“Reading Saved Me”: Writing Autobiographically About Transformative Reading Experiences in Childhood

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In recent years, the “memoir boom” coupled with an explosion of “books about books” has seen members of the literary establishment writing about their experiences of reading in their childhoods and adolescences. Readers are impacted by what they read and their sense of self can be both constituted and signified by the texts they have read, and when and how they read them. Memoirs of literary figures underscore ways in which this can happen. This article considers bibliographic nonfiction works by Michael Dirda, Alberto Manguel, and Karla Holloway, as three very different kinds of autobiographical expressions about reading in childhood, in order to explore how these narratives are put to use. These authors construct their childhood reading experiences in different ways. In all three, however, the value of books and the act of reading serve to frame their autobiographical recollections and to solidify a position in the literary establishment. Ultimately, memoirs of reading can advance conservative constructions of childhood that locate acts of reading and book appreciation in opposition to, and as a means of escaping, a social class.

Keywords memoir; reading; book culture; childhood; class

“Reading and life are not separate but symbiotic,” declares Julian Barnes, Booker Prize-winning author and fixture of the British literary establishment, in The Guardian. The act of reading is tied, he asserts, to the act of living. But Barnes is not referring to just any act of reading. He is not talking about workaday reading such as reading the back of a cereal box, or a sign at the train station, or the information sheet in a box of prescription antibiotics. Rather, he is referring to a higher, more sacred understanding of reading reserved for literature and for reading experiences that are personally transformative, especially fiction and non-fiction that deeply transport or impact the reader. Alberto Manguel furthers this association of reading with the sublime when he writes that “we are, at the core, reading animals and [...] the art of reading, in its broadest sense, defines our species” (A Reader ix). In this statement, Manguel elevates reading from an act to an art, infusing it with a sense of grandeur; for him, the practice of reading is what separates humans from animals. But in suggesting this, Manguel stratifies different kinds of humans; if reading is what makes us human then those who
enjoy the act, who revel in it, or who produce reading experiences for other people might be more human than those who do not.

These statements about reading demonstrate the extent to which members of the literary establishment — by which I mean people who work in roles associated with the writing, collecting, or editing of literature, in publishing and bookish taste-making, or in professing literature in Academia and related roles — locate in the act of reading, and in the objects of the book and the library, a symbolism, even a sense of the sublime, that has implications for culture and cultural consumption. Such contentions are woven with high-culture assumptions not just about the paramount importance of reading, but its inherent value as a measure of life, of humanity and the human, and of identity. These are public statements made in “cultural gatekeeping” publications — the former in The Guardian, a newspaper with a high-culture reputation — and the latter in Manguel’s A Reader on Reading. These authors are speaking directly to readers, to people at that very moment immersed in the act of reading and thus arguably biased toward such discourse.

The current boom in autobiographical writing about books and reading must be related to and considered alongside the memoir boom more broadly. A number of memoirists from different backgrounds have charted the growth of their intellects and subjectivities, their educations, and their journeys to writing their life story, through the books they read in their childhoods. Many more infuse their early reading experiences with a sense of the magic that set them on the path to becoming lovers of, and contributors to, and gatekeepers of, literature. What makes Barnes and Manguel stand out from the great many memoirists who reference childhood reading is that they are also veterans of the literary community and, to some extent, gatekeepers of literature. There are vested interests and agendas here, most obviously, to negotiate literature’s place within culture.

This article considers the relationship between reading and the life story by looking at the ways in which cultural gatekeepers like Michael Dirda, Alberto Manguel, and Karla FC Holloway depict books and reading in their narratives of childhood. Dirda, a long time book reviewer for the Washington Post, Manguel, an internationally renowned writer, anthologiser, and publisher, and Holloway, an English professor, construct their reading experiences in childhoods in specific ways. For both Manguel and Dirda, reading is tied to escaping social class, while, for Holloway the act of reading is an experience tied to race and racial prejudice, a perspective which invests her work with greater political weight and significance. Ultimately, in all three instances, the book and the act of reading serve dual functions, not just as the crux of these autobiographical recollections and life narratives, but as the foundations of careers and livelihoods. This, I argue, significantly informs a common construction of transformative reading experiences in childhood.

