing and illustrations, and by doing so perhaps absorb some of the energy and wisdom of the authors.

That may sound totally woo-woo, but I have a reverence for books that does not relate to Kindle or Nook. And I have since learned that my yearning for a spiritual connection to these books – and perhaps to my own books at home– may not be totally crazy. The internationally acclaimed Argentinian journalist, author and poet Jorge Luis Borges, whose works toy with the idea of infinity and mythical creatures inhabiting magical worlds, wrote a book that references the Klementinum. In “The secret Miracle,” Borges’ main character dreams of a place where librarians look for God in the books. At the Klementinum, a librarian tells him, “God is in one of the letters of one of the pages of one of the 400,000 books of Klementinum. My fathers and the fathers of my fathers have looked for this letter; I myself have gone blind looking for it.”

A cathedral built to house a book collection? God hiding in an ancient volume bound in leather and decorated with gilt edges and exquisite drawings? To someone who still spends an awful lot of time with his nose in a book, it seems entirely appropriate.