Our Reading Roots

A collection of personal essays by
students in ENGL 487
Topics in Children's Literature
Summer 2021
Simon Fraser University

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Our Reading Roots: Introduction

Nicky Didicher, Simon Fraser University

The Pedagogical Context

This small volume emerges from a final-year undergraduate Children's Literature course in an English department at a Canadian university. It was a seminar course offered remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the focus of the course was books we love to read and reread. We examined what makes us Readers (as opposed to those who are merely readers of electronic communications and Twitter feeds), how reading affects us as people, and our relationships with the books, manga, zines, fanfic, and other kinds of creative writing for and by young people we encounter. One of the writing assignments for the course was a personal essay, which I encouraged students to edit and revise for publication. Of the seventeen students in the class who completed the assignment, eight agreed to publish, and I also include the one I wrote as a sample/model for the assignment (authors in alphabetical order by family name). My comments about what we share as a group are based largely but not exclusively on the essays that appear here, though I drew on everyone's work to put together the recommendation lists that follow this introduction.

Our Reading Roots: What Made us Readers

Similarities in our personal stories highlight four elements of Canadian settler culture that can strengthen literacy and love of reading: libraries, families reading together, social challenges, and the offer of comfort and excitement. In this section of the introduction I have summarized, collated, paraphrased, and quoted from the anonymized students in the course to show that "English majors become English majors because books helped them, and they either want to figure out how to use books to help others, or they want to expand on their personal relationship with books."

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Although we read Brandon Sanderson's *Alcatraz Versus the Evil Librarians* as part of our reading list for ENGL 487W, none of us has encountered evil librarians. On the contrary, both librarians and libraries have been important to our identities and our personal development as young Readers: in particular, we draw your attention to Lily's story and honour her special librarian. For many of us, libraries became less important during our teen years, whether because we read less or because we were avoiding YA romance novels or we began buying books instead of borrowing them. Nevertheless, we celebrate the children's library as an institution.

For many of us, reading together as a family, especially with a book-loving adult reading aloud, has been equally important to our development as people and as Readers. Like the library, this family reading time reduced in significance in our teen years, to be replaced by bookish friends or the solitary pleasure of having books **as** friends.

Those of us who become English majors and minors were often social misfits and/or lonely amongst our peers when young. We were often in a loop of using books to escape a world in which we were ignored or bullied and being bullied or ignored because we were the "weird kid" who liked to read. Those of us who identify as female looked for strong brave protagonists in our books in the middle grades and avoided "girly" books with pink covers (or read them secretly); in high school we couldn't relate to what were supposed to be the typical teen experiences of partying and experimenting with drugs…though we would still read about them, alongside books with rebellious demon-hunting protagonists.

Most of us read for excitement and adventure, often through the doorway of fantasy and science fiction, but also for comfort. As one of us remarks, " Some people drink after a break-up. I go to the library and max out my library card." Books are the place where we try out emotions, try out ideas, and try out life plans, a safe space to experience, play, and grow. Sometimes books are a legitimate escape from a drab or hostile personal world, a wonderful place to revisit and find solace.

Diversity and Inclusion in Fiction for Young Readers

But what happens when we realize our havens are filled with cis-het, able-bodied, neurotypical white people? Until very recently, children's literature in English has been that way, much of it unthinkingly participating in systemic prejudices. We are

a diverse group when it comes to race and sexuality, with some of us as children reading through mirrors and some windows, to use Rudine Sims Bishop's famous analogy ("Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books in the Classroom*, 6.3.1990). Sadly, we did not have mentors/guides willing to challenge the available books as to either their lack of racial and sexual/gender diversity or their inclusion of what we now see as glaring stereotypes. Sometimes as young readers we noticed the gaps and problems. As one student remarked in reading over the personal essays, "It upsets me that others also felt that they were not represented through the books they were reading, but it is comforting to know that I was not the only one who experienced this growing up." Sometimes as young readers we were ourselves oblivious, and we now must, as another student puts it, "catch up on diversity from a platform of privilege that's never been questioned." As Philip Nel urges us in *Was the Cat in the Hat Black? The Hidden Racism of Children's Literature and the Need for Diverse Books* (2017), we want to learn to "read uncomfortably" (67 & *passim*), to be angry but not to bowdlerize, and we want to be there for the next generation: being teachers, librarians, and parents who point out places of discomfort and encourage child readers to think about them, and possibly being part of the new wave of inclusion and diversity as writers, editors, and publishers.

Yet we find ourselves in different places when it comes to adjusting our expectations of our books and our willingness to acknowledge old book friends to be racist, ableist, or sexist. We are very differently placed, for example, when it comes to J.K. Rowling. I was in my late thirties when the first *Harry Potter* was published. I read it aloud with my mother, and we agreed it was fun but derivative, nothing special. The students in ENGL 487W, however, are with one exception of an age to have been caught up in Potter-mania and many of us have or had strong emotional attachments to the series. For some of us, Rowling's books are still a treasure, while for others her comments about trans women not being real women have led to painful disavowals.

A note on "white" versus "White" is in order here. As someone who learned to write mainly in the 1970s, I see "Black" and "White" as references to racialized groups of humans, while "black" and "white" are colour words. There is a current stylistic argument about whether using "White" is acceptable, now that for some readers it carries a taint from its use by White Supremacist groups (see, for example, here and here for defenses of "White" and "white"). Several of my students feel strongly that we should only use "white" to describe this racialized

group, so, although our use of the lower-case term was not universal, I have edited everyone's essays to create a consistent use of "white."

Where We are Now

The eighteen participants in the course (including myself) are all committed to literature as a complex, variegated, and valuable human achievement. We are Readers; we are or plan to become teachers, librarians, and/or parents who will encourage new readers to put down roots in books; we are on a long journey of discomfort as we wrestle with ways in which English settler storytelling in print has limited and often continues to limit our expressions of who we are. We are committed to the critical investigation as much as to the celebration of books and other texts for young readers. We want today's young readers to have both mirrors and windows and sliding glass doors, as well as caregivers and teachers who will read with them in ways that inspire critical thinking and cultural awareness. And we will act to help that happen. We hope these essays inspire you to think about your own relationships with books through your own identities and experiences, and that you share a love of reading and thinking with people younger than you are.

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Recommendations: Titles We Beg You to Read or Avoid

By everyone in the course

Books (for many ages) we recommend reading

the *Adventures of Captain Underpants* series, Dav Pilkey
the *Animorphs* series, K.A. Applegate & all her ghostwriters
anything by Daniel Manus Pinkwater
anything by Russell Hoban
anything by Tamora Pierce
the *Artemis Fowl* series, Eoin Colfer
the *Calvin and Hobbes* collections, Bill Watterson
the *Deltora Quest* series, Emily Rodda
Forever Evil, Geoff Johns & David Finch
Graceling, Kristin Cashore
Green Grass, Running Water, Thomas King
the *Harry Potter* series, J.K. Rowling
The Henna Artist, Alka Joshi
Home Fire, Kamila Shamsie
the *Inkheart* series, Cornelia Funke
Jade City, Fonda Lee
Kitchen Princess series, Miyuki Kobayashi & Natsumi Andō
the *Magic Treehouse* series, Mary Pope Osborne
the *Mortal Instruments* series, Cassandra Clare
Olivia Kidney, Ellen Potter
the *On the Run* series, Gordon Korman
Oryx and Crake, Margaret Atwood
The Perks of Being a Wallflower, Stephen Chbosky
Pride and Prejudice, Jane Austen
the *Ramona* series, Beverly Cleary
The Rule of Three, Eric Walters