**Childhood as a site of self-construction**

Nostalgic and sublime recollections of past reading experiences are inextricably integrated with another site of nostalgia: childhood. In Childhood, Chris Jenks offers a sociological perspective of childhood, pointing out that childhood politically charged. Henry Jenkins concurs when he writes that childhood — which, he points out, is always
a “temporary state” – “has become an emblem for our own anxieties.” Thus, how authors write autobiographically about their childhoods and about childhood in general is frequently linked to ideals of childhood that are in the contemporary moment. Kate Douglas argues that autobiographies of childhood “reveal more about the present than they do about the past” (6). Douglas contends that “twentieth-century autobiographers sought not only to understand childhood developmentally and socially – to understand their experiences of the world – but also to explore how experiences of childhood impact upon adult life” (9). Douglas’s project in Contesting Childhood is to transcend a narrow focus on the Bildungsroman frame as the primary purpose for recounting childhood in memoir and in the scholarship of such memoirs – necessary given the popularity of trauma memoirs, for instance. However, it is clear that this model still has a powerful role, particularly in conservative contexts, for example, as seen in works by cultural gatekeepers. This is to make a distinction between the kinds of memoirs produced by established literary names and memoirs produced by the so-called ordinary people. In the 1990s, memoir did not prominently feature elder statesmen reporting on how their public lives neatly paralleled historical events. Instead, memoir in the ‘90s was dominated by the comparatively young whose private lives were emblematic of unofficial histories. (Gilmore 28)

This moment, that Gilmore terms the “memoir boom,” is characterized by a focus on stories of trauma, addiction, abuse, lives lived on the edge of acceptable society, and on recoveries, as both Gilmore and Douglas show. For example, Jaycee Lee Dugard’s memoir of her life after she was abducted as a child, A Stolen Life: A Memoir, acknowledges the place of books and reading in her attempt to stay sane in a horrific situation. Andrea Ashworth, similarly, speaks about reading in her abusive childhood in Once in a House On Fire (2004). More recently, The End of Your Life Book Club (2012) focuses on reading as a shared experience between mother and son during treatments for terminal cancer in the final months of her life. These works speak of books and reading that serve to transport the reader away from horrific lives or experiences, if only for a short time, as well as providing a reminder that a different future is possible, or, as in the case of The End of Your Life, that serve to give shape to the life lived and to build acceptance of death.

Autobiographies of cultural gatekeepers also appropriate the Bildungsroman frame and show the ways in which reading and books provide a means of enrichment, education, and escapism. Yet precisely because these authors are cultural gatekeepers as well as readers and autobiographers, there is another dimension to their recollections of childhood reading, namely to solidify the sense of the self as a deserving, faithful, and productive member of the literary establishment. That is, instead of testaments to the transcendence of an abusive, traumatic, or inevitable situation, these autobiographical acts are aimed at legitimating the place of the author in the literary establishment. While all memoirists narrate their childhoods through the lens of their adult selves, I am suggesting that in the memoirs of people employed in the broad field of literature, the implications require specific consideration.
Michael Dirda’s memoir of a readerly child

Where some authors simply wish to chart their growth as readers, or their transition from reading to writing, or to communicate their love of books amongst a readership with, almost wholly, shared interests, others use the memoirs of reading in childhood for more specific purposes. Michael Dirda, a Pulitzer Prize-winning literary critic with a Ph.D. in comparative literature, published his memoir, *An Open Book: Coming of Age in the Heartland*, in 2003. This title conflates life and human experience with books, in the mode of Barnes and Manguel as discussed above, and constructs life as text. In addition, the title establishes that this mode of being — that is, being with books — is in direct or even brutal opposition to the non-bookishness of his home town of Lorain, Ohio, a blue collar, steel worker town.

