

Turning Pages: My Life Story

by Sonia Sotomayor¹

My story is a story about books—of poems and comics, of law and mystery, of science and science fiction—written both in Spanish and in English.

Even though I was born and grew up in New York City, *español*, Spanish, was the language we spoke at home—the language of Puerto Rico, the island where my family came from.

I struggled to learn English. Balancing two languages in my head wasn't always easy, but books made learning fun. Reading was like lighting candles, each book a flame that lit up the world around me.

What was so special about books? Do written words have a unique magic?

At each step in my life, I would put together the answer like pieces to a puzzle.

My first memory of the power of words came from Abuelita, my beloved grandmother. Every Saturday, my aunts and uncles and cousins would gather for a party at her home.

After we ate dinner, the crowded little room would get quiet. Abuelita would close her eyes and recite poems written long ago about the tropical land our family had left behind. The words she spoke sent a charge through the room and sparked memories of her faraway island home.

I didn't know how to read yet, but written words, I discovered, were electrical currents that jolted feelings to life.

When I was seven, I got sick and was diagnosed with diabetes. I was so afraid of the big needle used to take my blood for testing at the hospital that I ran outside and hid under a parked car! I also learned that I would have to get shots every day to stay alive. All those needles were scary!

1. Sonia Maria Sotomayor, born June 25, 1954, is an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States. She has the distinction of being its first justice of Hispanic descent. Sotomayor was born in New York City to Puerto Rican-born parents. Her father died when she was nine, and she was subsequently raised by her mother. Sotomayor graduated *summa cum laude* from Princeton University in 1976 and received her law degree from Yale Law School in 1979. She worked as an assistant district attorney in New York for four-and-a-half years before entering private practice in 1984. Sotomayor was appointed to the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York in 1992, to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit in 1998 and to the Supreme Court in 2009. Sotomayor has taught at the New York University School of Law and Columbia Law School. [Adapted from Wikipedia.]

I found my courage in an unlikely place—comic books. After reading stories of regular people who had secret superpowers that could save the world, I imagined being as brave and powerful as they were. Then I learned how to give myself the shots, and in time I got used to it.

Books, it seemed, were magic potions that could fuel me with the bravery of superheroes.

I may have been inspired by Supergirl, but I still needed to use an airplane if I wanted to fly. When we took trips from the cold concrete streets of the Bronx to sunny Puerto Rico, I ate fresh mangoes that had just fallen off the trees, sipped juice straight from the coconut, and marveled at the shimmer of tiny glowing creatures in the bay at night. But my favorite time was siesta at my aunt's home in Mayagüez.

At lunchtime, we feasted on rice and beans and chicken spiced with *sofrito*, a delicious mixture of tomatoes, onions, garlic and peppers. Then, bellies stuffed full, all my aunts and uncles and cousins would settle down for a nap in the peaceful quiet of a hot afternoon.

Their naptime was my reading time. I had my trusty books to keep me company.

Books were my loyal friends. They made it so I never felt lonely.

When I was nine years old, my father, Papi, who had been sick for a long time, passed away. I felt sad and confused, and my home was filled with gloom. But I discovered a place where I could feel comfort.

All summer long at the nearby Parkchester Library, I walked through the aisles and touched the musty volumes until one book after another caught my eye. I read as many books as I could; I wanted to read them all.

I was lucky to have a library that was in my neighborhood, walking distance from home. For hours, I could sail away to the wondrous lands in the stories I would choose from the stacks.

The library was my harbor, and books were little boats that helped me escape sadness at home.

Leaving home, though, was the farthest thought from my mind the day a deliveryman rang our apartment doorbell, hauling two huge, heavy boxes.

"What's inside?" my brother, Juan, and I asked, and Mami, my mother, told us to look.

Tearing open the packing tape, we discovered an entire encyclopedia! There were twenty-four massive books, each unveiling secrets about the world—from the tiniest atoms

to the tallest mountains, from the hottest deserts to the frozen tundra. Mami had created a library in our very own home!

Every time I opened a volume, I learned new words and ideas. There were miracles of life taking place in our bodies and outside in the world around us, and I started to think more about my place in it.

I felt like a deep-sea diver exploring mysterious depths. Books were my snorkel and flippers, helping me get there.

