

Christmas cards and birthday books

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I hated my birthdays. It wasn't the presents, don't get me wrong - materialism is all the rage. No, rather it was that awkward moment when you are given a present. I would smile, unwrap it and make happy sounds over whatever was contained within. It was the same with Christmas. See present, open present, enjoy. See card, open card, fake joy.

I sent Christmas cards, everyone did. I signed my name at the bottom and copied out the address. I could copy. But I never read my Christmas cards, nor my birthday cards. I smiled at the words, stumbling across the page. I made all the right noises that I was touched by their messages of hope and encouragement. But I was never specific. Sometimes people seem deflated by my comments. Their smiles lost the crispness around the edges as I commented, "Oh, thank you" my eyes flitting over the personalised wishes they inscribed.

I had learnt to recognise the classic examples over my years - good luck is long and loopy. Best wishes - the tops of the words always look the same. But sometimes people wrote in script, or scrunched all their letters together. They got "Oh, thank you."

It's not that I didn't appreciate cards, I did - they speak for the gift, or for the giver. They transmit messages from old friend, new friends, acquaintances who feel obliged to give cards for every holiday. They just always remind me of secrets that I lived with. Secrets I couldn't avoid.

One year I was given a book out of the blue. I never asked for books, yet here it was. From a relative stranger of all people - we talked once over lunch at work. What gives someone the desire to give gifts unreasonable for the relationship? She had smiled as she handed it over. It was my birthday I think, or maybe Christmas. The cover was embossed, classic images of the fleur de lis. It was blank. I was stunned. Of course mandatory thankyou's circulated, hugs were exchanged. There was no card - instead the message emblazoned the first page of the book. Lachrymose lettering dripping down the page. Signed with hugs. I could read hugs and kisses. The book haunted me. Usually I would have drawn throughout it, spirals proving there was no space for words. But it was lined. It begged to be written in, the thick pages begging for weighty words. The cover was slightly plush, perfect for resting on any surface when one feels inspiration coming. No matter where I put the book, it was always in the corner of my vision - sitting on a shelf, resting under a coffee cup. I would go back to the words on the first page, written in ink, elaborate images in themselves. I traced them with my fingers. The first few times



my fingers came away darker. Then later I could trace them without looking. Finally I could trace them without the book.

A few weeks later the gift-giver asked me how it was going. I said everything was fine, I thanked her again for the book. Her eyes were sad, I had missed the point. She wished me all the best and went back to work. We never really spoke after that, she got a promotion and we travelled in different circles at work. Minds drifted on.

A few years later I married. It was an unremarkable courtship, devoid of poetry or distant love letters. But inevitably she found out about my secrets, coaxed them out of me, made me expose them to the world. Made me work at changing, improving. I learnt letters, words not constructed as shapes, but as letters written to make progressive sounds. I could read my birthday cards, write simple wishes back to people who I felt needed extra acknowledgment. I began to read books. I got lost in worlds of adventure, of suspense, of danger.

Then I found the blank book. The embossed cover has collected dust, the faux velvet a dusty grey in place of a pristine black. The ink words were just as I remembered. My fingers fell back into the old pattern, lost forgotten but never lost. The shapes finally forming words.

You have the eyes of a writer, don't let that slip away. I hope this helps.

I bought a weighty ink pen, learnt words of rhythm and words buried away. I filled those pages because now I knew their purpose. I never saw the gift-giver in person, but I sent her a Christmas card through mutual work colleagues.

I never really thanked you properly for the book, but now I can. Merry Christmas.

Winning entry in the short story writing competition "It's Never Too Late ... To Learn To Read", funded by the Australian Government Department of Industry, Innovation Science, Research and Tertiary Education, through Adult Learners' Week 2012 National Grant Funding. The competition was a partnership between the National Year of Reading 2012, and Tasmanian Writers' Centre.

