

I've been reading lately. I'll come home from work and read before going to bed, sitting in my boxy leather armchair. The armchair's new but I still use the same desk lamp my parents bought for me my freshman year of college. I like having a mess of new and old things; it's a balance I'm often figuring out in my life, what to keep and what to throw away.

Reading is something I've always opted to keep. That's because it's one of few things I do everyday that's been there from the very beginning. As a kid, I read books like a koala eats eucalyptus — slowly and smiling. I read fantasy novels in a white cushy armchair in the attic while fresh snow fell outside, and back then I'd stack a series of books next to me. It was such a joy to watch the pile of finished books grow taller than the unfinished ones. Later, I read the book that my dad wrote, although first he had to cut some of the pages out. When my brother told me this was because those pages had mentions of sex, I was mortified.

I read because my parents read, because my siblings and the kids in my neighborhood were older than me and therefore not as eager to include me in their games, leaving my summer afternoons free, and because the worlds I could go to in fiction felt rich and magical to the extreme. As a kid, you really think there might be a long adventure waiting behind the dresser. Or that a letter really might arrive in the family mailbox with your name on it, beckoning a new, more magical world. The separation between the fictional worlds I encountered in my armchair and the non-fiction one I encountered outside of it wasn't rigorous. Today, it's hard for me to explain my love of fiction without remembering that in its earliest form it wasn't really fiction at all.

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The library at my Catholic elementary and middle school was on the second floor and it had big rectangular windows, orange carpet and, on every wall, tall wooden bookshelves. There I found Flat Stanley and Frindle and the Magic Tree House. Later, I traded those out for the Mysterious Benedict Society and the Series of Unfortunate Events. When you finished a book, you'd take a short comprehension quiz on the library computer and, if you got enough questions right, you earned points. At the end of the school year, all those points summed together and the names of the top readers in the school were announced over the loudspeaker. On one of the last days of fourth grade our principal Mrs. Swietlik announced the winners: "... Fourth place Jimmy Nichols, Third place Marlee Nichols, Second Place Michael Glomski, First place Jack Nichols." Although the Glomski kid had gotten in the way of a Nichols sweep, I was the winner! I'd carry the glow of my victory for weeks. From then on, I was the reader, and I loved it. Being the reader meant that I was smart, that I had thoughts from far away places circulating in my head, and that my quiet demeanor wasn't a lack of confidence but a formidable introspection. Even the kids in 8th grade hadn't read all the books I had and to me this was a hidden superpower. As the reader I wasn't only moon-walking in other fictional universes; I was going where none of my friends and siblings had been before.

There was the joy of reading but also the joy of becoming a reader. Surely, I figured, if I immersed myself in thoughts and stories I would walk away with something, as a smarter or more interesting someone. Part of it was my need to explain away the nights where reading wasn't very fun and I doubted that the book universe was as colorful as I supposed. I still have those nights, all the time in fact. But, more strongly than that, as a kid, I had the distinct feeling that reading was turning me into something and, whatever it was, I loved what was I becoming.

On days when the purpose of reading felt less clear, I turned towards the artifacts my reading practice created. The first was a single-spaced document in Microsoft Word that contained rows and rows of my favorite sentences. When I encountered a sentence that struck me I wrote it down. This became a Pavlovian reflex: anytime I read something that felt particularly rich or raw or intelligent or whatever I added it to my list. I had sentences in there from everywhere: Lemony Snicket, the Wall Street Journal articles my dad left out, the chess grandmaster Garry Kasparov, the Hunger Games, anywhere I encountered thought transcribed to page. Even recently, one of my best friends Nolan gave me a book about San Francisco; the first line of the book was: “this story begins and ends with walking.” I liked that sentence so much I immediately thought of my list. Is it the contrasting verbs that makes it so nice? Or the idea of both beginning and ending not at but with something? Or is it just the walking, that my stories often begin and end on long walks too? A couple years later, I started taking screenshots on my iPod Touch of difficult words with their definitions. My photo library became a collage with pictures of my dog, food I was eating, friends I was hanging out with, alongside Google pages showing word definitions — this mixture seemed to represent some strange, possibly meaningful interplay in my life. I figured if I could memorize all the hard words I encountered, eventually I would stop discovering words I didn’t know. That turned out not to be true — I hadn’t accounted for the fact that I forget words— but, either way, these artifacts gave me incontrovertible photographic proof that reading wasn’t just entertainment. If I wasn’t developing the aura of the wise insightful reader purely through an invisible osmosis, then I was at least picking up the vocabulary to pretend.

