

Confessions of a Bibliophile¹

I've always enjoyed stories. That's it in a nutshell really. Some of my fondest childhood memories center on Sunday school lessons, learning the stories of David and Goliath, baby Jesus, Adam and Eve, and Noah's Ark. Outside of church I amused myself by flipping through The Cat in the Hat, critically examining the pages, straining to decipher the cryptic black sigils that somehow gave the illustrations meaning.

Once I had access to my elementary school library, I scuffed a furrow into the carpet, endlessly looping between comic books like The Adventures of Tintin, Calvin and Hobbes, and Garfield. The complex plots, philosophical themes, and sardonically sophisticated humor were completely over my head, on account of my head being preoccupied with pictures of explosions, talking tigers, and hungry cats. Also, I still didn't know how to read.

Then everything changed.

In the third grade I received a book entitled Frog and Toad are Friends. My class assignment was to read one chapter that night. Instead, I read the whole thing. It was an accident really. I stumbled through the first chapter without missing too many words. I was enjoying the story, so I decided to read a few more pages. Then a few more. Then a few more. Then I hit the back cover. Oops.

At that point I became cognizant to a pair of realizations: 1) oh holy wow I know how to read and 2) I CAN READ WHATEVER I WANT!!!

Rushing into the library on that first day of the rest of my life, I picked up the book with the most awesomest [sic] looking cover. That small mouse holding a big sword introduced me to

¹ The footnotes are mostly gimmicks. Ignore them to preserve the intended flow and tone of the essay's main body. If the main body's disjointed informal rambling monologue-esque style, unnecessarily overabundant commas, and redundant adverbs, and excessive conjunctions, and randomized punctuation, and gratuitous allusions, and sesquipedalian loquaciousness, and technically-crippled grammar at any time induce nausea, vomiting, or hallucinations, feel free to take refuge in the footnotes, where you will be protected by the fourth wall.

the world of Brian Jacques' Redwall. I read the entire series. And then I read it again. If not for the release of the Lord of the Rings movies, I probably would have re-read them again, and might still be looping through them to this day.

Instead, I discovered the magnificence which is Tolkien,² and quietly pledged my soul to the quest for more and better fantasy. So methodical was my obsession that I read the entire Silmarillion,³ being too naïve to know when I was out of my depth. After that my modus operandi was set. Find a series, read the series, then devour everything else that the author had ever written. Rinse and repeat.

I quickly expanded my conquests to include more genres, transitioning easily from the swords and dragons of fantasy to the lasers and aliens of sci fi. Then an elementary school history project introduced me by near accident to The Life and Death of Adolf Hitler,⁴ instantly turning me into a history aficionado. (Stop judging me. I was amused by the cover's picture of the little man and his silly mustache.)

Being native Mandarin speakers whose immigration was made possible by their studying of math and science, my parents had trouble relating to my growing infatuation with these increasingly outlandish English stories. At first they were pleasantly bemused. Then they were indulgent. Then they were worried. Where, amidst the cacophonous clamor of closing covers, was I finding time to study? Was there any space left in my head for facts after feeding for so long on fabrications? I think that they eventually came to view my hobby as a sort of monsoon. Constant in its seasonal return, unstoppable in its progression, hopefully leaving behind enough sanity to salvage and reuse later.

² Think of him as the George Washington of the epic fantasy genre.

³ The prequel to the prequel for The Lord of the Rings. Imagine that George Washington combined the Bible with Beowulf and then took out the interesting bits.

⁴ Spoiler Alert: He was a mass-murdering Nazi lunatic.

Rationalizing their lack of continuous disapproval as implicit support, I dove into reading without one look back. I became like a carnivorous cow, let loose upon an endless school of helpless, unsuspecting piranhas, leaving behind nothing but cracked spines and tatters of papery scales. Asimov, Card, Green,⁵ Paolini, Pierce, Anthony, Butcher, Heller, Gaiman, Forstchen, Anderson, Herbert, Weber, Colfer, McCaffery, Reeve, Turtledove, Nix, Stroud,⁶ Niven, Welles, Steinbeck, Tan, Adams,⁷ Heinlein, Bradbury, Shaara, Jordan, the magical Rowling,⁸ and that inestimably ingenious incarnation of intellect:⁹ Terry Pratchett.¹⁰ I've read them all and more, if not in their entirety, then at least wholeheartedly.