This is not Dirda’s first book about books. As a literary critic with the *Washington Post*, Dirda has published his musings about books in works such as *Readings: Essays and Literary Entertainments*, a collection of (mostly “personal”) essays. It is also not the first time Dirda has written autobiographically about his youthful experiences with books. He opens *Readings* with an essay called “The Crime of His Life.” In the second line of this essay he writes:

One afternoon some thirty-five years ago, a 13-year-old boy was lingering in the book section of O’Neil’s department store, surreptitiously turning the pages of *Tarzan the Untamed* [...] and read through an entire novel in the course of a lazy summer day [in the store]. (1)

Despite the use of the third person here, that boy is, of course, his own self. In this essay, Dirda dramatizes the experiences of his childhood reading activities and opportunities. He uses books as a means to frame or hang the narrative he wants to tell. The “crime” mentioned in the title of the autobiographical essay is the circumspect opening, in store, of prepackaged bundles of discounted books in order to create the particular set of books he wants to purchase. Dirda is a readerly child, a passionate, and determined one, a construction that serves his adult identity as a writer well.

It is not difficult to find examples of memoirists who want to list, even catalogue, the books of their childhood shelves and in their youthful hearts. Authors frequently link the rise of fledgling identities to the books they found in their early environment. In some of these narratives there is an inherent judgement as well, a positioning of the self as guardian of books in a culture that devalues them, and Dirda provides an illuminating case study of this avenue of self-portraiture. In *An Open Book*, Dirda writes:

Mine, it now seems, may be the last generation to value the traditional bound book as the engine of education, culture and personal advancement. The future belongs to screens and keyboard. Though that may sound direly elegiac, I know people will always need stories and that any era’s external packaging of them hardly matters: Oral formulas, scrolls, codices, paperbacks, e-texts—they all get the narrative job done. Nonetheless, what follows may often appear a kind of memorial, a minor monument to a time of softly turned pages, when the young entered libraries
hungry for books to devour rather than information to download, when printed
matter still. (14)

In this way, Dirda constructs himself as a last sentinel watching the sun go down on the
long and important history of the book. The use of the word “Elegiac” explicitly raises a
connection with Sven Birkerts’ 1994 The Gutenberg Elegies, a lament for what he sees as
the unequivocal end of the book, and establishes both projects as memorial to the book
as a dying art form as well as to the role of Dirda and Birkerts in safeguarding the
reputation of the book in its dying moments. In this way, Dirda pursues a conservative
project, one that assumes that the technology of the e-reader will necessarily see the
demise of the printed book. This elegy for the book is coupled with the elegy for
childhood. Indeed, the back cover of An Open Book contains “praise” for this work and
for others by the author, including an endorsement by Harold Bloom, who calls this
book “an elegy for childhood, youth, and first loves – both sexual and literary.” The
book’s packaging contains other markers of book culture. The front cover contains two
photographs. The first is a black and white picture of the author on the front porch of,
one assumes, his house, aged about five or six with two younger children (most likely
siblings) visible through the screen door behind him. The second is a color aerial
photograph of the main street of Lorain, Ohio where Dirda grew up. Although undated
on the dust jacket, this photograph displays markers of the 1950s or early 1960s in the
models of cars on the road, the buildings, and their signage and other adornments.
Steelworks are visible in the background. Both of these photographs communicate
nostalgia consistent with memoirs of childhood.