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Sailor Moon, Naoko Takeuchi
The Sandman, Neil Gaiman & various artists
A Series of Unfortunate Events series, Lemony Snicket
Strange Angels series, Lili St. Crow
Sundancer, Shelley Peterson
various series, Jo Nesbø
When You Reach Me, Rebecca Stead
Wither, Lauren DeStefano

Books (for many ages) we recommend avoiding

the *Animorphs* series, K.A. Applegate & all her ghostwriters
anything by John Green
anything by Shakespeare
the *Charlie Bone* series, Jenny Nimmo
the *Harry Potter* series, J.K. Rowling
Hot Pterodactyl Boyfriend, Alan Cumyn

From Windows to Mirrors: My Reading Journey

Nimrit Basra, Simon Fraser University

As a child, I used to look to books as an opportunity for adventure. I was able to jump into different worlds and be part of stories that I found more exciting and interesting than my own life. After I had picked up a book, I would be immersed in it until I finished. When I was in elementary school, I borrowed a copy of *The Wizard of Oz* from the local public library. Unable to put it down, I took it into the bathtub with me, eager to learn where the Yellow Brick Road led. While trying to flip a page, the book slipped from my fingers. I heard a dreadful *splash* and scrambled to pull the book out of the water… but it was too late. I hid that soggy book under my bed where it stayed for months, leading me to constantly carry the fear of having my library card revoked.

Looking back, I'm grateful that my mom encouraged reading and ensured books were a large part of my childhood. She always reminded me it was a privilege to borrow books, so you can only imagine the shocked look on her face when we eventually got a statement of fines in the mail for my overdue book. When she made me pull that book from under my bed and took me to the library to own up to my mistake, I was – to my surprise – relieved. I was glad that thinking about the library filled me with a sense of joy once again. And carrying that guilt would have been a heavy burden to bear, especially because we were regulars at our public library. I remember my mom signing my siblings and me up for the Surrey Public Library Book Club every summer break from pre-school to grade six, just to make sure we kept reading even though we were not in school. And, when we were in school, I remember her being in charge of the Scholastic Book Fairs, where she would spend countless hours setting up, taking down, and sharing her love of reading with my classmates and me.

As a result, in elementary school I used to read books from all genres, but my favourites always included magic. I vividly remember sitting in the treehouse that my dad had built in the backyard and reading the *Magic Treehouse* books by

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Mary Pope Osborne. I had a lot of questions about the world and used to be curious about the universe outside of my community, so these books satisfied my craving to explore. Living vicariously through the characters allowed me to feel as though their adventures were mine as well. I still remember the day I finished the last book of the *Magic Treehouse* series. I didn't know what to read next. But in grade four, I fell for *Harry Potter*… and I fell hard. I was utterly obsessed, and even though I read other book series such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *Narnia*, and *Percy Jackson*, nothing could compare in my mind. From my school supplies to my clothes to the posters on my wall – everything had to be Harry Potter-themed. While dressing up as a wizard and pretending sticks had magical powers did make me a bit of a social outcast, I was happy. In hindsight, even though this happiness stemmed from a place of unawareness and naïveté, it reflects a version of myself who was not troubled by the disappointments of the real world.

I often reminisce about lying in my mom's bed as a child and having her read to my siblings and me every night. Because there is a relatively large age gap between me and my siblings, we would argue about which books to read, eventually deciding between *Harry Potter* and a picture book of my little siblings' choice – most likely *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. But looking back, I don't remember us bickering and getting upset if Mom did not choose our book. What I remember is us spending time together. I stopped reading with my mom when I was twelve years old, and I regret this. I remember entering high school and thinking I was too cool to spend time with my mom. I recall my little sister and brother wanting to read together, but I ignored them because I thought I was too old for that. If I had a magic treehouse or a magic wand and I could go back in time and change something, it would be this.

But growing up is inevitable. I was starting to see the world differently and becoming aware of issues affecting others as well as myself. The girl who could blissfully read in her treehouse until it got dark at night and would risk it all by taking a library book into the bathtub began to struggle with finding her identity. Regardless of the genre, popular culture books consistently failed to include characters that allowed me – a second-generation South Asian teenage girl – to see myself as part of the narrative and explore my identity through fiction. I found myself constantly having to make adjustments to relate to characters; looking back, I recognize that I struggled to immerse myself in books because the characters almost always existed outside of a realistic scope for me.

As a result, my reading slowed down. To be honest, I mostly read what was popular so that I could fit in. I had spent much of my elementary school years being an outcast because of the books I was interested in; despite being okay with it when I was younger, I was adamant that I would not be an outsider in high school as well. I read a lot of (un)realistic books about white teenagers doing drugs, having sex, falling in love, and then killing themselves. In this sense, the books served as windows into worlds I would never be part of, as opposed to mirrors that allowed me to be represented, which is what I was looking for. In hindsight, this was an unfulfilling experience, as I had no desire to embody other characters. Instead, I wished these characters would have represented me.

That being said, there are a few books that resonated with me through my teenage years, and I still hold the memories associated with them very close to my heart. When I look at my bookshelf, I see a copy of Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and it reminds me of my eighth-grade self who viewed love and friendship as simple and guaranteed. In the far corner rests a copy of S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* – the last book I ever read with my mom. I still have my collection of John Green books because I can't bring myself to get rid of them after how much I begged my parents to pay for the hardcover copies. But I think the hardest one for me is my box set of *Harry Potter* books buried under a pile of laundry in the far corner of my bedroom. One day in the near future I'll donate them to someone else who may need to escape to Hogwarts…at least that way I prevent any more money from going into J.K. Rowling's pocket.

In between those books I cannot seem to let go of, I also see a transition taking place. I see books written by BIPOC authors that represent me and my beliefs. My collection of books written by activists is growing, and along with every single one of these books comes knowledge that helps propel me to becoming the person I want to be. From Kimberlé Crenshaw writing about intersectionality and racial justice to Alka Joshi sharing the journey of a South Asian woman navigating a classist patriarchal society, there are many authors and literary works that represent my passions and show me how to make the world a better place for everyone – they provide me with the mirrors I've been long searching for. And even though these are books I was not necessarily ready to read when I was in high school, I'm ready to read them now, and for that I am grateful. As an English major in university, I often experience a sense of imposter syndrome. When I hear about all the books my peers read while going through high school and their stories about developing a love for this language, I feel as

though I am not as well read. I have always believed that English class is more than just Shakespeare and I have not read many of the "classics." Additionally, as somebody whose homeland was once colonized and subjected to harm by the English language, I face internal tension and guilt when I think about pursuing studies in English. However, as I learned through *The Wizard of Oz* library book fiasco, facing my guilt head-on saves me a lot of heartache in the long run. So, letting these books serve as mirrors alleviates some of this tension and reassures me that there is a reason I am here.

One year ago, my baby cousin came into the world. Being the English major I am, I decided I wanted to get her some books. As I was searching for books to get her, I was happy to see that there were picture books that had little brown girls who looked like us in them. Growing up, I never had the opportunity to see myself in the books I was reading. It gave me hope that as she grows older, she won't have to settle for books that act as windows instead of mirrors and feel as though the world left her behind too. And if they don't exist, maybe I'll just have to write them for her.

