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Unexpected Literary Journey

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Lucy Vogel's literary journey from early childhood to early college. Deborah Brandt's definition of literacy sponsors is a key component of the overarching theme of the paper, which is the effect of George Orwell's literary sponsorship on Vogel's personal reading journey. Furthermore, novels like "*Animal Farm*" and "*Brave New World*" are discussed to illustrate how Vogel's analysis of literature evolved throughout her life. Additionally, Vogel exemplifies how being from China affects her view of Orwell's novel. Finally, the essay ties Vogel's analysis of "*Animal Farm*", literacy sponsorship, and her Chinese origin to Orwell and his impact on her perspective.

Keywords

Animal Farm, George Orwell, 1984, Marxist ideology, *Brave New World*, literacy sponsor, Aldous Huxley, reading, memoir

Childhood

My literacy journey started quite late in life. In fifth grade, we had a reading competition called "Battle of the Books" (BOB). I set a goal for myself to read all 25 BOB books and qualify for the travel team. This was not an easy goal because I was a slow reader competing against children who read at a high school reading level. Reading did not come naturally to me, so I avoided it at all costs. However, to my surprise, the BOB competition piqued my interest, and I was determined to push through my difficulty with reading. I ended up being the first to read all 25 BOB books and qualified for a prestigious spot

on the travel team. We won the county wide competition later that year. This is the only time I "enjoyed" reading as a child. I did not necessarily like the reading aspect of BOB; I loved the competition. The competitive nature of BOB drove me to be better and introduced me to a fun way to read.

I disliked reading for a plethora of reasons: I was a slow reader, I enjoyed genres atypical for a child, and I was not one to sit still. The types of books I enjoyed were nonfiction and historical fiction (*Small Steps: The Year I got Polio* by Peg Kehret , the *I Survived* series by Lauren Tarshis, *Yellow Fever* by Laurie Halse Anderson) or dystopian novels like *Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins or *Maze Runner* by James Dashner. Believe it or not, the children's section is not stuffed with dystopian novels for kids. I guess elementary school librarians are not in favor of introducing the topic of a civilian murdering governments to children.

I remember the *Magic Tree House* series by Mary Pope Osborn being all the rage in elementary school. The series was interesting, but it was formulaic. In every book the two main characters would go somewhere, do something, and then return home. Formula books like the Magic Tree House bored me. Sadly, most books for people under ten are formula books.

While in elementary school, I did find a series I enjoyed–*I Survived*. The series was historical, which I enjoyed, and the books had variety. One was about a shark bite, one was about World War II (WWII), one was about a volcano eruption, etc. The *I Survived* series did not build astounding characters or have world changing plots, but I was content with those books for a while.

In third grade, I read *Hunger Games*. This was one of the first series I genuinely enjoyed. The length of the book was intimidating, but the book itself was not a difficult read. I read the rest of the trilogy in the years to follow. I appreciated the world building of the novel; the thirteen districts fascinated me and the subject of government always appeals to me. I have realized that *Hunger Games* is heavily based on

romance, but I do not remember ever caring about that when I read it. Some might argue that I was too young to understand the "romance," but I think I'm merely too much of an old man to care.

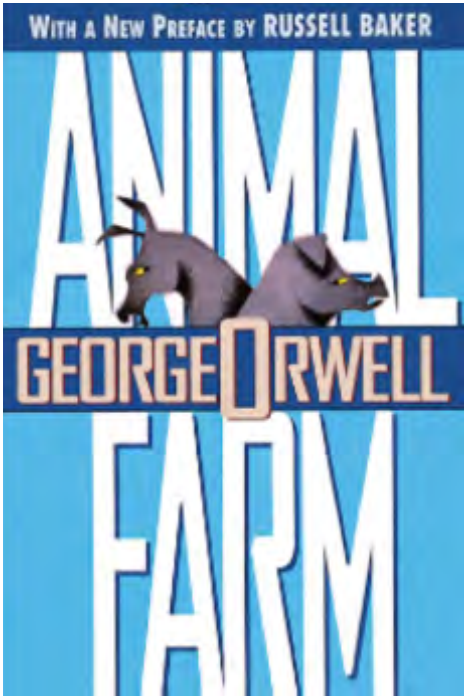
Middle School

Throughout middle school, I read several dystopian series including The *Maze Runner, Divergent* by Veronica Roth (regrettably), *Unwind* by Neal Shusterman, *The Young Elites* by Marie Lu, *Legend* by Marie Lu, The *City of Ember* Jeanne DuPrau and many more. I enjoyed these books, minus "*Allegiant*" from the *Divergent* series, but I did not love them. In my opinion, a lot of these novels lacked a deeper meaning. To this day, I still do not see the deeper meaning of most of these series. I find a lot of novels or series are fun to read and have interesting concepts, but they lack deeper meaning. Modern novels succeed in building worlds and creating fun plots, but these stories and scenes are not always well portrayed.