The library at my high school was also on the second floor, but it spanned a much larger rectangular space and, whether it was the carpet or the walls, I remember it being blue. The librarians there didn’t know the names of the average student who passed through, only those that flouted the library rules and got shushed. One day in my freshmen year English class, our teacher Mr. Neubeck explained that we weren’t reading Frankenstein just for fun; we were also here to draw insights and craft arguments about the story. In class, Mr. Neubeck told everyone to come up with an evidence-based claim about Frankenstein which, when we stated without evidence, he should impulsively shake his head and say, “No freaking way.” This would be the thesis for the 5-paragraph essays we all had to write. After much ado, the claim I came up with was this: Dr. Frankenstein purposefully avoids destroying the monster he created. Mr. Neubeck said there was no way this was true, that the story is explicitly about the purposeful hunting and slaying of the monster. His reaction left me free to write the essay, but it turned out Mr. Neubeck was right—there was no reasonable twisting and turning I could do to make this claim seem plausible, although that didn’t stop me from trying. This was my first introduction to the task of *arguing* about stories, being asked to notice something specific and non-obvious, painting some novelistic alternative reality and rendering it credible by showing it exists on three separate occasions in the text. Around this time, I stopped talking about books and stories and started talking about literature. Books were read in cushy armchairs with snow falling outside; literature was analyzed at desks with pen and paper at the ready. With practice, I picked up the tricks of more advanced students. Instead of saying “he purposefully avoids destroying the monster,” I should say “his treatment of the monster suggests affection.” Said this way, the claim is more slippery; it’s about an emotional truth not a physical one, and the argument that a *feeling* exists in a make-believe character ends up being not too difficult to support, even if it’s far-fetched on the surface. Thinking about books in this way sometimes feels like bringing your briefcase to the carnival or like trying to conduct court of law but the setting is just a big bouncy house. Of course I didn’t think about it then, but I do now. We bring our finest, sharpest tools of interpretation — the very same that we use to discern truth from a legal document — and we apply them to fiction, which is exactly that, totally make-believe,

usually illogical, the apparatus of feeling not proof. Are books *obscured* things? When we find something hidden in a story, is it really there or is it just our fantasies transposed? And, if there is submerged truth within the pages, does digging it up really add to the enjoyment we get from reading? These were feelings, suspicions that I might be standing on something unsteady, long before they became questions. Besides, the book universe was way more than a carnival or a big bouncy house; there was a seriousness to it that maybe did merit a detective-like approach, I wasn't sure. At the time I was too enamored with the idea of being the school reader to rethink my priorities, even if the activity itself was changing underneath me. What was obvious though is that, while I kept reading, I wasn't carrying the same books anymore; it was Mark Twain, Jane Austen, and John Steinbeck in my hands now.

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In college the first English class I took was sophomore year, and it was about monsters in medieval literature. The first book we read was *Beowulf*. I can remember very clearly walking into the discussion section for the class in a sunny room on the third floor of a strange building called Thornton (I never got fully accustomed to buildings that have staircases on the outside - they still feel skeletal to me). What I witnessed there became customary for the rest of my time at Stanford: a bunch of students sit in a poorly-constructed semi-circle of tables and wheeley chairs, most of them arrive late, some egregiously late. Because it's an English class at a university of science, we can only marvel at the fact that they arrived at all. It's generally an interesting mix of people. There's the group of veterans: a girl who carries a thermos and wears a somewhat alternative backpack, just meaning it wasn't clearly designed to carry a laptop, and a boy with long probably wavy hair wearing a flannel shirt and corduroy pants and glasses, of course. The veterans always know each other and probably have some feelings about one another carried over from a previous class, be it an innocent mutual curiosity or some one-sided hatred stemming from a conversation about Alice Walker that turned gendered and antagonistic. Though the veterans take their intellectualizing seriously, I sometimes wonder if they too arrived here on behalf of the joy one gets from being totally absorbed in a good story. They probably did. But, if so, is the intellectualizing — the talk of symbols, the psychological dissection of the characters, the involving of Voltaire and Freud and Sontag — really a sufficient approximation of the original *feelingfulness* that made literature alluring to them? My point is that if you asked a veteran why they study English, they'd probably tell you they have always loved reading books, but what I want to know is whether the type of reading they love is the type the English classroom now asks them to do. Is the intellectualizing different from the joy and love for a good story? Is the intellectualizing malignant to that joy? I don't think so — I happen to love the intellectualizing — but I do think it's oddly far from the original sensation that got me hooked on reading. And I do sometimes suspect that our English degrees, while celebratory towards our rosy-cheeked fascination with story, sometimes wrongly presume that this joy is steeped in the psychological, sociological, historical, philosophical elaboration of narrative. Personally, I am interested in the ways we might put literary scholarship on more intimate terms with the type of reading that is simple and joyful, the type that many of us first fell in love with.

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Another thing about the English classroom today is that nothing is out of bounds, no thought is too disconnected from a previous one, there are no non-sequiturs. If there is a central focus to some conversation, there is almost never enforcement; meaning, everything is a legitimate continuation of the previous thing. This has been talked about for a long time, and one only has to open an

Allan Bloom book to know that it ends in our enslavement to bad, meaningless ideologies (shoot!). But despite all the fuss I never totally grew out of the shock at seeing this in practice. In the classroom peoples' comments really do spring up out of nowhere and the topic under investigation by the end of a 50-minute discussion section is often unrecognizable from the topic that kicked it all off. Students who expect rigorous, systems-based, big-word-backed analysis of literature can be shocked at the modern belief that literary interpretation is also an art form and an act of personal expression. It's one thing to look appreciatively on this trend and quite another to see it and understand it in practice, everyday. In the modern English classroom one sees logic and feeling, system and free-association. This makes the whole experience deeply confusing, hilarious, and moving.