Darcy, Heathcliff, and the Drama in Solitary Reading

Justin Bermudez, Simon Fraser University

I'm dramatic. I wouldn't call myself a show-boater or someone who demands attention, mind you. For me, it's more of an internal drama that I've always seemed to possess, an emotional root within me that dictates my sense of myself. I love this, but it is something I hid away from others when I was younger. Books gave me the space to explore this dramatic part of myself, free of judgement.

While books eventually gave me this, film was my gateway. Ever since I was young, I remember the 1995 BBC *Pride and Prejudice* being on in the background of my home. In 2005 when Joe Wright's film adaptation came out, though, I found my very own love of Austen. The film had atmosphere, it had family dynamics, it had God-Damn-Handsome-Ass-Mr. Darcy, and most importantly, it was very, very, romantic. I indulged in this movie and its atmosphere for years, and it is ultimately what opened me up to the idea of getting lost within a story.

After this romantic experience, I made a huge effort to finally read *Pride and Prejudice*, and this really is when reading became a part of who I am today. It isn't because I simply read the book, or even really understood the novel like I did with the adaptations, it's more that I found something in the novel that allowed me to feel emotions that I considered too dramatic to experience with others. Sure, I didn't understand everything I was reading that summer, or for a long time to come, but reading this book became a place for me to explore a story, and my inner self, by myself; an emotional space I experienced without fear. With Darcy, I had a wonderful summer. I experienced enjoyable thoughts, I played out achingly romantic vignettes, and even experienced moments of sad misunderstanding that I found it hard to deal with. Reading gave me these feelings, and I soon became hooked on the possibilities of books.

The condition of my books is a testament to this new type of exploration. Early on I started writing in books. I scribbled names, wrote silly things in the

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margins, and added the odd smile or frown next to passages I felt were emotionally important to me. I dog-eared books until they became ruined and took them with me everywhere until they were filthy with overuse. I have a prized mass-market paperback version of *Pride and Prejudice* of absolutely no scholarly worth, but it is so sun-faded, yellowed, and well-loved that I could never imagine leaving it behind for something new.

I should mention that reading, and perhaps more importantly storytelling, was always part of my life before that summer, but this was always more of a family activity. The bedroom or sofa is where we would read stories out loud as a family, and these moments are some of my fondest as a child. Stand-out bedtime stories like *Bread and Jam for Frances* by Russell Hoban and *Not the Piano, Mrs. Medley* by Evan Levine were favorites for their comforting playfulness. *Alfie Gets in First* by Shirley Hughes also always made us laugh because of the titular Alife sharing a namesake with our father. As we grew up, we took turns reading lengthier books aloud as a group: the first four books in the *Harry Potter* series for example, as well as Lois Lowry's science fiction novel *The Giver*. Around this age I started branching out into my own reading, though, and it's then that Elizabeth Bennett popped in to let me know that reading could be a personal escape and a place for solitary thought.

At this time, none of my friends seemed interested in reading, and none had any real desire to share this hobby with me. And honestly, I don't blame them. As young people we could easily run and play outdoors, but we also had that easy luxury of watching television or movies whenever given the chance. Compared with reading, outdoor adventures and blockbusters always won out. Movies therefore became the thing I shared with my friends, not books. Looking back, I think this made me upset. Like I said, reading was a growing emotional space for me, even if it was largely solitary and personal. However, as a pre-teen, what's more important than introducing people to a place you express yourself in, sharing what you value and having others understand who you are growing into? I had a hard time with these changing feelings, and, as much as books were a personal space just for me, I think I felt a desire to start sharing this emotional part of me with others.

This reading space was emotional, but it was also enjoyable. Reading began to highlight where my passions were, and I soon found my growing interests revolving around history, literature, and the past. As a pre-teen, my first real exposure to the past as a concept came from both Austen and movies, a concept

that still fascinates and informs my interests to this day. As an extension to this new fascination, in late elementary school I became obsessed with a series of books called *The Royal Diaries*. Blending both fact and fiction, these books depicted the often turbulent lives of different female leaders throughout history. I read about Cleopatra VII, Queen Seondeok from 595 AD Korea, Marie Antionette, and Anastasia Nikolaevna of Russia. Looking back at these books and their writing now… well, it's not groundbreaking. However, I loved these books, so try telling my younger self that these were anything but fantastic! These books represented both history and culture to me, but more importantly they became a way for me to experience perspective in a new way that felt both very personal and – you guessed it – emotional.

As a cis gay man of Spanish, Swedish, and Indigenous ancestry, I can honestly say I had nothing in common with any of the *Royal Diaries* characters, and, shockingly, I still have a very different existence to that of these women now. I'm positive that a younger me either glorified or misconstrued these figures in some way, probably due to my own emotional response to the stories and how I tended to be swayed by my feelings rather than analytical thought. Nevertheless, back then, these stories felt real. This sounds silly to stress, because they are about very real figures, but these fictional narratives felt authentic enough that they emotionally affected my own growing viewpoint about different people and their lives. I wanted to connect with the stories and voices that I was reading about, and I think the *Diaries* series really made me realize that books can truly link people together in this profound way.

From that point on, I think it's fair to say that I moved into the emotionally dense times of high school, and in those years reading moved to the hidden peripheral world where teenagers lock up their dark secrets (and better yet, their feelings). As an extension from Austen, I started to read the Brontës, falling in love with Heathcliff and despising Mr. Rochester. Heady with their own implied drama, these books became personal favourites of mine in the dark moody years of my teens. During those years my spare time was peppered with personal readings like these, but reading soon began to dwindle out, as even at school I began only to read what and when it was required. I had drama classes going on, community theater, I was attempting to forge new interests and make new friends; times were busy. And, like I mentioned, my friends were never readers, and when high school asks you to be more social and "with it" – sometimes at the cost of yourself – you often abandon your emotional life rafts in hopes of finding

something that better connects you with other people. I did keep Darcy and Heathcliff around, however.

I have since realized that abandoning something you love isn't always the most fulfilling. High school ended, the mirage of outside "stuff" that teens get wrapped up in finished, and I found my way back to dramatically being me with books. And for the most part, I talk about books more, and the fear that my loved ones would condemn my overly dramatic indulgence in novels is gone. I share novels with my friends and family now, and thankfully, they also happily want to do the same. Everyone knows how much I love to get lost in a book, and I find myself sharing more and more of myself with others, thanks to opening up space I largely considered solitary. Books are still a place for me to over-emotionally contemplate things, even if it's just me wondering about Mr. Darcy's brooding thoughts and feelings. For the most part, though, I happily and wholeheartedly now share that space with others.

Circling Back through Books

Kelly Pei Xuan Chia, Simon Fraser University

When I think about my experiences with reading, the real question I'm asking is when I started reading in English. That's when I started reading independently. That story starts from when I was three, in Malaysia, where I started trying to switch the voice in my head to English instead of my native dialect, Hakka Chinese. I would only talk to my dolls in English and read in it, too. Eventually, my thoughts were in English, and it became much more natural for me to think and read in English than in Chinese. My parents weren't very fluent in English themselves or were busy working, and my brothers did not want to read to me. So for the most part I taught myself how to read through television and library books, and I loved it.

The library was my favourite place as a five-year-old. I'd stock up on fantasy books about princesses, or books about how to take care of rabbits. I was determined to either be a princess or have a pet, since I couldn't do either of those things in our small apartment in Singapore. In fact, I could go anywhere in a book. I read about countries and landmarks I dreamed to visit, about the cute arctic hares and foxes I wished I could be friends with.