The inside flap of the book’s dust jacket also explicitly positions Dirda’s love for
reading in opposition to the class expectations of his “factory town” by opening with a
statement of tension that defines the work: “‘All that kid wants to do is stick his nose in
a book,’ Michael Dirda’s steelworker father used to complain, worried about his son’s
mystifying passion for reading” (inside front jacket). However, as the narrative unfolds
we learn that Dirda senior recites fragments of Edgar Allan Poe to his sick son (32),
reads to his son (32), regularly takes him to the public library (34), builds bookcases for
the family home (34), and later makes bracket shelves for his son’s room (99). Yet,
Dirda credits “serendipity” for furnishing “the Dirda household with a number of
surprisingly good books” (35) instead of his parents, glossing his father’s evident
dissatisfaction with his blue collar job and expressed wish for his son to have a better
life fuelled by literature and academia. Dirda’s construction of reading literature allows
him to construct an origin myth that foregrounds his own inherent “nature” as the
ingredient that saved him from a steel worker life, rather than the nurturing role of his
parents – clearly narrated on the page – as facilitators of his bookishness.

Dirda’s book is a conventional memoir of childhood, covering the period of the
author’s life from age 4 to 19 and encompassing the usual topics and scripts for
remembering such as meals, routes to school, chores, and parents’ moods in the home.
However, the book is divided in its table of contents into four sections titled “Learning
to Read,” “Turning the Pages,” “Adult Material,” and “A Liberal Education.” This
structure serves to further conflate reading with life. “Learning to Read” contains
material about the author’s life from about the age of four years old and commences the
memoir, initiating a structure in which the depicted life begins not with birth but with
the process of learning to read. “Turning the Pages” picks up the story from the
beginning of junior high. “Adult Material” concerns the author’s high school years, and “A Liberal Education” marks his life at Oberlin College from 1966. In “Michael Dirda’s Book List,” after the “Epilogue,” Dirda shares with the reader two lists of books. The first is retrieved from a journal kept at the time, a list of books read by the time he was sixteen. The second is of books read by the end of high school. The inclusion of these lists at the end of this book serves to ensure that the reader knows how precocious a reader Dirda was in his teens by listing the highly literary, difficult books he sought out. The list also serves another purpose. Of the 55 books, just 4 are by women. While this is to some extent a reflection on cultural and environmental factors beyond the author’s control, it also perpetuates, whether consciously or otherwise, the stereotype of the literary canon as the domain of white male authors. It also furthers a high art/low art agenda underpinning Dirda’s writing. Throughout the book there is discussion about Dirda’s love for comics in his childhood (54). He describes in detail the euphoria he felt when, after trading comics with a classmate, he is spontaneously given 30 extra comics for free:

Utterly light headed, I pedalled home around six P.M. and en route noticed guys playing late-fall baseball in the field next to our elementary school, could even hear the *thwack* of the bats and the *thunk* of the balls against leather. At that moment, as when the dove descended upon the apostles, I felt the unmistakable presence of grace: The world was truly good and life a blessing. (57)

This use of sublime and religious language situates the experience of reading and (comic) book ownership within the icons of Christian tradition and American heartland identity (baseball). However, there is no list of comics read by the author at the end of this bookish memoir. Comic-book reading is positioned clearly as an early step toward the “real” reading he would embark upon later, as are other works of pulp fiction. Dirda reminisces that “if Agatha Christie provided my introduction to ‘grown-up’ fiction, then Fyodor Dostoyevsky deepened the casual relationship into a serious love affair” (126).

There are thus several undercurrents of elitism at work in Dirda’s memoir: his positioning of himself as last sentinel standing watch over the dying print medium; his fashioning of his own autonomy in pursuing a career as a reader and writer in spite of evidence that his parents aided him in this journey; and his assertion of literature as a high art form and perpetuation of a high/low hierarchy. In doing this, Dirda further cultivates and validates his own worth and worthiness as cultural gatekeeping and the final two paragraphs of the Epilogue advance these threads further:

Long ago my father used to warn me: “A writer writes. A reader reads.” For most of my life, even that as a staff book reviewer and essayist for *The Washington Post*, I have thought of myself as primarily a reader. An enthusiastic, well-informed reader, to be sure, and one with a minor talent to evoke the particular excitement and quiddity of a novel, a collection of poems or a work of intellectual history. Nonetheless, I really should have listened to my dad and would give a lot to hear him yell at me just one more time: “Get your nose out of that book and go do something useful.”