Most, not all, modern novels and series lack depth in my opinion; maybe it is because these authors did not experience WWII or The Great Depression. The fountain of meaning I yearned for would be discovered within classic novels.

In middle school, I read mostly "edgy" dystopian series, but I also read a handful of classics, the most notable being *Night* by Elie Wiesel and *Narnia* C.S. Lewis. *Night*, a memoir by Elie Wiesel, is Wiesel's experience of the Holocaust and offers perspective on that horrific tragedy. *Narnia*, in many ways, is a commentary on religion and trusting in God (or whomever you trust) and yourself. Both novels focus on good and evil, freedom and fear, and life before and during tragedy. Books today place too much emphasis on meaningless romantic relationships or gore, which is why the stories lack purpose.

After reading my first handful of classics in late middle school, I was drawn to more contemporary novels like *Ender's Game* by Orson Scott Card or *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. However, I was still searching for the one book that would make me see the world differently.



Animal Farm

In seventh grade, I remember going to a used bookstore with my mother. It was a small store in a quiet shopping center; I remember perusing the aisles as my mother picked out a book for her friend, when I stumbled upon the "Classics" aisle. For some odd reason, the novel *Animal Farm* by George Orwell jumped out at me. The cover was cartoonish, and looking back I think that appealed to my adolescent mind. The pig and donkey appear as if they are in an argument, which is kind of true. The color was an inviting "sky blue," not a communist red or totalitarian black. The letters were a fun font that reminded me of a Dr. Seuss book. I had heard of the novel, but I had not read it. It was only five dollars, so I decided to purchase it. I do not think I read the book until eighth grade (2016) because I have this terrible habit of buying books and not reading them. Nevertheless, I did read it.

The first time I read *Animal Farm* I was startled by how gory and disturbing it was. For example, the beloved horse, Boxer, suffered a horrible end. In Chapter 9, Boxer fell from being overworked. Boxer was no longer useful, so the pigs sold him to a "Horse Slaughter and Glue Boiler" company (Orwell, 1945, p. 123). Another disturbing piece of the novel was the battles. "The Rebellion," "The Battle of Cowshed," and the "The Battle of Windmill" depicted bloodied animals murdering humans. Snowball, one of the leaders, was quoted saying "The only good human being is a dead one" after Boxer accidentally killed a stable

lad with his iron shoe (Orwell, 1945, p. 59). The battles were disturbing because they were about innocent little farm animals fighting, and at the end of every battle there were mass casualties. One can assume that the farm was littered with animal corpses, which is not a comforting thought.

The topic of communism is disturbing, but to have animal actors portray the tragedy that is communism, or the rise of it, is daunting. The end of the novel depicted the pigs being indistinguishable from the evil humans. Orwell (1945) wrote, "Twelve voices were shouting in anger, and they were all alike. No question, now, what had happened to the faces of the pigs. The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which" (p. 139). The most frightening line is when Napoleon has Squealer repeat, "He would be only too happy to let you make your decisions for yourselves. But sometimes you might make the wrong decisions, comrades, and then where should we be?" (p. 69).

The examples listed above are still disturbing to me to this day because they can be seen in real life. Boxer's death represents the death of workers under communism, the battles represent the true horrors of war, the ending represents how a totalitarian government will never improve your life, and Napoleon's orders represent Stalin's final phase of his takeover. My younger self may not have seen the depth of his writing, but I did see Boxer being boiled for glue and found the fields of animal corpses troubling. The ending also gave me, and still gives me, goosebumps. Every time I read it, I find more chilling quotes. One would think that after reading this book a plethora of times I would not be shocked, but it gets me every time.

After *Animal Farm* I stupidly read *1984* by George Orwell too for a book report. Eighth grade Lucy understood about seventy-five percent of 1984, but I felt accomplished. I thought I was an expert on Marxism after reading those two novels. Looking back, that was a naive attitude. After my book report, I put Orwell's novels down for a brief period of time.

Animal Farm not only showed me a whole new genre, but it also introduced me to my love of government. After reading *Animal Farm* in eighth grade, I wanted to watch the 2016 election unfold. This was the first time I was old enough to fully understand what the candidates were saying and who they were. I watched all the debates (three presidential and one vice presidential) that year, and every year to follow, and stayed up until three in the morning to follow the results. Ever since that election, I have followed politics closely. I can trace my love of politics back to *Animal Farm*.

Early High School

The summer before my freshman year of high school I decided to reread *Animal Farm* because I realized I did not fully understand either Orwellian novel. I chose to reread *Animal Farm* because *1984* is dense and seemed like a project to tackle later in life. After this, I reread Orwell's novel religiously every month for six months straight. Every time I read it, I felt like I was reading it anew. His 139 pages contained an abundance of minute details that would be revealed with each read. I came to learn that details like the breed, color, and age of the animal held more meaning than I originally thought. Orwell tied in history and ideology. He snuck in religious meaning, and the importance of education. I realized how truly brilliant his depiction of the rise of communism was; he took innocent farm animals, one of the first things young children learn about, and turned them into evil power-hungry tyrants. His novel started my love of classic cautionary-dystopian tales and the 1940-1960 time period.