Reading in English felt like a safe way for me to explore the world, and it was an experience that I could confidently have by myself. At this age, I could read independently in English, but not in Chinese. When I read in Chinese, I felt like I had to ask for help with every character. In fact, I did so poorly in Chinese at school that I was often scolded or caned by my teachers. I didn't get good grades in Math either. English was the only subject I excelled in, and I was given cute pencil cases and notebooks by my teacher for doing well, so I found myself more motivated to read than practice any other subject.

But another strange thing happened as I read stories in English. Maybe it was just a subconscious effect of being ashamed about how bad I was at Chinese and only seeing white characters as main characters, but I started mimicking the characteristics of the people I read about. I think I wanted to be anyone but a Chinese second grader. When I wrote diary entries, I tried to sound like the kind

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fairies that I read about in the *Rainbow Fairies* books. I started practicing balancing books on my head like the princesses I read about. I wanted to be just like beautiful love interests I read about, with high cheekbones, lovely golden locks, and fair skin.

At that time, I never thought about why no one looked like me in the books I read: I questioned why I didn't look and sound like them. When I migrated to Canada in fifth grade, it got a little better and a little worse. Since I had read so many stories of the new kid in class being bullied, I was worried that I would be bullied, too. Plus, I really missed my home country – I'd beg my parents each day to reconsider moving back. I continued to do well in English, though I'd occasionally get micro-aggressive comments, like how people had never heard an Asian girl speak English without an accent. I started to get attached to graphic novels since I found that I could go through them really quickly, which was important since I continued to bring home mountains of books, and I loved the illustrations.

I read a lot of *Pokemon* manga, which is how I introduced myself to my now best friend of over eleven years: she was the first girl I met that also liked Pokemon! We would write stories based in the world of Pokemon by email, where we'd exchange writing chapters. It felt good to be these cute, powerful, adventurous main characters, since we largely kept to ourselves in school. This one time we had an argument, so I almost wrote my character out of the story, but her character apologized to me first in a chapter she wrote. These days, we still connect with the stories we like by writing about it. Meeting her was the first time the stories that I read helped me connect me with other people. I treasured my little reading world, but I happily learned that I could invite others into it.

It's also at this point that I would pick up a story nonchalantly in the library that would become far dearer to me than I could imagine: *Sailor Moon*. I remember looking at the manga in the library thinking that I'd try reading it because my mom loved it. I don't know what I expected, but I was at the age where I thought anything too girly was lame. *Sailor Moon* was the first queer book where I saw positive representation of genuine friendship and love between women, and the first time I learned about nonbinary people. I remember having a crush on one of the sailor scouts, Sailor Uranus, though I didn't really explore that at the time. I'd later find out that I was bisexual, and seeing queer relationships depicted as tender rather than a punchline helped me accept that.

I admired the main character, Usagi Tsukino, who, against all odds and evils, chose to be kind. She sometimes had bad grades, but she was still a good person. I was a child who conflated doing well academically with morality. It meant so much to me to have her in my life, to model love and kindness for me. I would read the manga or watch the show when I was lonely or sick, and it would always cheer me up. It's safe to say now that I take a bit of her wherever I go.

Even if I considered Sailor Moon as a good model that was proud of her femininity, I was still skeptical of books that were too girly at the age of eleven. The saga that I grew attached to was *The Hunger Games*. I thought the story of Katniss Everdeen, this brave teenager who against all odds survived a game systematically rigged against her, was so fascinating. I watched her grow from a child who had to raise her sister to a revolutionary hero, and I admired how many burdens she had to carry. It's really the first novel I remember being so absorbed in, and I borrowed the sequels as soon as I finished the first one. I remember being completely frustrated that the movie adaptation removed her point-of-view and details like the Avoxes, who revealed how deeply corrupted the Capitol was, focusing instead on the love triangle between Katniss, Peeta, and Gale. It wasn't girly, which here meant shallow. It wasn't a documentary! I felt like I at least had a better understanding of the story than the movie directors, who in hindsight, were probably capitalizing from what they thought would appeal to young girls. I indignantly thought that this story was about a girl who grew up too early to be a martyr of a revolution, a role that she was forced into. This was the type of girl to idolize, not a girl in a girly love triangle!

I wouldn't have a chance to ask myself why girly was bad for a while, but I knew that anything that focused too much on romance was too simple for the stories about women I had learned to crave. There were books I feared reading because of what it'd say about my femininity, such as *Twilight*. The women I admired had to be tough and emotionless, not peppy, because peppy was bad. I didn't allow myself a lot of emotional development in the books and protagonists I chose, not until high school. Perhaps I did not want to be represented as the type of girl that media tends to depict as shallow: the peppy girl that adored romance. I didn't think my characters could be peppy, romantic, and deeply human and vulnerable.

I certainly had not asked why there weren't more characters that weren't white: the struggles of each character I read about would be filtered through class and mental health, not race. It was not until grade 11 when my AP English

teacher assigned me *Green Grass, Running Water* that I was forced to confront how colonial my reading was. While we had been taught about residential schools, I'm ashamed to admit that it felt like every other Social Studies unit: in the past, with no consequences to the people in the present.

This book was unlike any other narrative I had read. It wasn't chronological, but it was cohesive, and it was the first time I understood that Indigenous peoples struggle presently with adapting to Western power structures. In that story, I read about women who oversaw the creation story: the narrative compared it against the Christian myth, and it blew my mind. This teacher gave us the space to talk about the ways our heavily Westernized literature obscured the voices and storytelling of other cultures. I will be forever grateful for it.

Now as an English major in university, I find myself especially interested in marginal voices being represented in fiction and nonfiction pieces. For me, my studies feel like solving a really satisfying puzzle about the reader, the author's culture, and the stories they've made. But as I nosedived into these texts, I also found myself reckoning with my lifelong relationship as a reader, academically and culturally, away from my Chinese heritage. I wrote about this disconnect in a school article and was heartened to find many other first-generation immigrants shared similar feelings about their culture: people that would forever feel a bit lost at the family dinner, and were rediscovering their culture with excitement, not shame.

As a reader, I've realized how much of my reading is through a Westernized lens, and how much time I've spent hiding from my culture as I study. While I am grateful for the pathways this has opened for me, I am trying to decolonize my reading by finding works that help me learn more about my culture. These days, I chase after books that I think make me feel that exclusive safeness that I felt when I was a child. Sometimes I find a book that touches me in more ways that I can explain, where I have to write about it in the margins of my notes after digesting it for days. For me, these books were *Tuesdays with Morrie* and *Song of Achilles*. I remember thinking about death, about life, and the relationships we make with other people. That's the best thing any work of literature can do for me: making me remember first and foremost how blessed I am to share my time with the people I love.

I work at a library now and I see so many more books featuring characters that look like me and my friends. Recently I read *Jade City*, an Asian-inspired

fantasy story written by Fonda Lee, that didn't rely on age-old fetishistic stereotypes in a book club with my friends. I loved that the world was so full, and that the characters felt so human when it hurt. It makes me wonder how many other books I can read that are lovingly embedded in the author's culture, too. I'd love some recommendations!

Do You Smell Something Burning?

Nicky Didicher, Simon Fraser University

When I was a toddler, I had a security blanket; when I was seven, I accidentally burned a hole in it. I wanted to finish reading a book after I was supposed to be in bed with the lights out, so I covered my bedside lamp in the blanket to dim the light, not realizing how much heat incandescent bulbs put out and not noticing when it began to singe.

