

Thea Halo

I've been asked to talk about the important role books played in the writing of *Not Even My Name*. Perhaps I should begin with the first book I read as a child. It was a schoolbook when I was in the first grade, I believe, called *Fun with Dick and Jane*. It was barely a story of a little boy and girl and a dog named Spot. "Run Dick run. See how they run...." Although quite simplistic, it was also quite magical how the alphabet I had learned earlier had congealed into words and then into sentences that formed images of Dick and Jane and Spot running and playing and skipping along.

Some of the books I've read over the years, even those I read as a child, are still alive in me. Even Dick and Jane remained, not because the story was so intriguing, but because it was the first time I became a participant in the telling. It was through my developing skill as a reader—even at that tender age—that allowed the author to bring the characters to life on the page. In a sense, reading became a symbiotic embrace of writer and reader, joined through the written word. It's no wonder that some stories have such a great impact that the embrace between author and reader never ends. The great authors of history become an intrinsic part of us, of our consciousness and, at times, even our moral compass.

By the age of 14, I had skipped over the teenage romance novels girls of my age were reading and went straight to the classics. I first picked up Homer's *Iliad* in a small local bookstore. The Hollywood film of Ulysses starring Kirk Douglas that I saw with my mother the year it was released inspired my interest. I wanted to know more. At the moment I picked up the *Iliad* and began to read, my love of literature was born. I purchased the *Iliad* with the money I made from painting photographs after school. When I finished the *Iliad*, I went back for the *Odyssey*. I then bought all the books on Greek Mythology I could find. Mind you, I still didn't know that I was Greek. By the time I was 16 or 17, I was reading the Russians, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Kafka's *The Trial*, and Gogol's *The Nose*, *The Overcoat*, and *Dead Souls*. At 19, I read Waltari's *The Egyptian* for the second time, and some years later, I was dancing with *Zorba* on the island of Crete.

When I was still a child, I wanted to see the world. I had become so fascinated by the beauty of the peoples of the world and their cultures, most of whom I knew through magazines, movie newsreels, films and books. My brother Tim and I often turned the rocking chair upside down and each of us sat on a rung. We'd pretend to row across the ocean while singing the lyrics of a favorite song of the time... "*Far away places with the strange sounding names.*" And I'd conjure images of Egypt, China, and Spain. I began traveling at the age of 15, first to visit family members who had moved away. By the age of 19, I traveled on my own to Spain. When I went to live in Spain a few years later, I brought two books with me... The Complete Works of Shakespeare, and the Red Book of Fairy Tales.

People sometimes tell me how brave I am to have traveled to so many foreign places alone, especially the more exotic places like Egypt and Morocco. They also tell me how brave I was to go to Turkey with my mother. But it had never occurred to me to be afraid. Perhaps my love of different cultures dispelled the anxiety that some travelers might feel. But I believe that books played a major role in the familiarity I felt with other cultures. Early on, I thought of myself as a citizen of the world. Consequently, I have always felt close to the people of other lands. I rarely felt like a stranger in a strange land.

I had already walked among the peoples of other cultures through literature. My travels had even extended beyond my physical reach. I not only traveled through space, I traveled through time. I walked down mist filled, cobblestone London streets in the 19th Century; sat at dinner with the Queen; raised a sword to fight off invaders; and became privy to the mores and manners of country squires, and the often upright, but financially strapped young ladies who hoped to win their hearts. I lay on a scaffold beside Michelangelo as he painted the Sistine Chapel. I roamed through Byzantium with prophets and conquerors, and dreamed the dream of an Emperor who saved the Empire. I've fought alongside gladiators, confronted lions, danced the dance of virgins for the Minotaur, and left a trail of thread to help an Egyptian physician find his way through the maze. I've discovered Egyptian tombs, long before my physical trip to Egypt. I stood beside *Akhenaton* as he prayed to the Sun, and sailed the Nile in a felucca with the wind

to my back—both literally and through literature—as I watched peasants bending to their tasks of planting along its banks. I have even walked among the stars and frolicked on the moon, and came home safely again.

Our trip to Turkey then, seemed like a piece of cake. It's quite possible that without that feeling of oneness with other cultures, that I had developed through literature, I may never have traveled to Turkey with my mother. Without our trip to Turkey, I would never have written *Not Even My Name*. It was the inspiration for writing my mother's memoir, second only to her desire to have the story of her people told.

It was almost 70 years after my mother's exile, that I took her on that pilgrimage to Turkey to find her home. I did it for her, not realizing at the time that the journey was also mine. But when I stood on that land, for the first time in my life, her family became my family, her people, my people, and her history, my history.

