

The Reluctant Silent Reader: How One Woman Stopped Pretending to Read *Animorphs* Books and Became an English Major

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I have always had an amicable relationship with reading, but I was not the bookish child who could be found under the slide at recess with their nose stuck in a book. I never relished library visits or silent reading time, nor did I seek books as escapism – I thought playing outside with my neighbour, attending school, and annoying my siblings was a perfectly interesting way to live. My mother certainly encouraged me to read from a young age, as she famously read *The Three Musketeers* in grade three and expected nothing less of her children. She took my twin siblings and me to our local library for story time, and we toddled out with our small arms stacked with picture books about dinosaurs and hungry caterpillars. My mother attempted to read aloud to her brood, but I was often disruptive. At the astute age of four, I decided *A Christmas Carol* wasn't worth its salt and fussed when my mother gathered us for story time. However, I spent several childhood summers faithfully enrolled in the library summer reading club. If you documented seven days of reading in a chart, you could reach into a prize bucket and extract such wonders as a bouncy ball or a sticky frog. I read children's classics – *Paddington*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* – but I was motivated more by the prizes and pleasing adults than an intrinsic desire to read.

In the third grade, I encountered my first pivotal stories: *Pippi Longstocking* and the *Little House* books. Pippi's eccentricities appealed to me, as I was an imaginative but painfully well-behaved child who secretly aspired to Pippi's wildness; I was the type of child whom teachers described as “a joy to teach” and peers described as “a boring goody two shoes.” I expressed my adoration by dressing as Pippi for Halloween that year. During the annual Halloween parade, in which the teachers marched the primary grades through the intermediate

classrooms, I felt rather pleased with my braided red wig and brown eyeliner freckles until an older boy looked at me and queried, “Why are you dressed as the Wendy’s girl?”

Burger jokes aside, Pippi sated me until my Grade 3 teacher read us *Little House in the Big Woods*. I quickly consumed all eight books in the *Little House* series, which I owned because my older sister had already read them. Hand-me-down clothes and books were staples of my childhood. My sister and I also shared a bedroom until I finished the fourth grade, which was how I pilfered books above my age level... and how I encountered an intimate scene in *The Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants* before I was probably ready. However, the nineteenth-century American Midwest was an intriguing alternate world to me. The *Little House* books inspired my favourite childhood game: I converted the closet under the stairs into a pioneer lean-to, complete with plastic food provisions and baby dolls to care for. Dressed in my mother’s old skirts and shawls, I spent hours alone pretending to weather a long pioneer winter. I now realize how damaging the *Little House* books are in their treatment of Native Americans and wish that the teacher who exposed me to the series had engaged with the racist depictions. It could have been an opportunity to develop my critical reading skills at an early age, but instead I spent many years reflecting fondly on the *Little House* series before revisiting (and criticizing) the texts through adult eyes.

The fourth grade marked my mother’s first successful campaign to read aloud to me, and we chose *Anne of Green Gables*. I was taken with Anne’s intelligence, free spirit, and impressive vocabulary. My mother used to hang a word of the day on the fridge, so I too had a rapidly expanding vocabulary that peers teased me for. In Grade 4 I called someone a narcissist and my peers joked for the rest of the year that I “talked like an old lady.” When I used the words “bereft” and “audacious” in a story assignment, my teacher chastised me to avoid “words I didn’t understand,” although I had used them correctly. I did not yet know what feminism was, but I felt angry that some characters were displeased by Anne’s academic aspirations, and when Anne earned the Avery Scholarship I felt just as proud as if I had earned it myself. The feminist message in *Anne of Green Gables* is decidedly not intersectional, but it was an important first step for me.

I struggled to connect with reading after *Anne of Green Gables*, largely due to the abysmal lack of selection in my elementary school library. My parents worked opposite schedules at the hospital and we three children were in several extracurricular activities, so family trips to the well-stocked public library

dwindled. Although the school library was packed with picture books and non-fiction, the young adult offerings were confined to a single shelf. The options were uninspiring. I valiantly ploughed through *Midnight for Charlie Bone*, but I only enjoyed fantasy that involved fairies and thought Charlie was sorely missing a personality. I dreaded silent reading and got through it by pretending to read *Animorphs* books from our small classroom shelf, or shamefully resorted to *Geronimo Stilton* (much to my mother's chagrin – she felt I was too old for cartoonish fonts and cheese puns).