I don't remember what book I was reading, but chances are good it involved magic. Fantasy was my genre: if it didn't have magic in it, it was hard to get me interested. I did read most of the fiction in my local public library, but it was fantasy I went back to reread. I don't remember learning to read; I just remember reading every day, even in summers.

My mother read aloud nightly to her children as individuals. I felt devastated at age thirteen when she stopped reading to me in the evenings, though in retrospect I can understand that I had then three younger siblings and reading to us took up a lot of time. Later in my teens, I read aloud to my younger siblings. My mother, a Great Reader, likes realism, romance, and historical fiction, and she was able to get me interested in some of her favourites, particularly Arthur Ransome's and Laura Ingalls Wilder's children's books (which I now see as problematically racist and colonial), but I never liked Louisa May Alcott or Lucy Maud Montgomery. We could agree on E. Nesbit: historical settings for Mum and magic for me (though also the pro-British-Empire attitudes). After my father died when I was twenty-nine, each time I visited my mother we would read a book aloud to each other, taking turns with chapters. We read the whole of Naomi Novik's Temeraire series (set in a parallel Napoleonic world with added dragons) over various Christmas vacations: fantasy for me, romance for my mother.

As a teenager I expanded my reading to science fiction. At thirteen I was allowed into the adults' section of the library, having burned through most of the children's collection. I discovered that adult fantasy and science fiction were all shelved together, so I started reading that section, usually at the rate of three

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books every two weeks. My father – Engineering major, fighter pilot, Math teacher – was not a Reader, but he enjoyed science fiction and had a subscription to an SF-book-of-the-month club, and I read those, too. The first adult novel I read was *Pride and Prejudice*, when I was ten (I found Mr. Collins very funny), and I found I liked Shakespeare in Grade 10, so I started reading canonical literature. And murder mysteries, especially those by Dorothy L. Sayers. And a few romance novels, preferably with magic in them.

I totally never noticed that pretty much all the main characters in the books I read were white, except for Othello and Little Black Sambo… as a small child, I thought Little Black Sambo was wonderful because he was so clever and could eat so many pancakes; as a teen, I didn't think much of Othello. Sometimes there were minor characters whose skin was a different colour from mine, and I accepted the stereotypes at first and then dismissed them as stereotypes when I got to know one of the two Black students at my high school and had a guitar teacher who was from the Six Nations reserve in Brantford. However, my attitudes and assumptions were set up by all that non-critical reading as a child, and it took (and is still taking) work to unpick them as an adult. You won't be surprised to hear that, in the reading materials available to me in the 1960s and '70s, there were no overtly queer characters. Though I did notice that Janie in *Harriet the Spy* was not interested in having male friends and wasn't very girly, it never occurred to me that Harriet was not girly, either (she seemed romantically destined for her male best friend Sport). I would have been unbelieving if you had told me that the female author of that book loved girls, not boys. I am white, female, middle-class, and cis-het, and I had a very sheltered and in many ways privileged childhood.

We didn't have much money, I never went to summer camp, and I paid for my guitar lessons after the first couple of years by babysitting and teaching beginner guitar. My mother made my clothes, and I didn't own any jeans until my aunt gave me a pair as a birthday present when I was in Grade 8. Not only did I wear non-cool clothes, but I was often the smartest in my class – and got bullied for both. I learned to keep out of the corners of the schoolyard. If we'd been allowed inside the school at recess, I would have sat with a book by myself. Books were my escape from my peers. I particularly enjoyed intrusion fantasy and portal fantasy, books where we begin in ordinary reality, then something happens to push against that reality, and the overlooked, socially awkward protagonist gets to win out over the dangers and villains.

Probably I subconsciously thought that magic would be the only way someone like me could be a hero, and I hotly resented the fact that the lone protagonists were boys. Girls could be part of a family encountering magic, as in E. Nesbit, P.L. Travers, Edward Eager, C.S. Lewis, and Madeleine L'Engle books, but this was before the independent girl hero in fantasy became a trope, before Lyra and Meggie and Alanna *et al.* I hadn't taken to Alice because I didn't get the jokes until I was an adult (and our copy had lousy reproductions of the illustrations). Somehow, I never read the Oz books! Perhaps seeing the film version annually on television convinced me I wouldn't like them because Dorothy was frightened all the time and the magic turned out not to be real in the end (not true of the books). I wonder what I would have made of Tip, in *The Marvelous Land of Oz*, who is raised as a boy and then discovers she is really female and a princess? But the lack of girl heroes did not dissuade me from fantasy, which allowed me to try on lives in which I was not the teacher's pet, not the frumpy awkward sidekick.

In my middle school years, I had a best friend who was also a Reader and loved fantasy. She was, like me, a socially awkward target and outsider, but instead of just keeping out of way and being safe, [let's call her X] was belligerent, rebellious, and able to claim special creative status for herself through art. We played out fantasy stories in which she was a clever adventurous independent heroine, while I always had to be her plump, less interesting sidekick. She turned me onto reading Zilpha Keatley Snyder and some other great middle-grade authors, but I didn't appreciate the roles she assigned me in our play sessions… or some of the pranks and petty crimes she wanted me to be part of. X and I both frequented the library, but she didn't return all her books and took to stealing them when she lost her library privileges. Then she went to the library in the next town over, took out a card using my name, and I got in trouble when she didn't return all of those books, either. That was after our friendship was pretty much over already, though. I'm grateful someone wanted to be my friend in public school, but it was a bit damaging trying to be X's friend. Since then, I've had friends with whom I've shared books, but no friendship based almost entirely on books. It would be nice, but I'm OK without it. If I stay up late to finish a book now, I don't have to risk burning a blanket, and perhaps I'll email my excitement to someone who will understand.

Now I teach literature, and I often have the privilege of teaching literature that adults write for young readers. I love that part of my life. I no longer burn my way

through stacks of books, except for work (but I get to read children's lit for work!). Since my work hours went up during the pandemic, I've sadly done no pleasure reading at all. When I retire, I want to read more and take a more sustained shot at writing fiction myself. And I think I'll probably write fantasy and science fiction stories that are inclusive and push against the tropes and clichés. Reading made me who I am and helped determine what I do for a living, and I celebrate the authors who helped me get there, even as I acknowledge their blind spots and damaging prejudices.

Exiting the Fantasy Bubble

Erielle Dizon, Simon Fraser University

If someone asked my twelve-year-old self if I was a "reader," I would have answered with a resounding "yes." Long before I began reading books on my own, my childhood had a strong foundation on which I gradually developed an interest in stories. My mother and I took turns reading various stories to each other before I had even started kindergarten. The *Harry Potter* books were some of the most formative stories during this time of my life, though I also vividly remember short, simplified Bible stories that we read. However, reading was not yet my favourite pastime, because I had not yet found the same amount of fun in books as I found in movies and games.

That all changed when I became truly excited about books around Grade 3 after encountering the *Deltora Quest* fantasy series by Emily Rodda. The worldbuilding engrossed me, but the frequent presence of riddles and puzzles that the protagonists had to solve sealed the deal. My favourite example comes from the second novel, where a giant guarding a bridge threatens to either chop off the protagonist's head or strangle him, depending on whether the protagonist's final statement before dying is true or false. The solution to passing the giant turns out to be a true-false paradox; even now as a student who has studied a bit of logic, I appreciate the effort that went into the riddle's design. By learning how to solve such challenges with the protagonists, I felt much closer to them than I would have without the puzzles. As I got older, some of the other great fantasy worlds that I explored were through reading the *His Dark Materials* series, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* series, and *A Game of Thrones* (the novel). These books had dangerous worlds, but the comfort I found was in the opportunity to escape my own world and all its uncertainties.

