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“My Beloved World”

I was struck recently by this line from Garret Keizer in his opinion piece in the August 14 New York Times relating his own view about books to those opting for book banning: “Like it or not, we belong to the same minority, the minority of those who believe in the power of literature in a post-literate age.” There is a lot about us as a people packed into that sentence about book banning, but perhaps most of all that he thinks that we live in “a post-literate age”! Maybe a bit overstated, but scary nevertheless.

One of the literature-powerful minority is certainly Associate Justice of the Supreme Court Sonia Sotomayor. She was appointed to the Court by President Barack Obama in 2009. In 2014 she published a memoir, which includes description of her very difficult childhood. It is entitled “My Beloved World.” The title comes from a short poem in translation from the Spanish, “To Puerto Rico (I Return),” by Jose Gautier Benitez.

Puerto Rico is Justice Sotomayor’s extensive family’s heritage home. The Bronx is her childhood home. The Bronx was then and is now a place of low-income apartment projects and survival by street savvy, but also for Sonia Sotomayor a place of joy for having much of her immigrated family nearby. They shared the stress of economic hardship. Her words describe a loving father but one who drank to excess, a working, nurse mother away from home too much, and persistent and highly vocal tension between those two. Her father, however, died when she was only nine.

In that nine-year-old summer, when her mother was in grief and in a self-imposed bedroom isolation for months, Sonia Sotomayor was put at a loss for lack of school diversion, motherly attention, and sense of purpose. She found a public Library.

“My solace and only distraction that summer was reading. I discovered the pleasure of chapter books and devoured a big stack of them. The Parkchester Library was my haven. To thumb through the card catalogue was to touch an infinite bounty, more books than I could ever possibly exhaust.”

And later in the memoir she writes about her own mother at a similar age: “The best part of school was the library and carrying a book home.” And: “In school Celina was lonely all the time and so quiet that practically no one knew she was there. She lived in the library and often read so long that there was no time left to study.”

What a personal testimony to the importance of Libraries! As an avid lifetime reader myself, and likewise benefactor from my own neighborhood public Library, I find it so interesting to come across books in which Libraries are such a key part of a personal or big story.

As told in this column over the course of time, the Library may be a public one, or one located in a school, or a privately held and remarkable one of historical note as with Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello Library and Benjamin Franklin’s Junto club, or even just a corporate one for narrow use. Sonia Sotomayor finds space in her memoir to

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comment on an ordinary public Library of importance to her personal needs on her way to becoming an Associate Justice on the Supreme Court of the signature democracy for which it stands.

Perhaps it is worth repeating again what Andrew Carnegie said: "A Library outranks any one other thing a community can do to benefit its people."

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