

“I Found it at the Library”

A talk to the Friends of the University of Missouri Library

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by

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It's good to be back home in Missouri, and I'm so pleased to be here among people who care about libraries. It is a special privilege to have been invited back home by the Friends of the University of Missouri Libraries. I hope you realize the full reach of your friendship—how much farther it extends beyond the magnificent resource you've helped grow and flourish here. With its more than 3 million volumes and its 35,000 journal titles, its more than 10 thousand manuscripts and archives, and so much more than that.

In offering your time and energy and ideas toward nurturing this great system, you are part of an even greater system, one that holds the culture together: a culture that is whipsawed by rapid and disorienting change, with pressures and distractions on our young people like no other time in history—and amplified to a deafening roar by the din of marketing and cynical pop entertainment.

Libraries invite people in. That's a phrase you'll be hearing from me again this afternoon—inviting people in. A library invites the culture through its doorways into a space that is more than the sum of its books. A space that affirms the best of who we have been and who we can be. And so you people here today are stewards of American culture at its civilizing best. And that's why I say it's a privilege to be in your company.

Let me speak some more about this concept, this civilizing gesture, of inviting people in. It resonates with me because it's what I try to do as a writer: I invite you in to the universe of the stories I write—and even nonfiction, which is what I do, works best when it is a story. I invite you in to walk with me on a journey. To see what I see, and hear what I hear, and to collaborate with me by filtering my evidence into your own font of memories and dreams and convictions. In that way we finish the story together.

Now, that may all sound a little cerebral to you, but it's not. I began to learn this secret as a dumb little small-town kid. I learned it by going to the public library and discovering

books that invited me in. Years later, I exploded that awareness and found my mission in life right here at the University of Missouri: at the School of Journalism, but also in the nooks and crannies of a certain granite building on a rise of ground at Ninth Street and Conley Avenue.

I stand here as an example of how your library can change a young life—by nourishing an eager but terribly naive young mind in search of roadmaps to his future.

As Doug mentioned, I grew up in Hannibal. Now, Hannibal is not a town that produces very many writers. Only one other guy that I know of made it. My family was working-class: Dad was a Fuller Brush man, and a very good one. We didn't have a lot of books around the house. I remember seeing the Fuller Brush company songbook and a novel called "Forever Amber," which my father read when my mother wasn't looking.

I was just a town kid. Kind of a part-time crook, actually. I smuggled Hershey bars out of Mr. Adams's grocery store, though I think Mr. Adams was onto me all the time...I went to see Hopalong Cassidy and Superman with my friends on Saturday afternoons at the Tom Sawyer theater... and I tried to create my own Superman look by tying a dish towel around my neck and wearing my Fruit-of-the-Loom undershorts outside my bluejeans, until my mother caught me at it and practically went hysterical. I was about to jump off the garage roof. But I think Mom was more concerned about public opinion.

But in the midst of these very ordinary and very happy kidhood days, my Dad used to do one important thing for me—and that thing, to use the great poetic line of Robert Frost, made all the difference.

On certain evenings after dinner, I would climb into Dad's Nash sedan, and dig out a place to sit amid all the mops and brooms and cans of floor wax, and we would drive from our little neighborhood house into the center of Hannibal. We'd make a right turn off Broadway at Fifth Street, near the park and the blind popcorn maker's red wagon, and we'd come to a stop at the intersection of Fifth and Church, exactly halfway between the Tom Sawyer Theater and Fifth Street's dead-end. There, on the other side of a little guardrail, a cliff dropped a hundred feet or so to some railroad tracks and then the left-field wall of Clemens Field, the town ballpark—where the mighty Hannibal Pilots, propelled by the good right arm of their pitching ace "Six-Toes" Echeveria, managed to finish last in the Tri-State League every season.

My father would let me out of the car and then go off to make his nighttime deliveries. I might take a step or two toward the edge of that cliff. There I could watch the game for free

and see the play-by-play man up in the broadcast booth toss down a carton of Lucky Strikes to every Pilot who hit a home run—which, thankfully for their health, was never—but usually I would hesitate, then turn and scamper up the eight curving concrete steps of the most inviting and beautiful building in Hannibal: two stories of blond brick, a pair of Grecian columns on either side of the front doors, which were made of curved oak and were about three times as tall as they needed to be.

I opened the doors by pulling on their iron rings. And then I left behind the Hannibal of ballparks and grocery stores and Nash sedans and the movies, and walked into Byzantium. A palace with high arching ceilings, an oil painting of George Washington on the wall, fluorescent lights, a marble tiled floor that let you hear your own footsteps, and the wonderful heavy scent of old glue on the bindings of books, some of which had been manufactured in Mark Twain's lifetime.