Fantasy grew so comfortable to me that problems of representation within the genre totally flew over my head. I came across "fantasy race" conflicts, but they were so far removed from real race issues that I didn't care to find any meaningful social commentary. I can't remember whether I noticed all the characters I read about in fantasy were white, but, if I did, I would not really care.

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I am Asian and grew up with lots of Asian friends and family, but I had no problem with reading white/ambiguous/non-descript/fantasy-ethnicity-that-stands-in-for-white characters so long as I enjoyed the story. Deep down, I associated most books with protagonists of colour with miserable stories about poverty because, while I was growing up, that was the extent of my exposure to diverse literature. Sometimes they were great stories, but they were never fun stories. I will never forget reading *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini in Grade 8 for significantly different reasons from why I will never forget reading *Harry Potter*. I would not realize that I was "gatekeeping" my own likeness from appearing in my favourite genre until much, much later.

My feelings about gender also manifested in my reading choices as a young girl. I preferred to follow girls who did "cool" things in fantasy or science fiction because it seemed that the alternatives revolved around romance or other "girly" topics. Unfortunately, I held the impression that girly things could never be cool; no one ever explicitly told me so, but I must have picked up the notion from seeing how poorly our culture reacts to media designed for girls and women. I was also raised with lots of male cousins, male childhood friends, and video games designed for mostly male audiences.

The last reason I considered myself a "reader" was that was how a lot of my family, friends, and teachers perceived me. I genuinely enjoyed reading and learning during elementary and high school, which led others to see me as one of the "smart" children among my classmates. Reading was especially encouraged by my parents and teachers, and my friends were indifferent, though I wonder if I could have been closer to them if I had more "social" hobbies. It's not as if these people were wrong about me; even if you took my hang-ups about other genres as a child/teenager into account, I still read voraciously. It is interesting to reflect on how these expectations from others – which turned into expectations that I had of myself – later influenced me during university.

If someone asked me as a twenty-two-year-old if I am a "reader" today, the answer would be far more complicated. Over the past five years, I have had a harder time processing and absorbing the words on any page. I know that the evolution of social media and texting has affected my attention span, but I also know I have made certain choices that compound the issue. As a double major in English and Philosophy, I am very lucky that I still love what I am learning. Nowadays I largely associate reading with working and studying. The energy that I muster up to read is largely spent on course texts, articles, emails, papers that I

edit for an academic undergrad journal, and drafts of my own writing. I find it funny and a little sad that I am a Humanities student because of my love of reading, only to have no time or energy to enjoy reading for its own sake.

Sometimes I feel guilty for not reading as widely or as often as some of my peers. Now I can trace this guilt back to when I was identified as "the smart one" by others. I no longer achieved As with minimal effort like I did in high school, and I had a mild-to-moderate case of impostor syndrome. Reassessing some of my priorities in life helped me deal with this feeling. I explored new opportunities outside of school such as co-op and volunteering and picked up new hobbies including cycling and piano. It was well past time to let go of my need to feel like "the smart one." While these activities are not directly related to reading, I think they gave me enough time and distance to develop a more balanced view of my relationship to it.

Perhaps I am still a "reader," but of a different kind. I might not have the free time to read as I had during my childhood and adolescence, but I was never as critical of my reading as I am today. I have not bought a new book to read for leisure in years, but I have made better use of libraries and recently started listening to audiobooks. I began considering audiobooks as a legitimate option thanks to my best friend. One evening, after I complained to her about how I could no longer read for fun, she decided to read entire chapters of her favourite book *The Rule of Three* by Eric Walters (a realistic thriller type of novel) to me over the phone. As unorthodox as it was, having someone read stories aloud to me broke through the "reading block" I had been experiencing for years. I think I will always have internalized prejudices to work past, but at the very least I have left the notion that girly things could never be cool in the dust. Some YA fantasy and sci-fi novels I enjoyed as a teenager were written with a female audience in mind, so there is no use pretending I was "unique" for largely avoiding romance. It might never be my favourite, yet my friend (the same one who was zany enough to read aloud to me) and I have had great fun imagining what *Twilight* would have looked like if it were better written. We are only halfway through *Rule of Three* and are currently too busy to engage in such antics again, but I would have never experienced these things if I was not willing to step outside my fantasy bubble.

Someday I want to teach literature myself. I want to help students not only feel more included in the stories we read, but also feel equipped to navigate murky waters such as how to think about authors whom we know are prejudiced, how to talk about racism, and how to reflect on discomfort. I am forever grateful to my

family and my own teachers for setting me on this path, but, if I become a teacher, I would do my students a disservice if I just stuck with what was pleasing and comfortable. My time at university showed me the benefits of teaching uncomfortable texts in a constructive manner: improved critical thinking, empathy, and writing skills, to name a few. High school and elementary students deserve similar opportunities.

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

Sophia Dobischok, Simon Fraser University

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

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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 Hou*se 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 Cassanda 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.

My Fictitious Friends and I

Lily Nichol, Simon Fraser University

My closest and longest standing friendship is with novels. Books were always there for me when I felt like no one else was. I read about people like me, people I wanted to be, new places, and grand adventures. Reading gave me a refuge when the world around me was not where I wanted to be. Novels were my closest ally while navigating my youth.

In about Grade 4 or 5, I recall receiving a phone call from the library that the book I had placed on hold was available for pick up. At that time in my life, I went to the library weekly and placed many books on hold, but this time things were different. When I arrived to pick up my books, I was handed *Alanna: The First Adventure* by Tamora Pierce, which I had never seen before and definitely did not put on hold. The librarian at the front desk said, "the children's librarian set this aside for you and said you should go talk to her when you come to pick it up."

Why would the children's librarian have put a book aside for me? I had only spoken to her a few times and did not realize she remembered me. The children's librarian explained, when I went to chat with her, that my enthusiasm for the library had left an impression on her. She told me that she thought this was a book I would like because it had such a fierce heroine. I took it home and ripped through it in just a few days, quickly working my way through the whole series and moving onto other books the librarian left for me. Every weekend we would discuss what I had read that week, and she seemed genuinely interested in my thoughts and ideas. I felt so important!

The librarian's picks for me also encouraged me to discover new books on my own. I loved series the most, like *Artemis Fowl*, *Alex Rider*, *Silverwing,* and *Airborn*. I loved Kenneth Oppel, Eoin Colfer, Anthony Horowitz, Tamora Pierce, and John Marsden. In reflection, I mostly read male authors who wrote male protagonists at this age. This was likely because I found children's novels so gendered and books with female protagonists often so limited in scope. I stayed

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away from them, other than Tamora Pierce and her Alanna novels (and the main character, Alanna, does pretend to be a boy so she is able to go on adventures). I devoured these books. All I wanted at this age was to be an independent adventurer someday – like all my favourite protagonists.

Though I did read to myself, my parents also read to me out loud every night before bed. As I began to near teenhood, I found myself getting bored with being read to, because my parents read out loud much more slowly than I read silently to myself. Sometimes, I would read ahead in the books we were reading together because I was impatient, but I think it hurt their feelings. By twelve I couldn't stand it anymore, and I awkwardly broke the news to my parents that I did not want to be read to. With their reluctant blessing I could now read anything I wanted before bed! I was an independent adventurer like all my favourite characters and had more opportunities to explore new genres of books as well.