In high school, I read more non-fiction books like *Unbroken* by Laura Hillendbrand. These non-fiction novels depicted important historical events, like WW2, on which Orwell based his novels. In junior year, I read *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley; this novel would rival Orwell's for my favorite book. Though Huxley did not use pigs and ducks to make his point, he (similar to Orwell), depicted a future in which the free world ends. Huxley's novel certainly gave me a new perspective on Marxist ideology.

In addition to enhancing my understanding of this economic theory, I felt I gained IQ points just reading his novel! Huxley has the best vocabulary of any author I have ever read. He predicts the future with amazing accuracy. *Brave New World* is arguably a deeper novel than *Animal Farm*. *Animal Farm* described the rise of communism in a relatively nuanced way, but it ended there. *Brave New World* predicted the effects of communism and the end of the free world, and that is much more difficult to do.

Why I am Interested in Animal Farm

As I have gotten older, I have found more novels and series that I enjoy reading. It is an odd sensation for me because I loathed reading growing up. I credit my newfound enjoyment of reading to one thing, and that is finding my extremely specific genre. Books for children are lighthearted, and I am not a lighthearted person. I think my enjoyment of such a grim topic—communism and totalitarianism—stems from my origin. I am adopted from China, and China is a totalitarian country. The government controls what people see, what they say, who they can worship, and even how many children they could have.

I was born in a small farm town. In farm towns, boys are useful because they stay and take care of the farm, while girls are forced to marry and follow their husbands. Farm families needed boys; most families in China wanted a son, but they did not necessarily "need" one to survive. Many children were abandoned because families were limited to one child, and if the child was a girl, then she was out of luck.

The United States Department of State recorded that 7,038 Chinese children were adopted by Americans in the year 2004, the year I was adopted. Of those 7,038, ninety-five percent of them were female. This US department only shows statistics pertaining to the US, but one can assume that even more babies were put up for adoption. I will not dive into the complex feelings of adoption, but one can see how the Chinese government uprooted hundreds of thousands of lives because of the One Child Policy. My anger towards totalitarian, communist, socialist governments fueled my interest in books like Animal Farm and

Brave New World. I have seen the effects of those governments; I have experienced the effects of these governments firsthand.

Animal Farm, 1984, and Brave New World do not have fairy tale endings. The endings of Orwell and Huxley are realistic. After a certain time, a country cannot reverse the damage that has been caused by a totalitarian government. Russia never undid the damage of the USSR; China had not undone the damage from Mao. Until a couple years ago China's citizens could not have more than one child. My "ending" in China was not happy. Most orphans do not have happy endings; I was a "lucky baby" to be adopted. They will not have fairy tale beginnings, middles, or ends. The totalitarian government ruined hundreds of thousands of lives (parents, children, workers, people of the "wrong" religions, the students in Tiananmen Square, etc.), and they will not have, or did not have, happy endings. Orwell and Huxley are trying to convey to their audience that at a certain point it is too late to save the free world, and there will not be happy fairy tale endings anymore.

Late High School to Current Day

Within the last couple of years, I have started to listen to talk radio and podcasts daily. It is always a fun surprise to hear my favorite talk show hosts mention *Brave New World* or Animal Farm. Today, the topic of the end of the free world is discussed daily. My fear of the rise of Marxism has allowed me to appreciate and understand these radio shows more. Interest in these shows can be traced back to Orwell.

Throughout my whole life, I have loved public speaking. I realized relatively recently that radio and television would be a fulfilling career for me. I enjoy public speaking and politics; commenting on current events sounds like the ideal job for me. Once again, my interest in politics and history can be traced back to Orwell.

Orwell is My Literacy Sponsor

Brandt describes a literacy sponsor as "any agent local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable[s], support[s], teach[es], model[s], as well as recruit[s], regulate[s], suppress[es], or withhold[s] literacy…" (Brandt,

257). Orwell, in many ways, has been my literacy sponsor. It is funny because I was one hundred percent not the person he imagined reading his novel. I am a small, young, Chinese girl in twenty-first century America. I am not a British man in the 1950s. Orwell is definitely a faraway agent who has supported and enabled my literacy journey. He enabled me to pursue similar novels to his, and pursue learning history, politics, philosophy, religion, ethics, etc. Huxley has also been a sponsor for me. He has taken my understanding of government and freedom to a new level, and he has inspired me to read his other essays and books.

Conclusion

I think about Animal Farm a lot. I think about the symbolism, the characters, the setting, the pure genius within it quite often. However, I have never thought of Orwell as a sponsor or mentor. When one thinks of a sponsor, it is usually someone who is close to you or at least someone you knew. Brandt has shown me that sponsors can be anyone.

I hope *Animal Farm's* legacy continues to grow and impact people like it has me. I also hope that everyone finds their *Animal Farm*; the world would seem dull if I had not picked up that small blue book. It is truly miraculous that Orwell's 139 pages changed the world, and my life.

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