My reading options improved in the fifth grade when Gordon Korman became a featured author in my school library. Suddenly, there was a wall of shiny new YA titles. The goal was to read as many books as possible before a local book talk with the author. Maybe because I was a boring goody two shoes who loved pleasing adults, I readily accepted the challenge. My favourites included *Schooled*, *No Coins Please*, *This Can't be Happening at McDonald Hall*, and the *On the Run* series. The *On the Run* series hooked me with adventure, but otherwise I was entertained by Korman's humorous style. At the time I never noticed the lack of female protagonists, either because I wasn't thinking critically or because I wasn't particularly concerned with seeing myself represented in literature – probably because as a cisgender white woman, I had the privilege of seeing myself represented many other places. I was so starstruck at the book talk that I refused to raise my hand to ask a question, lest I embarrass myself in front of literary royalty. Just like that, I was back into reading.

I no longer pretended to read during silent reading, but I hadn't fallen in love with reading. The pivotal series was Cassandra Clare's *The Mortal Instruments*. In the sixth grade my best friend Rebe, already an established reader, was adamant I read a wondrous tale of shadowhunters, vampires, and fairies. I was suspicious of fantasy – I had bypassed *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*, and still had sour memories of *Midnight for Charlie Bone* – but I agreed to read it.

I began *City of Bones* in the bath that evening and emerged several hours later, withered like a prune, having read the entire thing. Rebe supplied me with Cassandra Clare novels until I had read her published works and was hotly anticipating the sequels. Every recess and lunch, Rebe and I walked circles around the soccer field, hand in hand, and discussed the books at length. I wrote fan fiction. I drew runes. I now dreamed of being a writer. More importantly, I now couldn't wait to get my hands on all Rebe's recommendations.

In the summer between the sixth and seventh grade, I rode my bike to Rebe's house weekly and stuffed my panniers with selections from her windowsill library. I read *Crank and Glass*, whose grittiness helped me transition into adult realism; the *Gemma Doyle Trilogy*, a fantasy series with a feminist message; *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, my first experience reading about mental health. That summer I became notorious in my household for the epic four-hour bath, where the water became frigid while I tore through chapters. I also had my first summer romance in the form of Sarah Dessen books, which I savoured for their romance and realism. In retrospect, I cannot remember the plot of any of them because they all follow a cliché algorithm. However, I liked to see characters going on dates, attending parties, staying up late, drinking, having their hearts broken, and other general shenanigans. I never did those things growing up (and still don't as an adult: I guess you can't outgrow being a wet blanket) but, either out of jealousy or curiosity, I liked reading about it.

In high school, Rebe was by my side in every English class as I discovered favourite authors such as Margaret Atwood and Miriam Toews. Those authors were critical to my feminist development, and *Oryx and Crake* is still my favourite novel of all time. Rebe remains my best friend to this day, and she continues to provide stunning recommendations. Thanks to her I read *The Bell Jar*, *White Oleander*, and *Flatland*, which are three of my best-loved novels. As an adult I prefer literary fiction and sci-fi, but I remember my reading roots: I purchase every new book Cassandra Clare publishes, and I met her at a book signing in 2019.

I was fortunate that the adults in my life encouraged me to read when I wavered, and their support wasn't my only privilege. I am a white cisgender woman from a middle-class family who had a safe and privileged childhood, and I now realize that while my childhood favourites had characters I could connect with, it was at the near total expense of BIPOC and LGBTQ+ authors/characters. I did not encounter true literary diversity until university, so I try to make up for lost time by choosing classes that feature diverse authors. Decolonizing my reading list has been an amazing experience, and I have new favourites like Kiese Laymon's *Long Division*, Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*, and Richard Van Camp's *The Lesser Blessed*. After I complete my BA in English, I hope to one day do an MA or MFA and convince someone to let me publish a novel. Until then, I will just have to keep reading.



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