My mother used to say, "If I could only write, I'd tell the world what happened." After our return, I wanted to write my mother's story for her, but I didn't have the courage to begin.

Literature had immeasurably enriched my life, but it also intimidated me. I was convinced I could never write like the greats. I didn't want to write a badly written book. That would serve no purpose. As a young reader, and even into my later years, I used to wonder what it was that made good writing. What was the key? I was convinced there was a key for all things, even good writing. But each time I attempted to discover that key by diligently concentrating on the writing style of a book I loved, my efforts failed. Bad writing pokes you in the eye, but good writing is so seamless that it sucks you in before you realize you've been had.

Then one day, as if by some grand design, I found a stack of books that were thrown away on the street where I lived. Loving books, I took them home. They were all on how to write, and in one of those books I found the key I had been searching for. It consisted of a perfect example of very bad writing by a young student, then four simple, yet profound words of admonishment by her teacher: "Just tell what happened," followed by the student's new attempt to "just tell what happened." It was brilliant. Those four,

simple little words, and that example, were the start of my own journey. I had lived almost my entire life as a painter, but my lifelong love of books, had given me an intrinsic knowledge of what great writing sounds and feels like. That knowledge, and those four little words, gave me the courage to begin writing my mother's story. When people ask me how to become a great writer, I tell them to read great books as a start.

Little did I know then, that one day I would bring others on a journey; that I would be their guide through time and space to tell the story of the Pontian people and my mother's life; that *Not Even My Name* would allow readers to run along the mountain paths of Pontos with a little calf running alongside; that, through me and my mother's memories, my grandmother would teach readers how she made bread and baked it in a stone oven; how Pontians planted their gardens and worshipped by candlelight; how my grandfather and great grandfather heated iron to forge tools, and mended pots and pans; and then how Turkish soldiers came to pound at their doors with the butts of their rifles to tell them their 3,000 year stay had come to an end. And little did I know that I would one day allow so many to walk beside my mother as a child on that long death march to exile, as she watched her family and her world fall to dust at her feet.

Chapter 19, Babies and Buzzards, brings us on that journey.

In fact, in the span of some 300 pages, I could also allow others to watch my mother build a new life in America as the child bride of a stranger who was three times her age.

In searching for a passage to read for this conference, I found a period of her life in America that seems so relevant both to her desire to learn to read, and life in Greece and other parts of the world today.

Chapter 37, Butcher, Baker, Candlestick Maker

Each time in my own writing process, when I thought I had lost my way, I'd again turn to literature for help. I'd simply pick up a book that I loved by a great novelist, like *The Age of Innocence*, by Edith Wharton, *Portrait of a Lady*, by Henry James, or William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, and the rhythm of their writing would help be recapture my own.

Before I close, it's worth mentioning that libraries are a godsend for many around the world. But for too many, access to books is still a luxury. Even in the US, staff is being reduced in some libraries, while other libraries are closing for lack of funds. In some parts of the world, libraries and schools are so far away, that the inhabitants are doomed to know only the world they see and hear around them, deprived of the knowledge of the vastness of the earth and universe in which they live. We might focus on what they are missing, but we should also ask, what is the rest of society missing when so many are exempted from being full participants in society. What might they have contributed?

In what stage of development would the world be now without the development of much of our scientific knowledge by the ancient Greeks, or without the books that captured and preserved that knowledge. Quoting from one account, the Greeks left a "legacy of science, philosophy, mathematics, and medicine," that traveled "across the Near East propelled by religion, trade, and conquest." Assyrians, along with Persians and Buddhists, were among the first translators of the Greek philosophers. When found by Arab scholars, the Arabs went back to the originals. This "led to the development of Arab astronomy and medicine," which "flourished in the courts of the Muslim world and later passed on to medieval Europe."¹

Can we imagine the existence of the Golden Age of Islam, which came more than 1,000 years after the Golden Age of Greece, without the books Greek philosophers left behind? It would take another 800 years for the Italian Renaissance, and a few more hundred years for The Enlightenment. How many more years would it have taken these enlightened periods to reach Europe or the East, without the Greeks and books? And where would my love of literature be without Homer?

Is it naïve to believe in a world with a motto of "All for one and one for all?" It's through books and the arts and sciences that we come closest to that ideal.

Thank you.

¹ De Lacy O'Leary, D.D., *How Greek Science Passed to the Arabs*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London. 1949/1980.