This was the Public Library.

Even as a dopey 12-year-old I could sense that I was entering a hallowed place; a place that was in my town but not quite of it. A place that invited me in. A place that connected Hannibal with a greater world. With history. And with the very best that human beings are capable of.

I knew for sure that I had some friends waiting for me on a certain shelf back in the stacks: two heroes of a series of boys' adventure books set in the Civil War—written by a now-obscure author named Joseph Altsheler, who died in 1919.

“The Guns of Bull Run,” “The Guns of Shiloh,” “The Scouts of Stonewall,” and the rest. I didn't read those books. I lived inside them. I lived beside the brave young Union soldier Dick Mason in his long buckskin gloves, trotting fearlessly on his powerful steed as cannon thundered to the right and left. And then in the next book I crouched alongside his incredibly clean-cut Confederate cousin Harry Kenton as he tiptoed through forests of magnolia and live oak and great stalks of sunflower, on the lookout for redoubtable foes. I reveled in a romantic storybook war in which the combatants yelled things like, “Ouch—he's got his bayonet in my cheek,” and, “By thunder, Bill, I hit that fellow fair and square. He'll never trouble an honest Yankee again.”

Story. I was living inside a story.

I checked those Altsheler books out again and again. I would get them stamped by the

head librarian herself, the terrifying Dorothy Atkins, and then I'd head back to those big oak doors, my shoes clicking on the marble, and I'd push my way outside and sit down against one of those Grecian columns with a universe in my lap and wait for my father's Nash to come back out of the night and take me back into the world.

Those library nights of my Hannibal childhood, and the books I found there, opened up my future. They gave me an inkling of what I wanted to do—what I needed to do. Saul Bellow once observed that writers are readers moved to imitation. I wanted to imitate this guy Joseph Altsheler. Imitate him, hell; I wanted to steal his magic. (Those Hershey bars were only for practice.) I wanted his power to write stories that would make readers want to step into them. Walk around in the world I'd created for them on the page. What a fantastic super-power that would be. And I wouldn't even have to wear my Fruit of the Looms on the outside. I wanted to transport people from the everyday world into the transcendence of a story.

The mystery was how to go about that. I was a clueless 12-year-old. I figured you probably got it done the same way every kid in the 1950s got everything done. You sent away breakfast cereal boxtops. And then somebody in Grand Rapids Michigan would send you a book-writing kit by return mail. With a secret synonym-seeking ring, probably. But if Wheaties made cereal boxes that showed Joe Altsheler flexing his muscles, they didn't seem to be for sale in Hannibal.

A few years went by, and I took on some sophistication. I realized that only a stupid little kid would think the boxtop idea would work. By this time I'd heard about New York City and how everything important was located there. Clearly the thing to do was just pick up the phone and call some Book Guy in New York City and say, I'd like to write a book for you—how much do you charge?

But I didn't know any Book Guy phone numbers. And besides, in our household you didn't just pick up the phone and call anybody Long Distance. Long Distance was a luxury our father reserved exclusively for himself, and he would indulge it only twice a year: at Thanksgiving and Christmas, when with great ceremony he would lift the black receiver and, with the rest of us watching in a circle, place a call to his deaf mother in Jacksonville, Illinois. About 80 miles away. He could have just yelled from the front porch and saved himself some

money. If Joyce or I had tried to do anything that extravagant on our own, Dad would have had the police come to our house and take us away to reform school.

And so I had to wait several years before I could find any real roadmaps toward my dream of being a writer. That discovery began to unfold in the fall of 1959, when I stepped out of Dad's Nash into a realm even more exotic and more awe-inspiring than the Hannibal Public Library. The campus of the University of Missouri.

I was headed of course for the School of Journalism. But you had to complete two years of liberal-arts courses before you could enroll in the School. Meantime, I needed a safe haven: a place to take refuge from this scary new universe of snazzy creatures who looked to be about my age but who radiated a kind of adulthood I'd never seen in Hannibal kids. Hell, in Hannibal adults: the boys who knew about things like sport jackets and cologne and political opinions and Jack Daniels; the girls who wore pearls and could sit on a sofa while maintaining perfect posture, and who knew the meaning of foreign phrases like "C'est la vie." (That one meant, "Sorry, Ron, I already have a date for Homecoming.")

I felt a little shy and conspicuous, especially after the morning when a kid in the dorm room next to mine plugged in his electric shaver, and I mistook it for a fire drill buzzer, and staged a one-man evacuation of Johnson Hall in my Fruit-of-the-Looms.

