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Jonathan Orr Essay Contest

It was the summer of 2007. From the busy inner city street, one could just make out the light of a flashlight used by a lonely fourteen-year-old girl as she read late into the night. The sticky Midwestern night with its symphony of cicadas melted away as she was transported to Renaissance Venice where she took part in royal conspiracies, dangerous sword fights, and Venetian festivals. Her talisman, like that of the character, was a book.

The summer after my family moved into the inner city of Minneapolis was a lonely one. I was too far away to meet with my friends and too young to be able to do much about it. Because of this, characters in books became my friends. I was especially enchanted with the *Stravaganza* series by Mary Hoffman. Like the main character, Lucien, I was transported each night to a world of adventure and intrigue set in Renaissance Italy. Although the works were fictional, they inspired a curiosity for Italy and its story.

Years later, as I began my undergraduate work in psychology, something we read in a Western Civilization class opened up a drawer of memories that I had not looked through since that sticky and solitary summer. As we discussed the influence the House of Medici had on Italian history, I realized that I had heard this before. More than that, I had lived it through Lucien's eyes and Hoffman's imagination.

As the semester progressed, I was drawn back into the world of Lucien and longed to return to those nights of adventures that had inspired my imagination years before. I began to recognize the connection between history and the books that had kept me company as a child. What I loved was narrative. What was more, I could make the story of Renaissance Italy and others like it the focus of my study. Because of this, I changed my major to one that excited me. One that made me want to do my readings and go beyond what we learned in class. I became an aspiring historian.

My first semester filling my schedule with history classes was enlivening. Instead of registering for classes that sounded daunting and dull, as I had in the past, I could hardly choose between all the classes that interested me. I remembered other stories I had read as a child and longed to learn more about the real history behind them, as I had done with

the *Stravaganza* series. My class on the Gilded Age of American history brought back memories of travelling up and down the great Mississippi with Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, my African American history class reminded me of the struggles I had read about in Christopher Paul Curtis' *Bud, Not Buddy*, and *Elijah of Buxton*, and a number of my classes reminded me of the many adventures I had with Annie and Jack as Mary Pope Osborne's *Magic Tree House* brought me to countless eras and places.

Looking back, it is clear that the books that I read as a child planted in me a love for stories. Not only did these books expose me to worlds and times that informed my childhood but they also inspired a desire to learn about history that has changed the course of my academic life and vocation. As I look to continue my study of history, I will always look back fondly on that lonely summer. Despite the long and lonesome days, all those late nights adventuring in Italy paved the way for the rest of my life and my love of history.