

Literacy Narrative: From Point A to Point B

By Brandy Ball Blake

Growing up, I could never understand my dad's directions. If I needed him to tell me how to get someplace, I would end up hopelessly lost.

My childhood predated general access to the internet, so it's not like I was trained by Google Maps from birth. But I best understood directions if they were written out like instructions, breaking down a path from one location to another through a step-by-step list. Pecan St. ends at a T-junction with Maple Rd. At the T-junction, turn right. Go half a mile. Turn right onto Lombardy Way.

But my dad drew maps. Usually on napkins or other scraps of paper he'd find in his pockets. He'd get a pen that barely worked and would start explaining where I needed to go as he was struggling to get the ink to write on the thin napkin paper. Then he'd start drawing pictures. He'd hastily draw lines and boxes that represented roads and buildings, scribbling the names of a couple of places down – not the most well-known landmarks, mind you. And not all of the roads and buildings. I'm sure he had a method to his madness, but I couldn't figure out what the pattern was.

In response, I'd try to listen to him and watch him draw and point – all at the same time, and my ears and eyes would get all tangled up with my brain so that I couldn't absorb anything. But I would nod and tell him that, Yes, I did understand. Yes, I could find it. Thank you, Daddy. No, don't worry. It'll be fine. And then I'd take the napkin and walk away, turning it over and over again in my hands, trying to make some sense of it.

I've always been a great reader. Books were my refuge growing up. Fantasy books like the *Lord of the Rings* and the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Classics by Shakespeare and Faulkner. The written word was my friend. I got it. I had no trouble interpreting what I read.

But visuals? Growing up, I never thought of pictures as a language, as something that could be interpreted or analyzed, as something that had great meaning. I mean, I had heard of ART. I knew that people created paintings and that some of them were pretty enough to be hung in museums. Some people talked about their deep meanings, and I would look at them and think: "The Mona Lisa? She had a nice smile, I guess. That painting with all the dots and people in the park? That one was in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*." And move along. The idea that art had layers of interpretation didn't sink in. The idea that such visual interpretation could extend to film, to illustration, to marketing, to political propaganda – I didn't study that in my English class, so that wasn't a thing.

So I struggled to understand my Dad's maps. And I moaned about them to myself when I was trying to figure out how to get from Point A to Point B. What is this squiggle? What is the scale? Why does he only label some of the buildings? ... Wait, why *does* he only label some of the buildings? That was a legitimate question – not just me moaning. My guess? He probably labeled the roads or buildings that were more meaningful to him somehow.

These maps were my dad's story. They emphasized (through size and labels) the places that were important to him and to our family ... the places that he'd told me stories about. The places we had been to together. That's why he always labelled Dino's Pizza, the hole-in-the-wall dive where he had dragged my family, insisting it was much better than Pizza Hut. Or the Fire Station where he worked as a fireman and the various locations throughout the town that had (or had almost) burnt down. Or the corner pharmacy that actually wasn't there anymore. It had been

torn down and replaced by a CVS, but drawing it gave him the chance to complain about the CVS and the corporate takeover of America. These maps showed my dad's understanding and interpretation of the world. He drew what he believed to be important.

Now that did not actually help me get from Point A to Point B. But it did help me to see that my dad used a different language than me to interpret the world. He wasn't a reader. I don't remember that I ever saw my dad read anything other than the front page of a newspaper or the scores of a sporting event. No, my dad used pictures. And I remembered that he used to draw me pictures when I was a kid. And I thought that maybe he should have been an artist instead of becoming a fireman.

I'm not saying it opened up my world to visual interpretation. But I did start noticing other patterns, first in illustrations (an easy starting place since I still had some words to help me interpret the pictures) and then in marketing (What? They're trying to trick me into buying this product!?) and then in other media. More importantly, I realized that just because I relied on words in *my* understanding and interpretation of the world, not everyone else does.

Now, I study visual rhetoric. I teach a class that focuses on John Tenniel's illustrations in *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. I wrote my dissertation in part on visual cues of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in video games. I help students better understand charts and graphs and show them how they can make those graphs clearer to their audience. I emphasize to the students that it takes time and effort to understand visual communication and even more to create clear visual communication. Learning it is a new skill, and there really aren't step-by-step instructions. They just have to focus on what their audience knows (Point A) and the main idea that they want their visual to show (Point B). I get them to explain Point A and Point B, to walk me through the visual and what they want it to show. Then slowly, by breaking down

the main pieces of the visual, looking for connections between them, and discussing how to emphasize those connections, they turn a confusing visual design into a clear direction.

And now, when my dad draws me a map, I don't just take it and walk away. I ask him to explain it. And I learn a little more about his understanding of the world.