So I gravitated toward that granite building on a rise of ground at Ninth and Conley.

I went at first because I felt safe there. It reminded me of the public library back home, except it was about four times as big.

But pretty soon I discovered an even better reason to hang out at the Library: a small room on the first floor where they kept newspapers and magazines. The newspapers were interesting, but it was the magazines that knocked me out.

They were magazines I'd never dreamed of in my Saturday Evening Post innocence. They had titles like "The New Yorker," and "Esquire." Their pages were dense with fascinating stories that went on for tens of thousands of words; except that they were not stories, not in any way I'd ever understood the term. They were not made up. Every word in them was true.

And yet these pieces were never dull, never tedious and difficult like most of the textbooks I was struggling with. They were like journeys. The writers of them were crooking a finger at me, beckoning me to come along. Inviting me in. The great Joseph Mitchell would

begin a piece in the New Yorker by draping his arm around my shoulder and confiding to me—me, Mister Fruit-of-the-Loom from Hannibal Missouri—that, “When things get too much for me, I put a wild-flower book and a couple of sandwiches in my pockets and go down to the South Shore of Staten Island and wander around in one of the old cemeteries down there.”

That was the beginning of Mitchell’s famous essay, “Mr. Hunter’s Grave,” and I was with him every step of the way. He had me when he put those sandwiches in his pockets. You can’t make up putting sandwiches in your pockets; it’s too loopy, somehow, to be fiction. Too interesting. And it promised more of the same. I believed every word Joseph Mitchell told me. And he never let me down.

At some instinctive level, I probably recognized that these were stories, after all. They met all the requirements that we expect in fiction, with its higher pedigree. Something happens to set things in motion. Conflict occurs; choices are made that narrow the possibilities for what happens next. More conflict, the choices grow more critical. Dramatic tension rises. And moral tension. And things progress until at some moment in the story, something happens that changes everything.

It’s called the moment of reversal.

We surrender to it all; we see and hear it as if we were there. We are there, inside what John Gardner called “the vivid and continuous dream.” The state in which we forget we are reading words on a page and start to live them. That is the narrator’s art, simply described: to get us into that dream. Whether it’s fiction or otherwise.

The University of Missouri library was the best writing teacher I ever had. Because it introduced me to the possibilities of Otherwise. Let me explain what I mean.

I didn’t know it, but profound and permanent revolution in American writing was taking shape back then, in the pages of the New Yorker, and Esquire, and other magazines and books, and I was looking at the stirrings of it right there in the Library reading room; and typically of me, I wanted to enlist. And eventually I did.

It would be known by many names: “literary nonfiction,” “literary journalism,” “the New Journalism,” “the nonfiction novel.”

Rachel Carson brought out “The Silent Spring” in 1962, when I was a junior in the School of Journalism. Truman Capote was in the final stages of “In Cold Blood” then. The

first “nonfiction novel.” The New Yorker serialized it in 1965, and I cannot tell you the effect it had on young writers of my generation.

People nobody had ever heard of were about to burst on the scene and sweep aside the lofty novel as the gold standard for serious writing: people with names like Joan Didion, and Gay Talese, and Tom Wolfe, and David Halberstam. And William Least Heat Moon. And Hunter Thompson. Norman Mailer became a convert. And others.

These writers sensed that a new America was stirring from its post-war slumber, an America of social revolution and new international challenges; and this new America needed a new kind of literature to make sense of it. Grounded in journalistic fact, but wedded to the ancient storyteller’s art. With the goal of witnessing the world as it is on behalf of the reader. On behalf, ultimately, of community.

These new writers drew on assets not normally associated with the writing life, or taught in rarified literary seminars. Physical courage, for example. The courage to cross boundaries from the safe and sedentary world into unknown territory: the mean urban streets and hot Southeastern Asian battlefields and the inner circles of Mafia crime families, and a small quiet room in Utah where the electric chair awaited Gary Gilmore.

This was literature from the bottom up, not the top down. Literature as social history, reported at ground zero, with you the reader right there. Yet written with all the discipline and elegance and passion required of literature.

What a great new model for a kid like me, and for many kids like me: working-class kids who ached to join the Big Conversation out there. Kids who lacked any mentoring in the craft of fiction—making up stories—but whose passion and hunger fortified them with the courage to go out and pry real stories out of the world as it stood. To find in it what James Agee called “the cruel radiance of what is.”

I can tell you that I look on my career as a long apprenticeship toward mastering the writing tradition I discovered right here so many years ago. In the library and at the School of Journalism.