The endless parade of books in and out of my backpack elicited many comments from my friends. They described me as a book addict, and although I usually denied the allegation, I could not deny that my main motivation for reading has always been a hedonistic desire to experience neurons flashing and synapses cracking. Perhaps sensing this inner confession, my friends continued to ask what I had gotten from books, what I had learned from fiction; how I benefited from the endless hours crouched over a codex, clutching the covers, scrutinizing characters correcting chaotic cataclysms culminating in climactic conclusions.¹¹

I pondered my friends' questions, took note of their skepticism, and then ignored them. To question reading would be to question the very foundation of my identity. Reading was me. It was my persona. It defined me. I had early on developed the habit of reading while walking,¹² always carrying several back-up books in my pockets. My habit became so distinctive that a

⁵ has been known to use footnotes

⁶ notable for his use of footnotes

⁷ A notorious master of footnote use

⁸ teehee. punny.

⁹ Added alliterative appeal almost always amuses amidst and amongst autonomous academic.

¹⁰ undisputed eternal lord and master over all the mysterious and eldritch lore of footnotes

¹¹ Concocting creatively cacophonous collections can cause conscious conscience to collapse catastrophically.

¹² it's really not that hard

friend once emulated me for as a Halloween costume.¹³ Putting aside my book would be like putting aside my face,¹⁴ for in the sea of faces, I was the book-shaped piece of drift wood.

Alas, somewhere amidst the rocky isles of puberty I picked up a mirror and found a face full of pimples. As I stared aghast into the mirror, I realized it was time to examine what lay behind the reflected face. I had emerged from the soft silken cocoon of childhood into the dark forest of adulthood, bound to a pair of fragile, tiresome wings with nothing to guide me but the cold and cryptic light of distant indifferent stars. I realized that the world held dark ugly truths,¹⁵ and that I might be one of them. If I was to come to term with those truths, I would have to do it by under my own power, as no higher one was there to advise me.

The world would no longer tolerate childish procrastination, but now demanded adult introspection. I had reached that point in a person's life when one must find his place in the world, his role in the universe, and validation for the life lived and to be lived. I had become—and remain—caught up in that most clichéd and classic of quests: the search for self.¹⁶ The time had—has—come to question my past conduct (even and especially with respect to books) and learn how it applies to my present and future.

To misquote Orwell: “Who understands the present, understands the past: who understands the past, understands the future.”¹⁷ To find my identity I must have all three, for they are the context, the matrix, which must define it. I need to know who I am and who I have been, so that I may prepare for and become whatever I will be. Standing at a crossroads of a thousand

¹³ not very scary, but it won the costume contest

¹⁴ which when uncovered was unrecognizable to some people

¹⁵ Acne being foremost

¹⁶ Everyone embarks on this quest at some point. That doesn't make it sound any less pompously pretentious or melodramatic, though.

¹⁷ From George Orwell's dystopian novel 1984: “Who controls the past...controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.” The Ministry of Truth has assured me that this maxim is entirely unrelated to respected metaphysicist Sir Terence Pratchett's formula of: “Knowledge is power, power is energy, energy is matter, matter is mass, and mass changes time and space.” Of course...if Minitruth lied, that would imply that knowledge of the past grants understanding of the present, which grants power over the future...bah, preposterous.

branching paths my life may take, I must choose one to take the first step upon. That choice and its consequences may take me anywhere between Inferno and Paradiso,¹⁸ but the roads that lie before and behind me are tangled amongst each other, crowded with the confused clamor of squabbling angels and demons.

Being a college freshman without a decided major or career, my future is full of frightening uncertainties. I don't know what my past education has prepared me for, or what I should pursue in my current education to prepare for the evolving adversities of the future. I'm unsure of what I want from life, or the criteria on which I should prioritize my desires. Although often nebulous and distant, these unknowns prey on my mind, drawing me into a cycle of indecision and self-doubt.

