



“What we read becomes a map of who we are”

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The best book I've ever read is *Matilda* by Roald Dahl.

I first read the story of a girl so extraordinarily intelligent that she could move objects with her mind when I was eight years old. My second grade teacher, Mrs. Travis, helped me pick it from the reading list, and I made a newspaper for my project. My mother still remembers this project and I have modeled one of my own class assignments on it.

For those of you unfamiliar with this work of literature, or those skeptics among you who might say, “but it’s a children’s book,” let me assure you, *Matilda* has everything, but I’ll limit myself to one element. (Seriously, I could talk about this book all day.)

Matilda is explicitly about how literature opens us up to others. Matilda is a brilliant child who has taught herself to read by age 3. She forms a relationship with the local librarian, who recommends a survey of great books for Matilda to read.

From then on, Matilda would visit the library only once a week in order to take out new books and return the old ones. Her own small bedroom now became her reading-room and there she would sit and read most afternoons, often with a mug of hot chocolate beside her. She was not quite tall enough to reach things around the kitchen, but she kept a small box in the outhouse which she brought in and stood on in order to get whatever she wanted. Mostly it was hot chocolate she made, warming the milk in a saucepan on the stove before mixing it. Occasionally she made Bovril or Ovaltine. It was pleasant to take a hot drink up to her room and have it beside her as she sat in her silent room reading in the empty house in the afternoons. The books transported her into new worlds and introduced her to amazing people who lived exciting lives. She went on olden-day sailing ships with Joseph Conrad. She went to Africa with Ernest Hemingway and to India with Rudyard Kipling. She traveled all over the world while sitting in her little room in an English village. (21)

What we have read becomes a map of who we are.

My parents read to me in their bed when I was young, every night. I would change into my pajamas and then I was allowed to lie in their bed while my mother read me *Little House in the Big Woods* or my father read me *The Hobbit*. I distinctly remember my feeling of outrage when I interrupted my father (Princess Bride-like) to correct him: “You didn’t read that right. Thorin isn’t dead because he is the hero.” My father’s reply was simple: “No, Thorin dies. And he is not the hero, but you don’t know that yet.” While obviously now I can see that Bilbo is the protagonist, Thorin Oakenshield is still the hero of my eight-year-old heart. My memory of my sorrow at his death shows me who I was already starting to become: I have no interest in paragons of virtue; I want to hold close the ones who have lost their way.

Seven years later I lay in the same bed, home from school with bronchitis, and I picked up a book that my younger brother’s teacher had sent home with him. In 1998, I was one of the first to sit with Harry Potter

in front of the Mirror of Erised, which “shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts” (213) and see the reflection of Harry with his parents, who had died when he was just a year old. And I cried for the first time in three years for my father, whom I missed so much.

The only way to grow is to have a genuine interest in others. If you want to learn about yourself, you have to learn about others. You cannot sit before a mirror that only tells you what you already know. To be changed by what we experience on the page or garner from the textbook, the movement must be outward first rather than inward. I have encountered what I think is every brand of resistant reader in ten years of teaching. (I’m sure there are a few new variations coming my way.) Resistant readers, young children who “just don’t like to read” are quite often also my least enthusiastic students across all subjects. Low energy, low curiosity, they are Milo from *The Phantom Tollbooth*. Now, of course, the mechanics of literacy, the complex exchange between written word and reader that conveys meaning, is a hugely difficult thing to master. A lack of enjoyment can easily stem from a difficulty with the process. It seems a cliché to say “if you don’t like to read, you just haven’t found the right book yet,” but it is important that when reading is a difficult process that the literature be of high quality. I have yet to teach a student, no matter the ability level or interest in reading, who did not fall in love with (or at least begrudgingly enjoy) the richly layered story and gorgeous characters in Grace Lin’s masterpiece *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*.

But, without stories that reveal the truth of human nature, without poetry that explores the minute grandeur of creation, without songs that stir the heart, students cannot know themselves, because they cannot know others, and therefore they will remain disconnected from their souls, strangers to their very being.

I have been blessed to learn from my own teachers through literature and through literature about teaching. Shakespeare’s extensive exploration of love and leadership have helped me appreciate the demands and rewards of both (and I hope have made me better at both). Thomas Hardy’s tragic *Jude the Obscure* makes me aware of how easily the careless words of a teacher can misdirect an otherwise promising life. Jo March’s fulfillment in starting her school demonstrates beautifully that teaching is calling to be answered, not a consolation for frustrated ambition.

And of course, Jesus is Rabbi, teacher.

When Matilda goes to school, she meets her kindergarten teacher, Miss Honey:

Miss Jennifer Honey was a mild and quiet person who never raised her voice and was seldom seen to smile, but there is no doubt she possessed that rare gift for being adored by every small child under her care. She seemed to understand totally the bewilderment and fear that so often overwhelms young children who for the first time in their lives are herded into a classroom and told to obey orders. Some curious warmth that was almost tangible shone out of Miss Honey’s face when she spoke to a confused and homesick newcomer to the class. (66-67)

I loved Miss Honey as a child and I love her still. A dedicated, and determined teacher, I loved Miss Honey’s desperately poor cottage, her courage to overcome the abuse she had suffered, and that she quoted Dylan Thomas. When I talk about Matilda, I am reminded of how much I loved Mrs. Travis, my second grade teacher, who was much like Miss Honey in heart, though happily not at all like her in circumstance. And I remember to pray for Mrs. Travis, my very own first beloved teacher.

In case you’d like to read like Matilda, here’s her reading list:

Nicholas Nickleby by Charles Dickens
Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens
Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë
Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen
Tess of the D’Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy
Gone to Earth by Mary Webb
Kim by Rudyard Kipling
The Invisible Man by H.G. Wells
The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemingway
The Sound and the Fury by William Faulkner
The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck
The Good Companions by J. B. Priestley