I’ve applied these ideals in books that on the surface are quite diverse. In “White Town Drowning” and later “Tom and Huck Don’t Live Here Anymore,” I invited you to come with me on journeys to the unknown territory that was Hannibal. A Hannibal where I was now

a stranger, and that was a stranger to me.

In “White Town,” we witnessed the attempted rape of a once-thriving community now desperate for revenue. The perpetrators were some cynical, economic-development honchos who blew in and tried to turn my beloved town into a five-million-dollar cartoon version of itself so it could cash in on Mark Twain’s Sesquicentennial birthday by offering tourists a gaudy ongoing “attraction” of fireworks, parades, helium balloon races, music marathons, a “Good Golly Aunt Polly” rock ‘n’ roll revival, the world’s biggest ice-cream social, and the actual citizens running around every day in hoop skirts and straw hats and paste-on freckles. And so on. Toward a pipe dream of \$250 million that would be spent by a projected one million visitors. Things were going to get crowded at Hannibal’s lone Holiday Inn.

I wanted you to care about this violation. I wanted to make you a citizen of Hannibal. So I invited you to inhabit Hannibal with me, past and present. The 1950s Hannibal of thriving storefront businesses and safe neighborhoods and Boy Scout troops and the grand annual autumn street carnival known as the Fall Festival. And then back to the future, the Hannibal of 1985, to watch the town suffer a nervous breakdown as it struggled, and failed, to sell its soul.

Twelve years later I came back to a hometown where things had gotten a lot worse. Two killings in the late 1990s, six months apart—each committed by an adolescent boy. Boy killers in the town that has symbolized American boyhood since 1876—the year Mark Twain published “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer.” The killings were the starting-points for the book that became “Tom & Huck Don’t Live Here Anymore.”

This was the hardest book I’ve ever written. The hardest because the core of it would have to be built on certain interviews I really didn’t want to conduct: interviews with the survivors of the victims; with the fathers of the two killers, and ultimately with the boys themselves. Both were incarcerated at the time—one of them in the federal penitentiary at Potosi, serving a life sentence for the shotgun murder he’d committed.

I asked myself the questions that most of you would probably ask yourselves if you were in my shoes: What if these wounded people don’t want to talk to me? What if talking about it broke them up, or made them angry? And finally, what business of mine was it to go asking them questions anyway? Weren’t they entitled to their privacy? How could I claim that putting these interviews in a book was more than mere sensationalism?—the kind of slash-and-burn journalism we see every night on television?

Well, answering the first two questions was easy. We tend to forget how much people want to talk about the pain and sorrow in their hearts—and how seldom they’re invited to do so. America can be a very lonely place, and it’s getting lonelier as our communities break down and we grow ever-more isolated from one another.

Bottom line, I got plenty of conversation from each of these people. More than I ever expected. Moving, raw, searching, candid. And at times, unexpectedly poetic. A whole bagful of audiotapes to take with me back East. And now I had to struggle with the final question: what purpose? What moral responsibility did I have toward the trust they placed in me?

For answers I looked back once again to those revolutionary new writers I’d discovered at the University library. I remembered what it was about their work that inspired me the most. And it was this:

No matter the immediate topic of any given piece by them, the ultimate topic was always the same: America. How things are in America. What it’s like to live in certain corners of America. What one small corner—one grain of sand—can tell us about the totality of our country and our times.

I believe that the people who told me their stories in “Tom & Huck Don’t Live Here Anymore” rose above themselves—rose above their personal grief and remorse—and spoke with eloquence and dignity about the predicament of American town life as it is threatened with abandonment, the loss of local economies, and the spiritual confusion of the young people trapped in these circumstances.

In “Tom & Huck Don’t Live Here Anymore,” I invited you to come along with me and stare into the human faces and hear the voices of community decay. I wanted you to think about what has been lost through the grain of sand that is Zachary Wilson, the handsome, charming, deeply intelligent and utterly irreclaimable shotgun killer in this book.

I wanted you there with me in the blankness of the prison at Potosi, looking at Zachary’s face through the scarred Plexiglas as he told me that he was reading Freud’s “Interpretation of dreams” to try and figure out why he did what he had done, and then remarking: “I never remembered my dreams till I came here. That’s why I call this place the Dream Palace. It’s because your old dreams come back to you here. And your new ones die out.”

Those were the two Hannibal books. I'll touch very briefly on the Mark Twain, a far happier book that I loved writing. In "Mark Twain: a Life," my goal was to interrupt nearly a century's worth of biography and criticism that mostly told you what the writer thought about Mark Twain. And let you spend some time in Sam's company—75 years or so—and decide for yourself what he was like.