And yet...even amidst all these anxieties, I am content. I remain terrified, confused, guilt-ridden, awkward, and without pride for the person that I am. But somehow I also remain satisfied with myself as I am. And I have faith in what I will—or at least can—become. I believe that I am, for the most part, a good person, and will continue to be so.

Books form a cornerstone for my personality, and now I want to know how they have contributed to that part of me worth being. What have I gained from reading? Was it ever anything more than a petty juvenile obsession? Did it ever serve me as more than a court jester,

¹⁸ From Dante Alighieri's epic poem *The Divine Comedy*, which describes an allegorical journey through the afterlife from the bowels of Hell to the heights of Heaven. Widely considered the culmination of medieval European literature, it was recently popularized as a video game about self-mutilation and dead babies.

prancing and dancing to gibberish tunes rather than lending real advice?¹⁹ Did it *improve* me? Is it helping me *go* anywhere with my life? These questions whirl and blur and mix around me, a hurricane of panicked introspection.

Yet when I look into the eye of that anxiety storm, I find a calm that makes me feel as though I understand, if not the future itself, then at least its potentialities. Somehow I have faith that I can understand the making of the future's myriad branching paths, even if I cannot predict their destination. All the yellow brick roads²⁰ lie before me, mapped out and made. Now I want to know what part have books played in that silent cartography²¹ of my destiny.

Certainly reading has earned me some small notoriety and praise, but my constant reading has also disappointed my parents, who wished to see me spend more time studying. Looking back now, I can recall times that I should have heeded their warnings against distraction.

Of the benefits I might have received, most defy quantification. It's reasonable to assume that my love of reading helped me ace my high school English classes and Reading SAT. But beyond my classes, I never really delved into the 'deep' material. The 'useful' literature: the

¹⁹ Mark it, nuncle:
 Have more than thou showest,
 Speak less than thou knowest,
 Lend less than thou owest,
 Ride more than thou goest,
 Learn more than thou trowest,
 Set less than thou throwest;
 Leave thy drink and thy whore,
 And keep in-a-door,
 And thou shalt have more
 Than two tens to a score.

²⁰ From L. Frank Baum's The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, an allegorical commentary of the late 19th-century debate regarding American monetary policy.

²¹ Not to be confused with The Silent Cartographer, a level in the popular video game *Halo: Combat Evolved*, which chronicles the adventures of the Master Chief—a faceless armored space marine who traverses the galaxy in search of aliens to shoot, ancient temples to blow up, and the space zombies who kidnapped his holographic girlfriend. By fan consensus, the Master Chief is a more fascinating and culturally significant epic hero than Gilgamesh, Odysseus, Aeneas, and Beowulf combined.

science journals, the self-improvement manuals, the classics, the great essays. Instead I spent upwards of a decade chasing swords, sorcery, sci-fi, and slaughter.

I definitely took something away with me, even if the author might not have meant to proselytize the particular idea I took away. In some cases, but most definitely not all, I adopted new ideas from the author's words.²² Today I consider some of those concepts (even—or especially—the ridiculous ones) to be integral to my world view.

From Tolkien I learned that mankind is a brief and petty creature. From Adams I learned that everything is fun to laugh at, even if it's not funny. From Asimov I learned that everything is made out of tiny sub-atomic particles called science.²³ From Pratchett I learned that everything can be trivialized, and therefore learned from. From Heller I learned that everything I learned before I did not learn, because I was simply telling myself that I had learned something new by re-learning something old which I had already learned. Also, the human psyche is best modeled by precisely 42²⁴ interlinked rotating Mobius strips²⁵ that form a dodecahedron.²⁶

As demonstrated above, most of my epiphanies were disparate, abstract, esoteric, and downright weird ideas that have little application to the life I live on the outside of my head. How do I *use* those thoughts? What good are they in real life, where nothing survives without serving a function? How do they make me better able to shape my world?

