

The Messy Truth: A Portrait of a Girl Through Her Books

My book collection resembles vomit, in a way.

I don't mean to be crass, but I'm sure a lot of novice collections do. It's a hodgepodge of novels and history, fine literature and old textbooks, art and fantasy. There are definite trends and exclusions, but it is mostly characterized by its disorder. I long ago gave up on any standard of organization, so now it's grouped mostly by necessity, disparate texts haphazardly coexisting with knick-knacks and dirty turpentine containers on my brother's old bookshelf.

If it doesn't resemble vomit, or if that metaphor is too off-putting, then it perhaps resembles the fossil record, each book acting as a snapshot in the evolutionary history of my developmental years. Just like the fossil record, there are seemingly inexplicable jumps; where the physical condition of the books started to deteriorate as I realized that constantly asking your parents to buy you books is kind of lame, and resorted to bargain-hunting online. Where certain species were eliminated— donated to the VA, the Lupus Foundation, or whatever abyss books go after you decide their relevancy has expired. Where books from my grandparents' collection were integrated upon death or spring cleanings. They act as a brutally honest timeline, one that pulls no punches in regards to my personal history and past obsessions.

In these patterns, there are three major shifts that break up the collection, each spearheaded by a specific work of fiction. These represent major changes in maturity, preference, and, at a certain point, way of life.

I apologize for the lack of originality, but the first piece of great literature that changed my life was *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. This, the beginning of pleasure reading, opened up a whole new world for me. Before *Harry Potter*, I was doing fine in school, the kind of average that, at the tender age of nine, could be bumped up to smart with a well-timed kick, or

slowly slump into mediocrity, if left untreated. These books were the kick. After the first reading of the series, I climbed my way up reading levels with the fervor of a recent business graduate climbing the ranks of a hedge fund. *Artemis Fowl*, *Eragon*, *Tunnels*— you name it, and I was all over it. Only a couple of these were good enough to make it to the shelf, which, at that point, was half occupied by stuffed animals and Taylor Swift CDs.

This phase was the nitty-gritty of childhood, before the widespread use of the internet or introduction of homework into daily life. These were the golden years of finishing up to three books a week, curling up with a copy of *Peak* after dinner, reading until my eyes grew heavy and climbing mountains in my dreams. I was efficient, a well-oiled machine that ate Barnes and Noble gift cards and spat out well-worn copies of *Esperanza Rising* and *The Shadow Thieves*.

This idyllic stretch of pleasure reading was rudely interrupted by what I can now properly identify as puberty. This is the period of the fossil record where the big jumps are made, where the dinosaur starts looking like a chicken. This was started by *Hush Hush*— the off-brand *Twilight* for girls who thought they were too good for a vampire romance. In this YA novel, a plucky sophomore is tasked with untangling the cryptic behavior exhibited by a devilishly handsome vagabond who seems to know how to infuriate her in the fewest steps possible. By the end of the book we find out that he is — *gasp!*— an angel sent from heaven to protect her from— *gasp!*— himself.

I didn't care that the plot was riddled with inconsistencies, or that it was a sloppy mix of Christian ideology and rape culture— all I cared about was the fact that I could think of nothing other than this book for *weeks*. I scoured the internet for deleted scenes and fanfiction, endlessly scrolling through online forums until I got sunburnt from the blue light, yearning to squeeze even a single drop more out of the book. I highlighted the juiciest scenes with a color-coded ranking

system so I could cut to the good parts. That hazy summer, I distinctly remember laying spread-eagled on the floor of my room thinking *what do I do now?*

Despite its profound impact on me, *Hush Hush* did not entirely characterize this unsettling period of growth. Yes, it led to *The Hunger Games* and *Legend*— other hackneyed YA novels riding the wave of dystopian romances— but it also paved the way for more powerful works, such as *The Kite Runner* and *The Plum Tree*, books that are masterful in their treatment of the human condition and remain sympathetic in the face of depravity. As strange as it might sound, these are the books that taught me how to be human, how to think beyond myself before imparting judgement. They showed me what struggle looked like beyond middle school; having a lot of homework didn't seem so bad after following a girl my age through the Holocaust. These books taught me that my life is a privilege— not a right— and definitely not the norm.

Despite these more formative novels, high school still came as a shock. My first week in, I marched into the library, headed straight to the fiction section, only, to my utter dismay, to find three, maybe four, small shelves filled with books that still had yellowing catalogue cards pasted on the back cover. I stepped out of the comfort of the public library and entered into a wicked den of teenage sin and trickery where people didn't even do the *required* reading, let alone read for fun. I had unwittingly entered the modern era. Almost at random, I picked the most palatable book from the shelf and took it home— *Expensive People*, by Joyce Carol Oates.

That was the first book that left me with more questions than answers. Sometimes, especially here, where the lawns are perfectly manicured and a Canada Goose jacket is always within arm's reach, I feel like I am Richard, a neurotic child attending boarding school in Oates's hellish suburbia. To this day, that book elicits an odd reaction of revulsion and awe, though it has maintained its title of my favorite book, despite some fierce competition.

There's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, which I read during a summer spent shuffling between working in my father's air-conditioned office and the dry heat of the park near my house; for the first time I understood how people can maintain faith against all odds in their invisible creator. Irving didn't make me believe, but he made me look beyond my own atheism.

After that, I choked down Oates's *Blonde*, wincing my way through miscarriages and sexual coercion to try and understand a woman who history has turned into a blow-up doll. I'm not quite sure I do, but sometimes I find myself absentmindedly searching her image online.

There are still saltine crumbs and tear stains in the spine of Michael Crichton's *Prey* from when I started to cry during the chapter where two characters were mercilessly devoured by a swarm of nano-bots. I know this because I couldn't help but bring it with me to college— I re-read it during a week when the future appeared especially grim, when I felt like an island being swallowed up by the sea. When I cracked it open again, I regained some land.

It's a little sad, but I'm never going to read a lot of those books again. The fossil record will be broken up, whether it's done by a sloppy drilling company or my mother looking to turn my childhood bedroom into a guest room. I'm not going to be living with my brother's old bookshelf forever— and I'm certainly not going to bring *Hush Hush* with me wherever I go. We never like destroying fossils— they're sometimes the only evidence of our progress— but we can't always help it. My collection is ephemeral, but also the most faithful representation of who I was, and who I am now. It's not going to be here forever, but neither am I.

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