I found Sam, of all places, in the library: the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley. He lives there, in the great archive known as the Mark Twain Project at Berkeley: 12 thousand letters written by him and to him, and 22 thousand pages of his notebooks and journals.

There he was—so I just pretty much turned the book over to him, and his wife Olivia, and their daughters, and his friends, and his enemies, and the great figures he met during his lifetime. Sam Clemens himself became your companion and guide in this book. I just stood back and directed traffic—and thoroughly enjoyed the three years I spent in his company. I hated to come back to time present when I'd finished. But Honoree had dinner on the table.

I'll finish now with just a few thoughts about "Flags of Our Fathers."

Here was another journey into unknown territory: the forgotten lives of the six figures in the famous photograph of that flagraising on Iwo Jima, on the fourth day of that horrific battle in March of 1945.

I worked in collaboration with James Bradley, whose father John was the big strapping fellow in the middle of the photograph, with his back to us: the medic, who ran around the fire zone with no protection, ministering to the dying and wounded.

John Bradley died in 1994. He was the last to go. Three of the other five boys had been killed in action after the photo was taken. The remaining two besides John lived rather tragic and shortened lives after the war.

When his father died, James embarked on a three-year odyssey by telephone to track down and talk to as many surviving Iwo veterans as he could. James was driven partly by frustration: he'd never been able to persuade his father to say one word to him about his war experiences.

At the end of it, James had a great stack of powerful interview notes—but the notes lacked a central story. And with no experience as a writer, he was unable to devise one. A

series of publishers turned him down. Nobody needed one more bang-bang World War II story. And as one up-and-coming young editor put it, to his eventual regret, “I’m not interested in a book about a bunch of old men crying into the telephone.”

Well, I wouldn’t be either.

My literary agent, James Hornfischer, eventually put the two of us together. I did what I think anyone lucky enough to have had my training and background would have done: I suggested that we find out everything we could about each flagraiser’s boyhood. Their families. Their dreams. And take the reader there. Invite the reader in. So that by the time these six young men enlisted in the Marines and got sent to Iwo Jima, we knew them. We were invested in them. They would not be stick-figures in one more book of, pardon the expression, war porn.

Working from James’s research notes, I built the story in that way. I’d never written about war before, but something told me that this would have to be a quiet book. At least the language in it would have to be quiet. And simple. And intimate. Because you cannot out-write warfare. You cannot assemble language violent enough and grotesque enough to replicate the realities of combat on the page. Although many war books try to do exactly this. And they all sound alike.

The secret is to go the other way. To write away from the war and into the hearts of your characters. To write with the grim confidence that the war will follow you. It will be on your heels. Inescapable. And if you write with enough restraint—if you supply the facts and the circumstances, but keep your distance from the ugly and empty clichés of war-writing—the reader will supply the emotion you want to evoke.

It was a tough sell, and frankly, I didn’t always get my way. But it was Mr. Bradley’s book, his story, and I had contracted to write in his voice, and so I accepted the compromises. Most of them.

I’ll give you one example of what I was trying to do. This one stayed in the book. It remains the most dominant and troubling image I have of the battle of Iwo Jima. And it was all about quiet.

The Marines had crossed the Pacific and landed on the small beach—thousands of them in the first wave—and it was so crowded that when the Japanese opened up from inside the fortified volcano, Suribachi, they didn’t even have to aim.

The boys tried to advance across the soft volcanic ash, but they kept slipping back. “It was like walking through shell corn,” remembered one veteran. “Like climbing in talcum powder,” said another. “Like a bin of wheat.” “Like deep snow.”

Quiet images. But here’s the quietest one—and the one that has troubled my sleep the most: some of the young Marines were so traumatized by the firestorm and annihilation going on around them—that they simply dropped to the sand, curled into the fetal position, and went into a catatonic sleep. They had to be kicked awake by their officers.

I believe that the reason for the great success of “Flags of Our Fathers”—and this belief gives me more satisfaction than any pride of authorship possibly could—is that the book was cathartic. It inspired aging World War II veterans all around the country to finally open up after decades of silence, and share with their wives and sons and daughters and grandchildren the burdensome memories that they had kept locked inside themselves for so long.

With my work in “Flags of Our Fathers” I finally accomplished something that more than half a lifetime ago had seemed a romantic, but impossibly unattainable dream for a small-town kid with not much sophistication and some serious Fruit-of-the-Loom issues:

I joined the Big Conversation.

And all because I went to the library. Your library. Our library. Thank you.