Back on land, Nancy Drew, the young girl detective hero in dozens of books, fired my imagination. Her make-believe life was so different from mine. She lived in a big house on a tree-lined street and partnered with her dad, a successful lawyer, to solve crimes.

Despite our differences, I would doze off picturing myself in Nancy's shoes. Could I figure out mysteries, too?

Books were a time machine, inspiring me to imagine what I would be when I grew up.

When we moved to a bigger apartment in the Bronx, our new home wasn't anything like Nancy Drew's, but Juan and I did finally get our own small rooms. It was really just one larger bedroom divided by a thin wall, but we each got to decorate our rooms. I chose wallpaper with pictures of the constellations in the sky.

I loved reading science fiction books about journeys into deep space, time travel, and encounters with aliens.

Even more amazing, real-life astronauts had just landed on the moon! They left behind a gift of words—messages of peace from the countries back on Earth. I read everything I could about the moon landing. If that was possible, then anything I could imagine was possible, too.

Books were my launchpad, blasting me straight into my dreams.

As I got older and read more, my future slowly started to take shape, like a ball of clay that you carefully sculpt into a figure with your fingers.

In high school, my teacher assigned my class a book about boys on a deserted island who went wild because there were no rules. The boys hurt each other in the chaos of a land without laws.

This book opened my eyes. I saw why we need laws and rules to feel safe, so that people have the freedom to grow and flourish. I did not yet know that I would end up working in law, as a lawyer and later as a judge, but I was learning why laws mattered.

Books were lenses, bringing into focus truths about the world around me.

The Bible, a special book we studied at my Catholic high school, taught me lessons about how to treat my neighbors.

In one story, Jesus was approached by a crowd ready to punish a woman who had done wrong. Instead, Jesus challenged them, saying, “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.” His calm, powerful words made people think. Slowly and silently, the people let her be and went home.

I learned that we shouldn’t be so quick to judge people who do the wrong things. Sometimes we make mistakes that can hurt someone else, but that doesn’t make us bad people. It might just mean we have to say we’re sorry, put things right, and try harder.

Books were teachers, helping me sort out right from wrong.

When I started college at Princeton University, the tree-lined paths and old stone buildings looked very different from my neighborhood in the Bronx. I was excited to be there, but I was homesick, and sometimes I felt like I was drowning in everything I didn’t know.

I quickly discovered the massive Firestone Library, where I could find books on everything. It was so much bigger than my neighborhood library. I would study for hours to catch up. I even improved my writing using grammar books.

Books became my life preserver, keeping my head above water.

All that reading taught me about the farthest reaches of the planet and even about the little island closest to my heart: Puerto Rico. I read about men and women there who worked hard, but were paid very little. I read about how Puerto Rico became a part of the United States of America.

Just like in the books, my grandfather worked in a cigar factory and got sick from the dust, and my aunt spent long days stitching handkerchiefs. Like many of the Puerto Ricans who came to New York, Mami had a hard life. She studied for many years to become a nurse and was able to scrimp and save so that her kids—Juan and I—would have a brighter future.

Reading had long taught me about the world outside, but now I was seeing in books a reflection of the lives led by my own family.

Books were mirrors of my very own universe.

When I became a lawyer, I used cases in law books to convince judges that people on trial were innocent or guilty—how they had done right and where they had gone wrong.

Just as my own family story was mirrored in history books about Puerto Rico, I saw that law books reflected real-life stories of people who got into trouble but still needed to be treated fairly in court.

Law books were maps to guide us to justice.

“*Justice* means treating people fairly under the law. It’s also the name of what I am now—Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States.

As a Justice, I study the most important words in American law—the founding document of our government, the Constitution of the United States—and decide which laws agree with it. Every day I borrow from the lessons of law books of the past and write decisions and opinions that will be bound into the law books of the future.

Books are keys that unlock the wisdom of yesterday and open the door to tomorrow.

Flame. Electricity. Magic potion. Friend. Boat. Snorkel. Time machine. Launchpad. Lens. Teacher. Life preserver. Mirror. Map. Key.

The written word has been all these things to me and more for as long as I can remember. Like flagstones on a path, every book I ever read took me the next step I needed to go in school and in life, even if I didn’t know exactly where the trail would lead.

Piece by piece, my puzzle came together.

Where will your journey lead you?