Yes, Dad. You may not, as you used to say, always be right, but you’re never wrong. I now wish I had sat down with pen and paper more often than with an old
paperback, had titled my days more towards being a Writer than a Reader. Still, who knows? Perhaps even now it’s not altogether too late (322).

While this may seem a peculiar note to conclude on, potentially undermining the meaningful conflation of reading with life that was pursued so thoroughly over the preceding pages, it also demonstrates that a life of reading has enabled Dirda to pursue a life of writing. Despite his self-conscious protestations to the contrary, he is a “Writer,” and the body of writing he has produced is the culmination of a life of reading. Dirda is not just last sentinel of the printed book: he is a contributor to that hallowed canon of work. The subtext is clear: reading saved Dirda from a working class life in a steelworker town. This is a narrative of success clearly meant to resonate with his readership, though it is markedly different to, for example, Jaycee Lee Dugard’s account of reading as a means of coping with abuse after her abduction or Andrea Ashworth’s account of reading as a means of dealing with childhood abuse, despite the fact that all three advance a thesis of reading as a means of salvation. Have studies of memoir and autobiography, encouraged by the boom in subaltern and traumatized voices, left us unprepared to deal with the conservative narratives of self that also populate the shelves of life writing? Dirda’s recollections of his childhood are obviously shaped to convey a poverty of cultural wealth as well as material wealth. In doing so, and in chronicling the intellectual enlightenment bequeathed by the books he digested, he situates his life narrative within the Bildungsroman framework, albeit tinged with heroic fantasy: his autobiography chronicles his journey from economically and culturally disadvantaged working class upbringing to burgeoning connoisseur of the written word to his current station as respected literary critic commemorating and standing vigil over high-culture objects. In attending to narratives like Dirda’s, we see the influence of the survivor narrative in memoir, though we also see how it can be co-opted for more abstract, less traumatic circumstances.

**Alberto Manguel’s holy erotics of reading**

Though Dirda sanctifies his reading childhood in his memoir, Alberto Manguel repeatedly mystifies and makes sublime, indeed holy, the reading experience throughout his oeuvre. This is explicit in the way he begins *A History of Reading* – a nonfiction book about reading interspersed with accounts of his own personal experiences of books – with images, and descriptions of images, of saintly readers from Aristotle to Erasmus, Saint Dominic to Francesca, and Paolo to Mary Magdalen to Charles Dickens to Jorge Luis Borges. He muses that “All these readers, and their gestures, their craft, the pleasure, responsibility and power they derive from reading, are common with mine. I am not alone” (5), clueing us in to the community experience of reading. At this point, Manguel gives an account of his own learning to read (age 4) as an “act of conjuring” (6). Here, “shapes […] metamorphosed from black lines and white spaces into a solid, sonorous, meaningful reality” (6). He characterizes reading as not just magical but crucial: “We all read ourselves and the world around us in order to glimpse what and where we are. We read to understand, or to begin to understand. We cannot do but read. Reading, almost as much as breathing, is our essential function” (7).
In this way, Manguel reiterates what he sees as the connection between reading and being human. Manguel also evokes the Sefer Yezirah, the sixth century Hebrew text that outlines God’s creation of the world through “a written Book made of letters and numbers” (8). The reading of books becomes an act of religious devotion. Furthermore, Manguel argues that his own books were “transcriptions or glosses of that other, colossal Book” (8). Again, the book is conflated with the human and the act of reading with a moment of the divine. Collectively, these anecdotes and allusions position the act of reading as the loftiest, weightiest of pursuits: saintly activity, magical process, and the stuff of life itself. It is also, for Manguel, a criterion through which we can distinguish between humans and non-humans, where the non-human consists not only of animal but also of lesser incarnations of the human. Unlike Dirda and Holloway, Manguel repeatedly casts reading as a crucial element of the human project.

