

## NGUY 6262

By Emily Nguyen

I often joke that I have tremendous pride in being the Accelerated Reader champion at my elementary school, but that's really where it all started. In early second grade when my dad realized I wasn't going to be a math protege, he printed out my elementary school's entire library catalog, highlighted every book that had AR points associated with it, and told me to check out all these books so that I could take the reading quizzes and rack up points. If I couldn't be the best at math, at least I could be "the best" at reading.

At least twice a month, I'd go to the Mountain Park public library and check out the 20-book maximum. There would be half a shelf of books in the "reserved" section with "NGUY 6262" tags sticking out between the pages, and my dad and I would trundle them over to the checkout station and then load the huge stack into the backseat of our truck.

I took great satisfaction in being able to finish a book in a series and immediately pick up the next one in the pile. The worst thing in the world was finishing one book in the series only to remember that the next one wasn't available when I last checked, and then I'd have to wait in despair until the next available book came in.

The second worst thing in the world was damaging a book. I'm one of those people who hates to write in books or fold the pages or leave them discarded in wild piles, and this stems from the fact that most books I touch aren't mine. I took it upon myself to keep my teachers' personal classroom libraries in tiptop shape, and it wasn't long until my teachers knew me as their personal librarian. During one school year, any spare moment I could get was spent curled in the corner of the classroom shelving returned books onto blue bookshelves and filing yellow borrowing cards into my teacher's meticulously organized catalog box.

It wasn't until I reached fifth grade that my school put together a Readers Rally team, which was like the quiz bowl of fiction books. I loved my experience so much in fifth grade that I continued this club throughout middle school. We spent over half the school year meeting at 7 AM in the school library and preparing for the annual competition held in the spring. We traded our practice questions over our set list of 20 books, and despite the slow, sleepy mornings and chilly air of the library, adrenaline would race through our veins as we competed against our teammates to see who could answer those comprehension questions the fastest. No detail was too small to forget, no moment of hesitation could be afforded, and the shock of the buzzer always snapped all our attention to the blinking yellow and red lights on our dinky buzzer machine. There would be triumphant smirks from those who succeeded in being the quickest, gasps of frustration from those who were so, so close, and laughter from those who watched from the sidelines, especially our advisors.

Our tight-knit group bonded over stories we all shared in our hearts, and we'd debate over character motivations and plot holes, puzzle out what was *really* happening during a messy scene, and take great pride in our incredibly nerdy hobby.

In this loving community of friends, including others I eventually met later, I found a love of writing through my love of reading, and it coincided with online engagement with fandoms for my favorite animes. Because I had boundless confidence as a middle schooler, consuming lots of fanfiction meant I eventually began to craft my own. Several friends and I interacted with online communities by publishing our creations through DeviantArt to a small group of followers, and it reflected within our school lives as well. Overnight school trips, homeroom periods, and downtime during orchestra class were spent working on our stories where we wrote our friend group into alternate universes. We explored the possibilities of

wielding magical powers or adventuring through medieval realms while keeping our normal quips and jokes as dialogue. We even drew character designs for our friends set in their new worlds.

As we grew older and went through high school, we lost time and motivation to write and read for pleasure, but I remained a stickler for grammar and mechanics. My prior writing experience was put towards editing my friends' essays for classes. Countless nighttime Skype calls were spent going through drafts of papers. "What are you trying to convey in this paragraph?" "Where's your pronoun antecedent?!" "You're missing. So. Many. Commas."

It was only in rare moments where I found myself writing from the heart for a personal reason. One night during senior year of high school, after having an honest discussion with my AP U.S. History teacher, I went home and thought about what I wanted for my future. College application deadlines were looming over my head, and there was fierce internal conflict over what I'd choose as my college major. In what I now call the "Coins Essay," I painted a picture for my audience of how the magic of childhood let us believe that the possibilities were endless, but age took "endless possibilities" and transformed them into "anxiety-inducing uncertainties." I was so anxious about my future during senior year. Many of my thoughts revolved around the central idea of "I don't know what my interests are" and I blanched in fear at the possibility that I had no personality, no individuality, no future, and no potential, but that night, I rediscovered an old childhood hobby of mine that reminded me that if at one point I had dreams and aspirations, even if it's collecting all 50 state quarters, then what's holding me back from exploring new ones now?

I was so caught up in the emotions of the Coins Essay that I was writing well past midnight while curled up in my blankets. The rest of the house was fast asleep. After reaching a

concluding point in my story, I decided to post it to my Instagram. I was extremely nervous to share my story because I wasn't sure if my words would resonate with anyone, but out of love for my teacher and a sense of pride for my moment of clarity, I went through with my decision. The outpour of positive reactions was surprising, and many people mistook it as my Common App college essay. At that point, I had nothing for my college essay written because the task felt too intimidating, but after reading through my Coins Essay again, I realized it was a piece of writing I'd be proud to use to represent myself to college admissions teams.

Despite the reduction in number of books read and number of stories written, my interest in pursuing the next thrilling story never went away: it just manifested itself in other parts of my life. I continued to read fanfiction even as I changed fandoms; I entered the world of webcomics, which included *Ava's Demon* and *Lore Olympus*; I observed the world of movies and theatre and their related discourse; and at the CommLab, I discussed fascinating research meant for exclusive audiences. I've never been a strong speaker, choosing instead to sit on the sidelines and listen to the conversation or ditch my surroundings in favor of fantasy worlds. But I've learned that talking to people earnestly and expressing interest in what they have to say can bring out the best stories. And when that magic moment happens, I love to listen.