Literacy Narrative--- Tom Molinaro

On his last day, my father was in the middle of a book, a Western by Louis Lamour, his favorite author. He lived a long life, dying at ninety, and during those years, he spent countless hours reading. In fact, he was reading at least two novels a week for the last 25 years of his life. Although he never advanced past the eighth grade—having to leave school to help work on the family farm in Canton, Ohio—that didn’t stop his thirst for knowledge and his voracious appetite for books. Fortunately, some of that rubbed off on me, though I’m a minor league reader compared to him.

By the time I reached my teens, my admiration for him grew as I realized he was a working-class hero and a self-taught man. Everyday and sometimes on weekends, he deliverd fuel oil to homes in Brooklyn and Queens. As an ardent Brooklyn Dodger fan, one of my dad’s most enjoyable experiences was delivering oil to none other than the Dodger legendary firstbasemen, Gil Hodges.

When he came home from work in the evenings, after washing his hands, he would settle down in his favorite chair and open the Daily News. I sat on his lap and asked him to read some of the stories aloud, especially the ones about football. My father followed the Cleveland Browns, much to the dismay of his New York Giants loving friends. I can remember the smell of newspaper print, the aroma of meat being sautéed in garlic and oil, as my mother worked her magic by the stove, and hissing radiators which warmed us through the coldest winter days, by oil powered steam heat. My father wouldn’t have it any other way.

Though we were all delighted when he was home, there were times when he worked long hours, especially on cold New York winters, when cruel northeast winds brought blizzards and temperatures dipped into the twenties. He would try to compensate for his absence by bringing home treats and sometimes toys for me and my sisters. One of those toys created a direct link with my fascination for stories.

One of those late evenings, well after we had all eaten our dinner and my mom had put aside a plate for Dad, we heard his footsteps in the hall. As he opened the door, shaking the snow from his boots, a chill swept through the house. Dad’s arms were laden with offerings which he placed on the dining room table: candy for mom, dolls for my sisters and a box for me, which I thought was filled with toy soldiers. They were soldiers of a sort, but not from any period with which I was familiar at the time. They were beautiful replicas of medieval knights in chainmail and armor, some on foot; others, mounted on steeds, all armed with swords and shields.

“Why don’t we call these the Knights of the Roundtable,” he said, sorting out ten or twelve plastic warriors.

“Which round table do you mean, Dad,” I asked, puzzled. I was then given a brief synopsis of the Arthurian legend: the king himself, Guinevere, Lancelot, the Holy Grail, and some other pertinent figures. I sat silently and motionless, drinking in every detail.

“Would you like me to read a book to you about these adventures?”

“Yes, yes, please,” I said. “When can we begin?”

“I’ll tell you what,” he said. “Tomorrow night, right after dinner, we’ll go to the library. They’re open late on Wednesdays,” he said.

I remember browsing the stacks of the children’s section of the library, holding his hand, my head barely reaching his waist. The cool, crisp glow of the fluorescent light shined off hundreds of titles. As we continued our search, I ran my fingers, slightly, across the spine of every book I could reach. At that moment I hoped that someday I would be able to read these books for myself, and to read as well as Dad.

“Ah, here it is,” Dad said excitedly, “*King Arthur and His Knights,* by Howard Pyle.”

That night we read Howard Pyle’s classic until my bedtime. This was the first time he read a story to me that was not filled with pictures or intended for a very young audience. Although he used to share what he was reading—Zane Grey westerns and magazines like *Time* and *Popular Mechanics—*I absorbed little as the words just skimmed over my head, but I just enjoyed being close to him, something which more than compensated for any boredom I had felt from his personal reading. After all, I was only six years old and I adored him.

As he read the Arthurian tales, I could imagine the musty smell of the King’s castle, the landscape of Camelot, and the clothes the people wore, especially the armor encased Knights. I learned new phrases, greetings, and customs like “a flagon of wine,” “by your liege,” and jousting tournaments in which brave fools would risk their lives for the honor and love of a fair maiden.

As years passed, I began to read on my own and my interests became more diverse. My zeal for kings of ancient Britain had waned, but I had developed an insatiable thirst for story, a thirst I carry till this day, and which is only satisfied by diving into the river of a good book.