The first chapter of A History of Reading is devoted to Manguel’s personal history as a reader, from learning to read at age 4, to becoming a “professional” reader, turned toward collecting other people’s personal experiences of reading into a history.

And so I ambitiously proceed from my history as a reader to the history of the act of reading. Or rather, to a history of reading, since any such history—made up of particular intuitions and private circumstances—must be only one of man, however impersonal it may try to be. (22)

There are correspondences and commonalities between Dirda and Manguel’s writing – both perpetuate the reading experience as a sanctified occupation, especially Manguel, in dignifying readers with the label of the human which circuitously implies non-readers are intrinsically lacking in humanity – but Manguel’s personal incursions into the text are not the conservative and self-congratulatory statements Dirda offers about his own reading experiences. Manguel is not trying to wedge open the door to the literary establishment with a pile of lauded books, though the relationship between book culture and higher social classes is apparent in the way he describes his father’s plush library. Manguel writes:

Before returning to Argentina, my father had asked his secretary to buy enough books to fill the shelves of his library in our new house; obligingly, she ordered cartloads of volumes from a secondhand dealer but found, when trying to place them on the shelves, that many of them wouldn’t fit. Undaunted, she had them trimmed down to size and then bound in deep green leather, a colour which, combined with the dark oak, lent the place the atmosphere of a soft forest. [...] Reading these circumcised books required the extra effort of supplanting the missing bit of every page. (279)

Like Dirda, Manguel responds to his father’s literary habits and draws both to and away from them in equal measure. Reading also serves a marker of status, albeit differently: in the Manguel household, literature is abundant and “cartloads of volumes” are bought – and subsequently mutilated – solely for aesthetic reasons, where in the Dirda household it is books that elevate Dirda above his blue collar compatriots. The link between books and sex, reading and eroticism – hinted at here by Manguel’s use of the term “circumcised” to describe the trimmed books – arises repeatedly throughout
Manguel’s discussions. In *A History of Reading*, he gives another account of the trimmed books, without describing them as circumcised:

Later as an adolescent in my father’s largely unused library in Buenos Aires […] I made another discovery. I had begun to look up, in the elephantine Espasa-Calpe Spanish encyclopedia, the entries that somehow or other I imagined related to sex: “Masturbation,” “Penis,” “Vagina,” “Syphilis,” “Prostitution.” I was always alone in the library, since my father used it only on the rare occasions when he had to meet someone […]. I was twelve or thirteen; I was curled up in one of the big armchairs, engrossed in an article on the devastating effects of gonorrhoea, when my father came in and settled himself at his desk. For a moment I was terrified that he would notice what it was that I was reading, but then I realised that no one—not even my father, sitting barely a few steps away—could enter my reading space, could make out what I was being lewdly told by the book I held in my hands, and that nothing except my own will could enable anyone else to know. (12)

Like Dirda, Manguel here appropriates the *Bildungsroman* narrative, with a particular focus on sexual awakening via literature. Reading construed as a private space of auto-eroticism is extended in Manguel’s 2010 memoir, *A Reader on Reading*, where Manguel talks about reading explicitly erotic fiction in that same room in Buenos Aires (173). The conflation of reading with life advanced by Dirda is thus apparent in Manguel, not just psychologically and psychically but physically and physiologically too. This conflation is also evident in the writing of Holloway, though her interests are more aligned with race and racial prejudice than the class concerns of Manguel and Dirda.

