Bea Nielsen, “I’ve Read a Book”

*The Complete Book of U.S. Presidents*, by William A. DeGregorio, is a 750-page tome chronicling the lives and administrations of each of the United States presidents. It is my favorite historical text. Since my childhood, I’ve read this book.

This book represents my grandfather—flannel shirts, rheumy blue rimless eyes, that smoker smell even after ten years without a cigarette. I sat on the floor of his study when family dinners went sour. I remember my perpetual orange plaid dress and grandpa’s slippers, his impossibly narrow ankles folded into one another. I sat on the floor reading thick, hard covered books. The sound of golf announcers on the television almost drowned out the sound of my brain teaching itself how to stretch.

*The Complete Book of U.S. Presidents* was often entrusted to me for a few days, and I’d walk away from Grandpa’s office hugging this vessel of our nation’s executive history to my chest. I read each biography of the Presidents, savored them, learning more than most people ever would care to know about John Adams’s personal life, criticisms of Theodore Roosevelt’s presidency, or who was in Andrew Jackson’s kitchen Cabinet.

What I knew about Grandpa were the facts, the words that would describe him in a biography—He was a World War II veteran, he worked as an ad man on Madison Avenue in the 1950s. He listened to my strained piano-playing without much patience; he fed me brownies with walnuts; he watched me read his books with fondness but never said “I love you.” I desired to make him aware of my quiet ambition: I wished to take the gray and white matter of my brain and twist it until I moved beyond what is visceral and innate to humanity—toward a life in which ideas are always questioned, a life in which questions never cease.

Few people actually know and understand political figures; my grandpa’s attitude fit that of a President. He was president of a family; a patriarch at the center of a web of independent minds, weaving his opinions into ours. Through the Presidents book, I learned more about my grandfather than I ever learned from knowing him. The marginalia on the pages of the *Complete Book of U.S. Presidents* literally shows me what my grandfather thought, but not the crux of his character. I read him in the context of my life as one watches the speeches of presidents on television: with a removed connection and respectful criticism.

My grandfather was a question—an unanswerable query that I would never understand, but one who served as an unswerving guide. I have grown to love the things that I do not understand, because they provide questions. I have decided that the best way to learn is to question what I think I know. Ideas moving through our minds unchallenged are simply ideas; there is nothing concrete about an idea that is not fortified by argument.

I enjoy learning about most things that are applicable or related to life—life itself, humans, our brains, our ideas, our faces. I am curious about the recesses and crevices of our minds, and what exists in places that I will never be able to access.

The human mind fascinates me more than statistics and staid facts. I want to know when we know ourselves, or the point at which we become caricatures of ourselves. I am fascinated by variables of individuals, and our personal intellectual stimulus; our ability to be simultaneously compelled and compelling.

My grandfather gave me the tools to become knowledgeable, and watched me learn to love what he did, yet he never took credit for these accomplishments. He sat and observed. The stoic figure at the head of the table taught me to think with his first book suggestion.

Years after my childhood, I was still entangled in facts contained within the Presidents book. The book stayed on the same shelf. Grandpa didn’t sit in his Eames recliner in the office with brown carpet any longer; his children instead filtered into a dark back bedroom—his new office, one filled with synthetic white sheets and obscurity instead of books and brandy glasses—where he lay waiting for us in quiet regality. He was a sagacious mind sequestered within the confines of his aging body.

When he died, he left the book of Presidents to me. I was left to continue his legacy of obsession with the intellect and the literary products of unappeased minds.

Today, I know what I like—the sound that drinking glasses make when they hit each other and do not break, the smell of books, biting into pears, Israeli folklore, insect collections. In most chairs, my feet don’t touch the floor unless I slouch low in the seat. I am five foot two, standing straight on a good day. These facts sketch me; they add to my biography. As a supplement to these biographical facts, I am learning to read the penciled-in margins of my own life. I am learning to fill my mind with thoughts and perceptions, to sweat ideas and words, to stretch my brain’s limits past the lines of my existence.