When I came under siege by puberty and its army of anxieties, I wanted to know that I had gained something useful from reading, that it had in some way made me a better person, contributed to me being a person worth being. In my view a man was defined by the choices he

²² or I might have simply used them to reinforce or crystallize ideas I was already developing. Cause and effect is difficult to map on the inside of a brain

²³ a concept that continues to affect modern sociology's development to this day

²⁴ except for when there are 22

²⁵ a surface with only one side and only one boundary component. A very weird shape, all things considered.

²⁶ except for when they form a platypus

made and the actions he took; the way his internal thoughts and personality left an impression on the external world. How could reading let me do that?

The logical next step would have been for me to take up writing, to synthesize all the thoughts and concepts I had absorbed into essays and stories of my own. To irrigate the minds of my fellow man with the lake of ideas dammed up within my brain.

But that grandiose and vainglorious vision never came to fruition. I had desire to improve the world with my efforts, but no ambition with which to implement that desire. I have authored few works that I can claim as being fully my own creations. Most of my essays were well received by my teachers, but those compositions were never original works. I only wrote them as responses, analyses, reactions, mere derivatives of other authors' ideas. I have shaped nothing new from the clay of thought, but instead became someone else's mold. Like an engraver's plate: incomprehensible on its own; only capable of stamping copies onto empty sheets. Bar a few pallid poems and thin stories produced for a writing class, there is little to indicate the existence of my own creativity, my own imagination. Only my ability to regurgitate the ideas that I've read.²⁷

I do not wish to disparage the value of derivative thought. After all, all human behavior is derivative of various real-world stimuli. But at the time I was filled with the teen's juvenile need to express individuality, to graffiti my name into the firmament's empyrean pillars.²⁸ I had seen the magnificent creative powers of many authors, and felt as if I had squandered my own on gossip and mimicry of greater talents.

²⁷ I'm puking on your brain right now.

²⁸ The next time you visit the Valley of the Kings, take a good long look at some of the inscriptions you find. For every "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" there will be at least a dozen scribbles amounting to "Brooks was here."

Is that all I am then? Just a bland living reflection of someone else's art? Will there be nothing to mark that I too, passed by this way and lived and learned?

When I ponder this question, my mind, naturally, goes back to the books I've read. All those authors left their marks on the world, their signatures in the book of life. And I am here to read them. It might be argued that a destination only has significance in its relation to the origin, but once that relationship is established, the destination's existence as its own entity cannot be denied. So in a way, I draw my identity from being in partnership with the authors I've read. I see that their memories and thoughts live on, beyond mere preservation as mummies shelved away in dusty silent tombs. Without me those ideas—and by extension, their progenitors—remain insipid wispy foreshadowings of ghosts trapped on Schrödinger's bookshelf.²⁹ always potentiality, never quite reality. The culmination of human literature will not come when its greatest manuscript is completed, but when someone reads it.³⁰

There is more to life than making my own mark. There can be as much payoff for watching as there is for acting. After all, no action has significance unless observed.³¹ If all writers simply clamored only to draw attention and become memorable, their art would quickly waste away and fade from consciousness. Books exist for two purposes: to be read and to house ideas. But this does not mean that *ideas* exist to trumpeted from towers or plastered to billboards. Ideas simply need to be, and humans can then choose to utilize them as they wish. With life as

²⁹ Schrödinger's cat is a thought experiment, devised by Erwin Schrödinger to illustrate the problem of applying quantum mechanics to everyday objects. It presents that a cat placed inside a box, completely isolated from outside stimuli, might be alive or dead, depending on an earlier random event. However, the cat's state, being isolated from the outside world, is unknown and therefore indefinitely indeterminate until observed from the outside. Until then, the cat is simultaneously alive and dead, as both outcomes have equal validity according to quantum physics. In layman's terms, the cat does not actually exist until viewed by an acid-tripping physicist.

³⁰ unless this has already occurred...?

³¹ If a building collapses in the inner city, and no one is around to hear it, the important question is what happened to populace.

with ideas, there is intrinsic value just in being. Not being powerful or wealthy or respected, but just existing and appreciating the fact of it.³²

I don't need to measure my self-worth by how much my own ideas impact others. Instead I can absorb the ideas of others and bear witness to their interactions in my mind. If I am later called to testify, then all well and good; but if not, then I can enjoy having seen something remarkable, and relish having participated in something eternal.

