

Growing Up with Books
2nd Place Stuckey Essay Contest
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I want to be an author. I want to write a book that will be a friend to a kid out there that needs one. Books connect and comfort people across the world. They tell you that you aren't alone, and that other people have had the same thoughts as you. Books tell you that it's okay to be different because that's what makes you real. They tell you that it's okay to be yourself. I want to become an author because in the words of Beverly Cleary, "If you don't see the book you want on the shelf, write it."

I have been enamored by books for as long as I can remember. My best early memories are of my mom reading to my siblings and me. It was always a fight to be the closest to the book so the four of us could try to read the words. We all saw my older sister reading her *Junie B Jones* books, and we loved the idea of being able to do that too. I loved listening to the *Amelia Bedelia* series and how she took things so literally. I remember starting kindergarten and reading a book out loud about a cat and a rat and a bat on a mat that I was so proud to be able to say. My teacher gave me a smiling gold star for my folder. I never really stopped feeling like I got a gold star for reading because the more I read, the more I learned, and the happier I was. A lot of people relate to this childhood filled with books. Parents encourage their kids to read early on because reading improves many other skills as well. Reading has been proven to improve memory, concentration, vocabulary, and empathy. It is helpful in relieving stress and in educating kids. In addition, an early love of books will likely cause you to continue reading as you age (Moorhead1).

In late elementary school, I would sit and read under the trees on the grass hill. At some point at the end of fifth grade, I realized that I had more friends in books than in real life. I don't blame reading for this; I had just never thought that I needed close friends outside of books. In contrast, I think reading is what caused me to meet people. Once I started reading more complicated books, I realized that all of the heroes put themselves out there, and tried new things. I decided that I needed to become a heroine and start to write my own story.

Like me, people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) also struggle with the idea of making friends, and understanding other people's emotions. Research is currently being done to find if reading fiction could be helpful to people with ASD. Because reading generally builds empathy towards others, it is theorized that reading could help improve social skills in those with ASD, and learn how to understand what other people are thinking or feeling (University of Liverpool 2).

I was thinking more and more about making friends after the epiphany that I needed to get myself out there. I spent the summer reading more and more, especially stories packed with adventurous, daring characters. I wanted to adapt to new situations like Percy Jackson. I wanted to effortlessly talk to people like Leo Valdez did. I wanted to lead people like Annabeth Chase. Instead of saving the world, I just wanted to make some friends and become a better writer. In seventh grade, I got my chance. I was put into multiple classes with a girl that I knew

but didn't really *know* since kindergarten. I didn't know much about her other than that she loved books, which is really enough to make a friend, in my opinion. I made it a point to sit next to her and ask what book she was reading. Because we both loved reading and learning new things, she quickly became my best friend.

Another thing that happened in seventh grade was my middle school getting a Talented and Gifted (TAG) program. This program met once a week to work on National History Day projects. These projects could be about a variety of subjects in many different forms, I chose to write an essay about Norman Borlaug, father of the Green Revolution, and this ignited my passion for reading nonfiction. I loved reading analysis about Borlaug's impact and forming my own ideas about his work. I went on to compete at National History Day for two more years until I started to get busy with high school. I got involved in speaking contests in FFA because I still love reading articles about what is going on in agriculture, and speaking about them helps me to be more outgoing. It's always easy to find someone that you can talk to when you've read about the same topic.

That's one of the best benefits of books: empathy. You can put yourself in the shoes of hundreds of different people, even if you wouldn't normally meet them. You can start to understand people that are different from you, whether that be in race, sexuality, or political views. Empathy then boosts tolerance of others. Even if you think they are wrong for how they are, or what they believe in, reading can allow you to realize that they aren't harming anyone else with those beliefs. By loving diverse characters, you realize that you are inherently similar to them, and can be easily tolerant of them (Hill 1).

Lately, my favorite genre is realistic fiction. I'm a junior in high school, and I feel like this is the time where I really want to relate to people and feel welcomed. Though my peers aren't mean, I just don't quite fit sometimes. So I read. I listen to all kinds of stories. I can take the feeling of connection in fiction and share it with others. I retell and make up stories and people accept me for it. I carry that feeling of acceptance around with me all day and make it into energy. When you exclude energy, it seems like the people around you feed off of it, and books are what help me do that. I find it makes school a lot more pleasant if people actually want to be there.

One of the greatest examples of a book that made me feel like I have a place in the world is *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky. Charlie is one of the most relatable characters because he is a book worm and an introvert. He is a Wallflower in the best way. Throughout the book, you see his flaws as he goes about life with the intention of saving everyone. I find a lot of inspiration from coming of age stories, and this is my favorite. What really stuck with me was how real Charlie seems, how he learns that it's okay to not understand other people or even yourself. He ends his story with, "I am both happy and sad at the same time, and I'm still trying to figure out how that could be" (Chbosky 224).

Like Charlie, my love of reading has made me want to become a writer. I want to make someone feel that it's okay to be flawed because even fictional characters are flawed. Otherwise they wouldn't be alive. I hope I can be a great writer, but more than that, I hope I never forget how to be a good reader. Reading to me is what keeps me hopeful for the world.

Works Cited

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