The second thing is that, reading in college, nobody really knows what we're trying to illuminate. By reading "closely", we hope to say something meaningful about what a work of literature reveals. But, what exactly are we looking to reveal? The author's deepest beliefs? The anxieties of the time the author lived in? Some timeless and universal human condition? Or is it the work of literature itself, the specific things the characters are suffering from or some similarity they all secretly share? In the classroom, I've found any of the above is acceptable so long as it's written in Times New Roman and double-spaced. Again, this is the same hilarious and fantastic reality of being a formal student of literature — there is no object of analysis, only the act of analysis. One can argue along any vector they choose to, take up whatever ambiguities they notice most. I have found few other spaces in my adult life that have embraced formlessness like the English classroom does.

My experience of reading in college was a 7:30pm class with five other students. It was finding shady nooks on campus and camping out in them, desperately needing a productive Sunday. It was preparing my comments fifteen minutes before class so I wouldn't have to think on the spot. In college, reading was the realization that good writing is always encircling a strong image, and the next week it was the realization that good writing isn't about image at all but about beautiful, meaningless sound. In college, I revisited the poetry of William Carlos Williams: "so much depends upon a red wheel barrow glazed with rain water beside the white chickens." Under the guidance of my teachers, I wondered if the etymology of "depends" and "glazed" gives us another interpretative crowbar to dislodge more poetic significance. But, before that, I wondered if the white chickens were also a little muddy, if the sky above them was brightening up or the rainclouds were closing in again, and if there was a barn in the background whose brassy red matches the shine of the wheelbarrow. Reading in college was all those things.

That said, I can't tell you that Stanford was the *kumbaya* I needed to reconcile the serious and not so serious sides of my passion. Nor was it the unbridled interpretive playground that cut me loose from the utilitarian's view of reading, the soullessness and the boredom. In college I doubted for the first time that I was really cut from the same cloth as other serious readers, some of whom were planning to take this passion way further than I was. I picked up more lucrative interests and this relieved some of the pressure I was putting on reading to be both an enormous source of identity and also my future breadwinning talent, whatever that means. Said differently, I pushed reading off into a corner where it didn't constantly have to justify its value and where it could exist on a plane separate from my existential angst, cordoned off as sacred. The only cost to this was that reading ended up, who'd have thought, in the corner, where it spent less time informing my thoughts and decision-making. This was a trade-off I never explicitly chose but which I reinforced a million times over with small everyday decisions and, to be honest, it's a trade-off I constantly find myself re-litigating in my head even now: do I like reading and writing about books enough to bail out from my comfortable nine-to-

five life? Would I feel more at ease in the university ranks than the corporate ones? I don't know. I am still adjusting to a world where reading is only a hobby again, where no one hands me a booklist, and where the whole reader aspect of myself isn't written down anywhere official. It's mine and mine alone to define. Hence, why we're here.

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I live in New York City now. I don't have a library to describe but I do have a bedroom. There's one bookcase in my bedroom that I'm slowly filling up with books I've liked over the past two years. *Remains of the Day*, *The Namesake*, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, *The Looming Tower*, *Covenant of Water*, *The Idiot*, *1Q84*. These books are held upright by two identical, wrought-iron bookends that are in the shape of little frogs reading novels. There's also my brown leather armchair, the green patterned quilt my grandma sewed, two very yellow lamps, and a costly supply of large Yankee candles. You could measure some quality of my reading and writing by my candle turnover rate.

These days, whenever I read I also bring a pen and a pocket-sized notebook in case I suddenly have the urge to write. I started doing this because, despite my in-the-moment confidence that a good insight is much too embedded in my brain to be forgotten, I have only empty notebooks to show for many late-night walks and afternoon readings in Central Park. Though, now, when I do write something — and remember to read it back — I usually find it feels too cliched, too moralistic, too trying-too-hard, too presumptive, too unprompted. I am learning that being a writer is different than being a reader. Writing has a self-criticism that reading doesn't.

I think about the reasons I read as a kid and why I read now as an adult. I think reading helped — helps — me find my way around the maze of dualisms that the world often uses to explain our lives back to us. That some people are good and some people are bad. Some live in first-world countries, others live in third. Some are heroes, others villains. Thought versus feeling. Growth versus decay. Masculine or feminine. Want or need. I believe stories have an eroding effect on systems like these. Stories explore the area between things. Through story, the civilized and the uncivilized become friends. The villain becomes the hero. The disastrous becomes a source of joy. The desires that characters have are neither wants nor needs, they are way more powerful. I believe that wherever two poles have been planted into the earth, *story* is the force that furnishes the space between them. Stories let us sit in that space and put our feet up. From there the world looks much more dynamic, meaningful, funny, under sway of miracle, even rose-tinted.

I think good stories enrich our awareness of the energies that underlie people and places. They challenge our instinct to judge everything new as good or bad. They make our assumptions less entrenched. This isn't just written stories, it's any kind, but personally I have always been most interested in encountering story through reading. That's where the power is for me, if only because that's where I first found it.