

On Truth and Literature
2nd Place Stuckey Contest Winner
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I once read on Twitter that Teddy Roosevelt read a book per day while he was president. I probably found this while I was scrolling through Twitter thinking I had nothing better to do, so remembering this made me reevaluate my life as a reader. I try to be optimistic, so instead of thinking of how much more I could be reading, I decided to reflect on how I have evolved as a reader. I discovered that my love for books came quite by accident. I didn't intend to become a reader, it seems. However, had I never become a reader, I wouldn't have found the beauty of the truth of literature and the truth of how much I need others.

I treated books in grade school and middle school as little more than homework assignments. I would read them to complete the assignments in my literature classes, not for pleasure or for learning something that couldn't be taught in a classroom. I read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain and *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank, but I didn't appreciate Twain's sense of humor or Frank's struggle as an avid reader would. I only read them to learn whatever my literature teacher asked of me on the quizzes or essays. I aced the classes every quarter, so I didn't feel the need to change my reading habits. However, as I read those great works along with *Macbeth* and *A Christmas Carol*¹, I unwittingly got hooked on reading. I was insatiably hungry for more to read during the summer before my freshman year of high school, but my first actual journey into the vast world of literature began quite by accident.

I encountered the first book of my journey, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, in a perfect storm of boredom and curiosity. I was at a Target with nothing to do when I discovered the book's first chapter on a demo for the Nook tablet. I enjoyed the quirky, unorthodox chapter so much that I rushed to the library to find the novel. I finished the book in three hours, and it only built my desire to read. I searched *The Hitchhiker's Guide* on an internet book recommendation engine, which led me to read the sci-fi dystopian *Fahrenheit 451*. I was genuinely compelled by a novel for the first time, and so much so that I relied on the engine to develop a taste in literature. It led me to *V for Vendetta*, to *1984*, to *Brave New World*, to *Animal Farm*. I had moved from science fiction to political parables, and I welcomed this change as I developed a greater interest in politics.

I twisted my own view of politics and society as a whole because of this string of dystopian novels. The novels paint a pessimistic outlook for the future of modern societies, especially for their governments, and I absorbed their political ideas without question². By the time I was finishing *Animal Farm*, I was analyzing nearly every sentence of the book, looking for some underlying meaning that would reveal some great truth that the author was trying to express and I wanted to know. However, in all of the analysis, I didn't take any time to appreciate the style or nuance of great writers such as Ray Bradbury and George Orwell. I first paid attention to this nuance with my next choice of literature, *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

A close, erudite friend of mine recommended *Slaughterhouse-Five*, saying it would be “right up my alley” after reading Rowell and Bradbury. I hunted for the novel every weekend at garage sales³. I finally found *Slaughterhouse-Five* five weekends later, and I started reading it immediately. I struggled with the novel at first, especially Vonnegut’s use of the phrase “So it goes” every time a character died. I researched the novel and discovered that the main character was not actually taught the idea of “So it goes” by aliens, but he adopted this phrase to cope with the trauma of the Dresden firebombing. Intrigued by this, I began to analyze the book critically, looking for what Vonnegut was really saying about the war. I departed from merely absorbing ideas; instead, I interpreted the book to form my own ideas about Vonnegut’s experiences. I made original thought my goal and critical analysis a habit, a habit that became useful as I began reading more diverse literature.

I began my second literary journey at the beginning of my sophomore year of high school. I didn’t follow a specific theme or use a recommendation engine, but instead picked whatever happened to be readily available. I first read Haruki Murakami’s *IQ84*, an elaborate story of a bizarre alternate reality that includes an exploding German shepherd. Bizarre assassination plots, and little people crawling out of a dead goat’s mouth. I then read *Trainspotting*, Irvine Welsh’s story of the dark underbelly of Scottish drug culture. Both novels were distinct from any other I had previously read: both were written from multiple perspectives⁴, and both had themes I never thought I would approach. *IQ84* turned out to be little more than a simple love story, and *Trainspotting* dealt with the ethics of drug use and the impact it has even on those who never touch drugs. I embraced analysis when I read these books so I could understand their ideas and find the truths behind them. I faced a minor crisis of indecision when I finished these books. I was trying to avoid book recommendation engines, but I didn’t know where else to turn initially. Eventually, I asked a few other friends what they recommended⁵. Perhaps I hadn’t been listening to them well, since they had actually been recommending the *Harry Potter* series to me ever since I started high school.

I began my trek into the wonderful wizarding world of J.K Rowling’s *Harry Potter* in January of 2015. At first, I doubted it could stand up to my still-developing ability to analyze literature. Today, it still stands as my most profound reading experience. Not only did I find a beautiful story of loyalty, friendship, and sacrifice, but I also understood why my friends loved it so much. Rowling’s style is easy to understand, even for children, so my friends who had read it years before could appreciate it as much as I did as a high school sophomore. For many of them, this was why it became an important part of their childhood. When I finished the series, I remembered my freshman year when my friends found out I never read *Harry Potter*. They were appalled. They even called me a “muggle.” Not only did I break free from Muggledom (for lack of a better term) by reading *Harry Potter*, but I am a much happier person for it. I’ve discovered that the importance of other people, whether it lies in recommending a book series or in saving each other’s lives (in the series), is one of the greatest truths of literature, especially in *Harry Potter*. Unfortunately, I was reaching the end of summer vacation when I finished the series, but I did find redemption in reading *A Room of One’s Own* for my summer reading requirement.

I didn’t find profound truth in Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* so much as I found a way to express the truths I had already found in other literature. Woolf’s essay is a story of a woman, Mary, who explores a vast swath of literature to understand why so few women were writing

fiction before and up to the 1920's. As her story progresses and Mary reads more and more, she digresses to explain exactly what she is reading and how she interprets it. Her stream of thought is often completely unrelated to what she is actually pursuing. However, Woolf ends the story by drawing from her jumbled stream of consciousness to eloquently support her argument that women need a stable income and a room of their own to write fiction. This conclusion was, in a way, a breakthrough for me. Like Mary, I usually digress or lose focus at some point whenever I analyze something that I'm reading. Woolf's essay didn't change this habit at all, but I saw that my own thought process can be refined to produce an argument or a realization that I can express. In other words, I found that I can find truth in literature without restraining my natural analysis, which means I can read literature as I want to read it.

I think my literary journey to this point of my life is a cause for hope, perhaps foolish hope. As I reflect on my past as a reader leading into the present, I remember all the great books I have read. As a more avid reader with a less selective, more courageous taste for literature, I know I'm going to encounter some pretty terrible works. However, I think I'll find even more books that are inspiring, beautifully-constructed, compelling, punchy, witty, and/or many other qualities that are fixtures on the back covers of best-selling novels. I've discovered so much of the beauty of truth and others in such a short period of time, and I want nothing more than to learn more. I think there's little more to do than to simply keep picking up whatever book will start my next literary journey.