

The Boxcar Children

"One warm night, four children stood in front of a bakery. No one knew them. No one knew where they had come from." I read on the back of the new book I had chosen from the library. *Why were four kids standing in front of a bakery*, I wondered. *How come no one knew them?* I flipped the yellowish book over in my eight year old hands and read: The Boxcar Children. *Huh, I thought, strange title. The Boxcar Children. Were people living in the boxcar? No, that couldn't happen.* "Might as well try it," I said under my breath. I tossed it in the book crate my mom had sitting on one of the grey library tables and went searching for other novels, hoping to find something that would really grab my attention. An adventure book maybe. Or something about detectives.

As a child, beginning chapter books is a big deal. My parents read to me all the time when I was young, but something about starting "big books" is a milestone in any kid's life. It creates a new sense of independence because from that point on, you can learn about the world all by yourself. Reading unlocks new doors that are just begging to be opened. My first "big books" were the Junie B. Jones series, but, after kindergarten or first grade, they began to seem too childish for my high-end taste. Quite obviously you need to move onto bigger and better books when you can finish a sixty page book during one church service and you've read the entire series at least twice, if not three times. Everyone else at school was starting to really enjoy the Magic Tree House series, but they never appealed to me. *Why would I want to read about stupid unicorns and other imaginary creatures?* I would ask myself. Oh sure, I would try to enjoy them like every other eight year old in my class, but I could never seem to finish one of the books. For some reason, time traveling from a tree house just was not appealing to me.

My mom made it a priority that I learn to read very early in my life. By the age of four, I was able to read simple words and sentences. At four and a half, I could pick my way through a beginning reader book if I had a bit of help from my mom. By kindergarten, I felt like an old pro at reading, flying through our paper books in class in under forty five seconds. *The dog jumped over a log.* At school, I was always in the highest reading group, but even then, I still had no trouble reading whatever the teacher handed me. Sure, words like encyclopedia or pneumonia might make me stumble, but I was still under the age of

eight for Pete's sake! I needed books I could get lost in for more than six minutes and twenty-seven seconds. As much as I loved reading, and I did love it, preferring to enjoy a book over a Nickelodeon show or princess movie, it was clear I would have to find some different reading material.

I tried the Horrible Harry series - the books were too short; I could finish their seventy pages in under an hour and a half. I needed something more substantial, something I could really get into. I tried books about puppies and kittens-longer, but boring. I didn't want to read about puppies playing in a meadow under a rainbow. I was a little girl and, stereotypically, we like kittens and puppies, but I wanted something more true to life. Besides, what kind of names are Daisy-Sunshine and Lilly-Belle? I tried books that weren't in a series, and sure, some of them were good, but a week later when I finished one of the books, I was back at square one. Even to this day, I prefer series over individual books because I can really get to know the characters and see their personalities and relationships evolve over time. My mom and I would check out crates of books from the library, only to have me like eight out of the twenty-five enough to finish reading them. To say the least, finding a series I would love was going to be a challenge.

Along came the Boxcar Children. At around one hundred and seventy pages, they were long enough for me to get lost in the story. After the first book, I was, shockingly, hooked. Here were four kids, not much older than myself, solving mysteries together! And not mysteries dealing with mythical creatures or lost pets, but mysteries that could actually happen in real life! At that time, and still today, the books I enjoy most aren't necessarily true to life, but stories that *could* be true to life. For example, it isn't likely that four siblings would roam around the country together, finding mysteries where ever they went, but the mysteries they did find could happen in real life. Or, at least they were written so vividly I believed they could happen. I like details: what the person is wearing, how the room looks, etc. I want to *see* the story happening in my mind. I didn't start with book one, but after a couple from the middle of the series, which I thoroughly enjoyed, I went back to the beginning and gave it a try. To begin with, I was a bit unsure as it wasn't like the others in the series, which are all classified as mystery books. However, it turned out to be magical for me. This tale was not a mystery; it was about Henry, Jessie, Violet, and Benny living in a boxcar in the woods, hiding out from their grandfather, Mr. Alden, because they

thought he was a cruel man. It turns out, he was about the kindest man ever, but what amazed me was how the Boxcar Children could function in the real world at such a young age. I wanted to *be* the Boxcar Children.

I was absolutely flabbergasted at how independent these siblings were. They could cook, and clean, mend clothes, make beds out of pine needles, and do anything an adult could. They even came up with a makeshift "refrigerator" in the creek that ran next to the boxcar. From that moment on, I would never turn back. I became so obsessed with the books that my friend Paige and I would play "orphans," trying to "live" by ourselves around the cul-de-sac in our neighborhood. We would create "stews" out of mushy crab apples, a mix of brown and green pine tree needles, and small wood chips, mixing our creation in whatever bucket or bowl we could find, trying to re-create Jessie's root vegetable stew. This stew was a vivid memory of mine from the first Boxcar Children: a combination of vegetables no one wanted: small potatoes, tiny carrots, onions the size of blackberries, and stew meat, all cooked up in a black cast iron kettle over an open fire. In the book, it "smelled" fantastic to me-beefy, rich, warm, and comforting. Unfortunately, ours was far from edible.

After reading Gertrude Chandler Warner's first novel, I realized how books could make you feel. Some words on a page could transport you into a completely new world. I wasn't just reading the Boxcar Children, I was *living* them. Books had never had that effect on me before. When I was reading about those kids, I went into a little world of my own, like watching a movie in my head. People around me could be talking, but if you had asked me what they were saying, I would have had no idea. A dog could have done a handstand in front of me and I would have had no clue. That was my favorite part of these books and still my favorite part of reading today: entering the world the characters are in, living a different life whenever I open the cover. And, although the stories about the Alden kids were fiction, I was learning about places all over the United States through the travels of the Boxcar Children, from Colorado, to New York, to Boston, to Portland. Heck, I felt like quite the traveler myself!

From that point on, I had a new outlook on reading. I did not just like reading, or even love reading, I lived for reading. It took me places and let me experience things I could never hope to

experience as a second grader. I read like a maniac, finishing books in two or three days. I couldn't get enough of solving mysteries right along with Henry, Jessie, Violet, and Benny. I couldn't get enough of how much they could do on their own. Pretty soon, I had made it through half of the series, then, not too long after that, I had finished all of the books, then, all of the "special mysteries." So, I started over, re-reading my favorites three and four times, and most of the others at least twice. Ever since I picked up the first Boxcar Children book, my love for reading was solidified for life. To this day, I strive to find novels that compare to the first book in that series, to feel the joy and magic of reading, just as I did as a child. To experience that moment when you open the cover and can't put the novel down until you see the last page. To live the days when you read the first book in a series and immediately have to read all the others. The only difference is, ten years from when I read book number one, my characters of choice are Cotton Malone, Cassiopeia Vitt, Cammie Morgan, and Katarina Bishop, instead of Henry, Jessie, Violet, and Benny Alden.