But as comforting as that may be for a philosophy, it still offers me nothing truly solid. I still can't name a tangible, pragmatic benefit of my bibliophilia. Clearly, books are able to impart knowledge, to expand minds, to enlighten souls. But what about readers like me? The ones who read for the joy of it and were just looking for a good time? The people who walked along the Styx simply to enjoy the scenery, with no ulterior thoughts of creating an indestructible posterity.³³

Perhaps, even though I did not gain comprehension, I lost ignorance. I found an intangible skill that was the driving force behind the preposterous ideas. I learned to open the cover, to turn the page, to accept the world as the author described it long enough to question the world as my eyes saw it. In finding an escape from the world I found a place to stand and watch it turn, and now need simply find a lever long enough.³⁴ Once I learned how to take that small step out of reality, I saw that the world kept spinning without me. I didn't need to pressure it or prod it for acknowledgement; only let its rotation carry me and watch for just the right time to

³² *Cogito ergo tabula rasa*: I think, therefore I am a blank slate.

³³ In Greek mythology the River Styx formed the boundary between Earth and the Underworld. The sea nymph Thetis dipped her infant son Achilles in the river, making him nearly invulnerable to harm and allowing him to grow up into one of the most powerful and respected heroes of Greek legend. Presumably, stones from the riverbed were known as Styxonite.

³⁴ The Greek physicist Archimedes is apocryphally attributed to have said "Give me a place to stand and a lever long enough and I will move the world." Unbeknownst to Archimedes, the solid body nearest the Earth is the Moon, which is anchored by Earth's gravity well. Therefore, any attempts to apply leverage would have the same effect as a man trying to lift himself by the scruff of his own neck. (Any astrophysicists in the audience may feel free to dispute this claim.)

apply just enough leverage. Doing so will not make my past or future any less complicated, but it will prove to me—if no one else—that I have perspective and power over my present. The books taught me how to think critically, analyze an idea, appreciate it, and compare it to others. And when I was finished—finding myself either enlightened or baffled—I learned how to move on to the next one. By learning how to read books, I learned how to read into the world.

Yet I am often still confounded by the paradoxical nature of some of what I find. Perhaps the world is too complicated to make sense of without placing trust in contradictions. For me, the first contradiction is this: everything makes sense in context, but all things are everything else's context. To understand a chapter, you have to read up to it, then read it, then finish the book. Then read the rest of the series, then read the complete works of the author, then read the genre, then read the contemporary and ancestor and descendent genres. Because everything has a genre. Literature, science, politics, religion, health, family...there are as many genres as there are ways to describe ideas. For me, waking up each morning is like stepping into a new library to discover that all the books are merely entries in a single anthology,³⁵ and knowing that I will never even turn a fraction of the pages it contains.

When I look out my window, I see a hundred thousand multitudes of books: books of architecture, of traffic ordinance, of meteorology, of microeconomics...and bustling all around them, the autobiographies. Not all sensational, not often successful, almost always repetitive and unenlightened, yet each uniquely written and exquisitely detailed. The entire world is a book,³⁶ and I think the author would appreciate me reading it rather than simply judging the cover.³⁷

³⁵ Here's a fun trick: Try reading an upside down book backwards in the reflection of a reflected mirror while dancing the Macarena while also listening to "Never Gonna Give You Up" by Rick Astley. When Bloody Mary appears her head will explode.

³⁶ Limited edition, so it's really hard to get copies at the library. Non-renewable, and the fines for missing return deadlines are a *bitch*.

³⁷ Then again, that's what got me into this mess.

I cannot pretend to understand the present. Nor can I presume to fully comprehend my past. And without the knowledge of both, I remain unable to predict my future. But the future is always uncertain, even as it steadily decomposes into the present. Books alone, although powerful in many ways, are not enough. They cannot grant complete understanding, or the capacity for creation. What books can bestow is a starting point and direction in which to begin searching for them.

Maybe that's enough.³⁸

³⁸ Everything I wrote in footnotes, I learned from reading!

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Judges’ Commentary on “Confessions of a Bibliophile”