At the beginning of the summer between Grades 6 and 7 we moved from an urban centre to a smaller and more rural city where I knew no one. My mother took a position teaching at the university there, and, so that she could prepare for her fall term, we moved in early July well before the start of school. That was the longest, hottest, loneliest, and most boring summer of my life. My already large interest in reading grew into something of even more epic proportions to compensate for my isolation. At the same time, puberty was letting me know that I had a burgeoning interest in boys and my only recourse was Young Adult romantic fiction.

For eight straight weeks, you could find my preteen self chasing the shade across our unfurnished patio to avoid the blistering sun, sitting in a tie-dyed bean bag chair I found at a garage sale down the street, and reading like it was my job. Meg Cabot was my gateway to Young Adult romance novels, and I read every book of hers I could find! One of my favourites was *The Mediator* series where I met Suze and Jesse, the cute ghost who lived in her bedroom. I also loved *The Princess Diaries* where I met Mia Thermopolis, the awkward teen princess who finds love. I also discovered Sarah Dessen, John Green, and Maureen Johnson as I sought reprieve from the heat by browsing around the air-conditioned bookstore in my small city's even smaller mall.

Not all of these new authors I discovered wrote romances, but what they all had in common was their teen protagonists struggled to find their place in the world. In my new home and city I saw my struggles mirrored in their pages. It

made me feel less alone to know that the characters in my novels grappled with their self-confidence, their friendships, their loneliness, and even found starting a new school as scary as I did. I didn't make any human friends that summer, but I certainly made a lot of book friends. I still own every single book Meg Cabot wrote prior to 2004. Though I haven't read any of them recently, they still all maintain a prominent spot on my bookshelf. I find comfort in knowing that they're always nearby, and I know if I need them again they are never far away.

To this day, I am so appreciative of the children's librarian who put books on hold for me and to my local library for having such a strong and amazing children's collection. I'm glad that I had so many opportunities to read growing up. Looking back, I know that finding myself in books was one of the healthiest ways I could have gotten through all the uncomfortable transitions of my youth, including puberty and moving. My bookshelf isn't getting filled at the same rate these days, and the time I have to sit around in a beanbag chair and follow the shade is almost nonexistent. I have allowed my love of reading to fade into the background as I focus my attention elsewhere – though it's less of a choice and more of a necessity as study to become a high school English teacher. My hope is that I will be able to share my love of novels with my future students and encourage them to make friends with books.

No Longer Ariel: Leaving the Archetypes of Children's Literature Behind and Learning to be My Own Strong Female Character

Rachel Sargeant, Simon Fraser University

If you ask my father, the earliest record of me loving books was when I was two or three years old, raptly listening to him read me Disney faerie[1] tales and doing all the voices. If you ask my mother, it was when I was three or four and hearing me read my *Little Mermaid* picture book out loud over the baby monitor. While I have no recollection of those moments, I vividly remember being slightly older, maybe five or six, sitting in the front section of the grocery cart holding a *Berenstain Bears* book, cold from being in the freezer aisle while my mother shopped for milk and eggs.

Growing up, I was encouraged to read anything and everything, and so I consumed a steady diet of faerie tales, dinosaur encyclopedias, and Little Golden Books. My favourites were *The Little Mermaid*, because Ariel was the only Disney princess with red hair; *The Unicorn's Secret: Moonsilver*, after I started horseback riding at age six; and the *Magic Tree House* series. It was fantastical books like these that I first remember deeply connecting with. I loved learning the details of worlds not my own, and, in my child mind, dinosaurs were exactly like fantasy creatures, except they were real. What else in my books was real? Genres like portal fantasy and magic realism make you believe it's plausible that maybe, just maybe, magical things could happen to you, too. I wanted stories that had adventure, and the fantasy girl-marketed books that had unicorns and mermaids always had a brave female protagonist. Growing up so closely with books had the side effect of me basing my personality on protagonists I liked, which both hindered my ability to relate with the outside world but also helped me realize I didn't just have to read about brave girls – but could become one.

[1] I choose this spelling deliberately, to honour Celtic and other ancient traditions.

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I was an awkward child, and starting school only pushed me further toward individual activities, such as reading. I got overwhelmed much faster than regular Kindergarteners, wasn't good at making friends, and didn't understand how to deal with failure, which at that age that meant not being able to colour within the lines. Elementary school also did not treat me well, as intense bullying made it so I only attended half the time. I would immediately turn to books when I got home, using fantasy as both a calming method and escape. I used to spend hours at the local library, gathering stacks almost as tall as I was, with O.R. Melling's *The Golden Book of Faerie*, Liz Kessler's *Emily Windsnap* series, and Shelley Peterson's *Sundancer* on a nearly permanent loan.

Child protagonists are usually unusual, be they a half-mermaid, have the ability to portal into other worlds, or end up fulfilling prophecies. Beginning to read chapter books at a time when the majority of female protagonists were made "relatable" by descriptions of blonde hair and plain features, giving a character red hair was authorial shorthand to show their protagonist was exciting and special. Being one of two redheads in my elementary school and feeling the typical childlike sense of being different, I clung to characters like Ari from *The Road to Balinor*, Ginny from the *Harry Potter* series, and Amber from *The Prophecy of the Stones*, living vicariously through them. I liked reading about girls who were the opposite of me and my life – maybe they didn't have friends either, but they were brave and outspoken, throwing themselves into danger for the sake of others, gaining experiences I would never have. They were who I wanted to become, someone who made magical friends and went on adventures, persevering in fantasy worlds where they were important and celebrated for being different.

High school was when I really began exploring books, due to a combination of being an outsider and the sharp rise in popularity of the Young Adult genre. I had a book (or two) in my backpack at all times, sat on the floor outside my locker to read at lunch, and got in trouble multiple times from one snippy English teacher who wouldn't let me read in class after I had finished my work. Growing up during the boom of Middle Grade and Young Adult books both helped and hindered my perceptions of myself, particularly when it came to my sense of superiority from being not like other girls. At this time, my favourites included Lili St. Crow's *Strange Angels* series, the *Mortal Instruments* series by Cassandra Clare, *Daughter of Smoke and Bone* by Laini Taylor, and *Tithe* by Holly Black, all main characters who didn't fully embody traditional femininity and put higher value on

learning to fight or create art, rather than on physical appearance. They were weird like me, yet they got the guy. They were different from their peers, yet they somehow ended up saving the world. I subconsciously attached to them in a way that went beyond relatability, and, in doing so, I changed myself so that I reflected their personalities. I felt more confident in myself because of these quirky characteristics, but it led to a rude awakening when I realized reading a lot didn't make me any smarter or better than other students. That being said, being exposed to characters who expressed various attitudes and ideas of strength at the volume and rate at which I was consuming them opened up my ideas of what being a strong protagonist was, and I credit a lot of my beliefs on strength and morals to what I read back then.

Having books be a central part of my life for over two decades, I've watched the ideals and biases of children's literature grow alongside my own understanding of what it means to read critically. Along with the expansion of dispositions of female leads, the bookish community is now more often holding people accountable for poor depictions of marginalized groups, starting new discussions on age-appropriate topics, and actively challenging accessibility. The influence children's literature had on me was positive in the way that it showed me what I could become, but also held me back, because it reinforced stereotypes and kept me from seeking certain relationships. My coping mechanisms were unhealthy because I put too much effort into escaping, and I had to un-learn a few quirks from these early-2000s types of protagonists, like realizing it was good to have female friends and to stop having crushes on people who treated you poorly. I have a healthier outlook on fantasy protagonists in my twenties than I did as a child, but I would not describe my enthusiasm for books as any less – if anything, it grew thicker roots when I worked at the bookstore, continues to grow each day I am a part of the book blogger community, and is what pushes me to work with writers to question the new media that has evolved from those earlier days of children's publishing. Having people like this in my life allows me to explore stories without becoming them, and talking with someone who understands your enthusiasm is its own kind of magic. I am forever grateful that these other worlds were accessible to me when I needed them most to escape, but also that they showed me my potential to become the protagonist of my own story. I've given Ariel a voice, but this time, it's my own.