**Karla Holloway and the politics of being marked by books**

Karla Holloway’s 2006 work, *BookMarks: Reading in Black and White. A Memoir by Karla FC Holloway*, is clearly, by virtue of its subtitle, marked as a memoir, and indeed it begins with and contains throughout vignettes of personal experience of books and reading in her youth and then in the childhoods of her children. However, much like Manguel’s work, the autobiographical elements supplement a much broader story. Although Holloway begins with an experience in her adolescence—an English assignment asking her to nominate a list of periodicals she read, and her growing awareness that she would be interpreted, if not exactly judged, according to that list—the work is not chronological but flips back and forth throughout her life and bookish experiences. In chapter 7, “The Children’s Room,” she relates her romantic and magical experiences of discovering books and reading them in the county public library with its turrets and other trappings of an “enchanting space” (118). This is in contrast to an earlier discussion of “the Negro library” as a continually contested space, and where Holloway looks at a range of issues affecting the circulation of books in African-American families. However, Holloway begins her memoir by describing her own personal library, looking for words to “suggest something lovely, lofty, and serene, and that capture the feeling I have there when the afternoon sun lingers and stretches across from the antique library desk in the window to the chair where I sit reading” (32), before she goes on to report the state of libraries under policies of segregation. She
quotes from Ralph Ellison’s experiences of using libraries in his childhood (44), Maya Angelou’s book lists in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (95), and Malcolm X’s discussion of the transformative experience of reading in prison (81–85) and then uses this narrative to frame her own heartbreaking experiences of providing books to her son in jail in the hope that they might provide a transformative experience or comfort.

For Holloway, books are not something to save her — they didn’t save her son from his terrible fate, after which Holloway finds her ability to engage with books and reading eroded (53). She reflects:

The thing that had been a lifetime of solace and escape and seduction into another space too is gone, with him? […] It took me years to hold a book again in the way that would allow its story to displace my own. (53)

Holloway’s account is of an intimate connection between a child and their books:

I do have left the sense that books and our memories of them and their spaces have a potential for both marking and mourning a far greater intimacy that we might at first imagine could come from our touch of its pages. (53)

Manguel too acknowledges that a personal library is a “sort of multilayered autobiography, each book holding the moment in which I read it for the first time” (A Reader 278). But for Holloway, libraries, both public and private, contain political barriers. Holloway details not only a history of black people’s access to libraries in the pre-civil rights U.S. but also discusses the advice given in 1931 in the newsletter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for building up of a personal library on a limited budget in austere times (33). 3

Holloway’s work is markedly different in focus and purpose than that of Manguel and Dirda. All three authors revere books and reading, and locate in their childhood access to books a magic that infuses their lives and careers — though for Holloway this is tempered by a tragedy that does not appear in the works of Manguel and Dirda. The childhood stories of all three are informed by their professional careers as gatekeepers of literature — Dirda as book reviewer, Manguel as publisher and anthologist, Holloway as professor — and thus each have a stake in the preservation of literature and the industry. But there are differences here too. Like Manguel, Holloway is painting a historical portrait of reading and literary consumption beyond her own personal experiences, while Dirda’s recollections are rooted predominantly in his own private history. But, like Dirda, she is painting a portrait of reading as an act impacted on by social and environmental factors, unlike Manguel for whom reading is both necessity and luxury. Ultimately, however, Holloway is not simply a chronicler of and advocate for reading: she is an advocate for the freedom to read and learn, and does not take for granted that reading is not as freely available as others like Manguel and Dirda seem to assume.

Conclusion

The narratives of childhood reading discussed in this paper provide three similar yet distinct case studies of authors with strong ties to the literary establishment — critical,
industrial, scholarly or otherwise – reconstructing their childhood literary engagement. Moreover, they all present some form of self-fashioning, following Stephen Greenblatt’s use of the term (1980), around books and literary culture, but in different ways. Here, books become a shorthand through which life writers can establish their credentials as fully fledged members of the literary establishment, can validate and reinforce their inclusion in that establishment, and can nostalgically recall their indoctrination into a mystical world of books. It is a world that in some cases comparatively few people in their immediate environments were cohabiting, a world that was essentially isolated because of the solitary nature of most reading experiences outside of being read to in infancy and at school. At the same time, personal stories of youthful reading attach book history to humanistic arcs of birth and death, growth, maturation, seen most obviously in Dirda’s division of his own life story into different stages of reading, making explicit that human identity – at least in the case of active readers – can be both constituted and signified by the texts we read and when we read them. Ultimately, memoirs of reading can advance conservative constructions of childhood that locate acts of reading and book appreciation in opposition to, and as a means of escaping, a social class. For Dirda, books and acts of reading are fashioned as the portal through which the author escaped his lower class of origin destined for a position in the upper middle classes of the literary establishment. For Manguel, books are affiliated with his conservative impulses and form a barrier between the human and the nonhuman in ways that stratify beings, even humans, into more human (those that read) and less human (those that do not). In contrast to these, conservative memoirs, however, are the politically progressive work of Holloway, who advocates not only for the importance of literature but the very right to access books, taken for granted by many establishment-based celebrants of the written world. Her work shows that literary memoirs by literary establishment do not only reinforce the status quo.