Analyzing the Eggs, Never Making an Omelet

Natasha Tar, Simon Fraser University

Reading itself was never a question or choice; I was introduced to books extremely early. My dad only reads the Bible and has always told me it's the only book worth reading. He read sections of it to me but stopped when I was around five because I became obsessed with Revelations, especially Revelation 12:3, which is a description of the devil. My mom didn't think the Bible was sufficient reading material, so she took me to the library. She tells me that my first word was "duck," and she guesses this is because she read *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck* to me so often. I read this book many times growing up, but I didn't understand why it made me feel so conflicted. I was angry about what happened in the story: angry at Jemima's foolishness and naïveté, at her plight and her quick acceptance of circumstances, at the deceitful gentleman fox, and most of all at the awful puppies who come out of nowhere and eat her eggs. At some point, I realized this anger stemmed from confusion. The story was almost "Little Red Riding Hood," something I understood quite easily. But the ambiguities in *Jemima Puddle-Duck* prompted me to return to it again and again. There seemed to be a lot going on below the surface of the text that I couldn't reach and reasons for Jemima to act the way she did that I couldn't understand. Grappling with and revisiting confusing books informed my reading throughout childhood and continues today.

I've always needed a long time to answer questions. I admire those people whose hands shoot up moments after a question is asked. Meanwhile, an answer usually comes to me around dinner, long after I've left the classroom. When books started being assigned in elementary school, I would read ahead so I would have answers when we reached the assigned chapters. I wonder if reading all the time caused me to become so slow at answering questions. I took books' patience for granted; they let me chew on questions for as long as I needed to. It also didn't help that I gravitated towards books that confused me and prompted multiple readings. Two such series are *A Series of Unfortunate Events* and *The Adventures of Captain Underpants*. I loved these series, and I still re-read parts of both fondly and find new things. At the time, I didn't question why I loved two

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disparate series equally. Now I see that they're both narratively interesting, with fun background details and chatty narrators.

That said, I read most things as a child: from *Junie B. Jones* to *Ripley's Believe It or Not* to plain old nonfiction shark books, I wasn't overly picky. Up until early high school, I would read books I hated or found boring to the very end. In this manner, I dragged myself through a lot of awful YA, such as *Hot Pterodactyl Boyfriend*. It felt wrong to leave behind a book once it was started. Sometimes I pushed myself through books because I found them difficult to read in another way. *Wintergirls* was my friend's favourite book. The book is a visceral look at depression, eating disorders, and suicide. I make myself read it every few years as a reminder of this pain's reality. I also struggled with *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* when I first read it at age twelve. The masturbation references made me uncomfortable, but I knew the book as a whole was important. It was probably the first book I'd ever read by an Indigenous author about an Indigenous character.

Despite reading basically anything, I've always enjoyed magical realism the most. High fantasy and sci-fi never appealed to me. If the books weren't at least a little connected to our world (or at least a world very similar to ours), I would be disinterested. Maybe I believe that our world is interesting enough.

Instead of YA books, I tried to read classics in high school, most of which I found boring. I read *The Lovely Bones* at fourteen and decided I should wait a bit before trying more adult books because that book is… a lot. I then reverted to my reading roots and got back into comics, graphic novels, and manga. These were full of the fun narration and details that I've always loved. They encapsulated my teenage years much better than most YA fiction that was popular at the time. Since I was a cowardly prude who was disinterested in drugs and alcohol, I couldn't relate to or enjoy the stories of common YA novel protagonists. Katniss from *The Hunger Games* and Beatrice from *Divergent* are cold and relentless teenagers, the results of dystopian circumstances. All the other YA protagonists were having tons of sex, falling in love with boring people, or complaining about their parents. In comparison, the comics I read featured quieter moments of the teenage experience, the ones still rife with difficulties and complexities but conveyed without the snark and irony of the YA novels I came across. *The Gentlemen's Alliance Cross* and *Kitchen Princess* series featured protagonists who tried to keep in good spirits, nervously joined clubs, and faced problems with determination. Topics such as adoptive families, cruel classmates, and terminal

illness weren't met with just cynicism, angst, and anger. They were examined from all angles, and characters were allowed to be conflicted and sad without being melodramatic. After reading these series with their admirable and subtle emotional cues, I developed a very deep hatred for John Green. The only book I've ever treated poorly was a library copy of *Paper Towns* that I threw out a fourth-floor apartment window before I finished reading it. In turn, I've never liked books that are constantly undermining any genuine moment that happens within them. I'm always looking for stories in which authors freely experiment with form and narration but don't feel the need to walk back vulnerable moments.

Near the end of high school, I was introduced to zines. My reading became split between formally published books and self-published works. The former were old friends. I read anthologies during that time, which I thought of affectionately as the mixtapes of books. But the latter came with a more complex relationship than reader/work. Going to a zine fair meant chatting with the creator, who was sitting in front of you at a table or booth. It meant flipping through their book, laughing, pointing to a specific drawing or poem and saying, "That's so great!" In the end, you would probably buy all of their zines, which would only cost you about $25. Over the years, you'd see them at other fairs and get to know them. The zines are only a small part of the interaction but are still deeply satisfying. Most often they're personal and earnest. Matthew Bogart's *Incredible Doom* series is one of my favourites. Anything by Kathleen Gros and Cole Pauls is delightful. Zine makers were also my first real exposure to writers who were LGBTQ+. Now with diverse books being widely available and celebrated, I feel like I'm constantly playing catch-up and reevaluating the world and privilege I took for granted as a child.

My reading was guided by characters who questioned things constantly and were often confused, but not trying to hide this confusion behind apathy or other façades. Other than that, I think I've always admired books that try new things, narratively and through physical design. If I were to psychoanalyze myself, I guess it would make sense to say that I was looking for things in books that I was lacking in real life: honesty and novelty.

Pursuing an English major was my second choice. I wanted to be a baker, but after two years at a bakery, I decided it wasn't the life for me. Reading, and by extension writing, was my only other constant and passion. I had seen Vancouver's community of small presses, magazines, and self-publishers and decided being part of that world looked interesting. Maybe a literature degree

would also help unravel the mysteries of all those confusing books. My parents thought I was throwing my money away by going to university. But my dad had seen my love of reading and writing and begrudgingly admitted I could probably make something of myself by studying these things. Though he's still upset I haven't read the Bible.

I'm now in the second-to-last semester of my degree and sometimes I feel like it was wasted on me. I've found academia overall more prescriptive than exploratory. I will probably never go back to university. The world has lots to teach without the price tag and desperate struggle to be seen as smart. Bitterness aside, I'm grateful overall for the experience and I've tried to get lots out of my degree. I'm sure I could now write a decent paper on *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck*, analyze it for themes of rape or the price of motherhood or something like that. But honestly, I could probably read it a thousand times and still not fully understand it. It will still confuse and anger me. And I'm glad for that.