In addition to providing case studies of the reading reminiscences of these authors, these three memoirs of the transformative power of childhood reading can serve other functions also. However, in the contemporary life writing zone of cultural production and criticism there are few tools to help us unpack the conservative memoirs of authors like Dirda and Manguel. Contemporary life narrative seems understandably preoccupied with the experience of the subaltern; the marginalized; the voiceless; and the victimized, traumatized, and suffering tropes that Dirda and Manguel only superficially attempt to mobilize. This is not only understandable but also vital work in the field. However, its volume comes at the expense of critiques of contemporary conservative memoirs that proliferate largely unexamined. These memoirs or memoir-moments may be boring, trite, infuriating to scholars of life narrative, and trivial given the range of human experiences, expressed elsewhere in the medium of life writing, but they are in many ways stealthy and somewhat sinister in the role they play, in that they confirm and perpetuate the stereotypical views of class politics, and thus they are worthy of attention and analysis.

Although much of this article identifies the conservative trajectories of nostalgic remembrances of reading in childhood, it also points to the effective component of reading and the link between affective reading and the material object of the book. This affect is not restricted to canonical literature, or to authors who use their memories of reading to legitimate their position in the literary establishment, like those discussed here. In this way, these narratives also form part of the larger discussion around the future
of the book and the future of reading in “the late age of print” (Bolter; Striphas). The view (or perhaps the threat) that children born today will never read print, perpetuated by the likes of Dirda and Birkerts, is absurd for precisely these reasons: the love of the material book is communicated through material bodies in shared reading experiences with strong affective components. And yet, as the discussion of Holloway, and to a lesser extent Dirda and Manguel, demonstrates, a range of cultural and environmental factors can and do impede literacy, access to and consumption of books: these three authors managed to overcome these factors, but legions of potential readers and writers have not and do not. Conversely, this invests their reminiscences with even greater weight and value.

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Notes

1. Alberto Manguel, Argentinian-born writer, editor, anthologist, and translator, has worked in the book industry for decades. His 1996 book *A History of Reading* outlines his view of the history of reading and book collecting from 4000 BC to the present day, though little attention is paid to current debates on how technology might be changing reading. Manguel’s 2010 book *A Reader on Reading* is a collection of essays, lectures, and other occasional writings tied together with quotes from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. Both contain detailed personal stories in which Manguel discusses his personal reading history from learning to read aged four (*History 5*) to his extensive book collection. Manguel’s books are aimed at a general reading audience of book lovers. Although Manguel has written two novels in Spanish, the majority of his works are not fiction.

2. Examples of books about books that contain a significant autobiographical component include works by Lewis Buzbee, Anna Quindlen, Francis Spufford, Pat Conroy, and Patricia Meyer Spacks. Leah Price’s coffee table book *Unpacking my Library: Writers and Their Books*, includes not only the anecdotes about writers’ connections to their personal libraries but also Price’s own recollections of her own and others’ libraries. Scholarly work considering books about books has come recently from Nicola King, who looks at memoirs by academics, and Ana Vogrincic who considers the broad field of books about books.

3. However, Manguel also describes the politics of reading under the military dictatorship of Argentina in the 1970s (*A Reader* 279).

References


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