

17,850 Hours

I grew up, and still grow up, in the middle of Nowhere's stomach. It's a thirty-minute drive to my high school, which is in the middle of Nowhere's palm. I used to ride the school bus every day until I got my driver's license and purchased a dinosaur named Yucky the Yukon. Because I live in the bowels of rural Missouri, my siblings and I were first to board the bus in the mornings and last to step off in the afternoons. Due to the spread-out nature of my school district, I was granted a daily two-hour round trip. Two hours, five days a week, one hundred seventy days a year, for ten and a half years, is equivalent to 17,850 hours. It was during that time I discovered the power of storytelling.

I was terrible with letters in kindergarten. Practically dyslexic, I wrote my alphabet and numbers with purple puffy paint and ran my fingers over them, attempting to imprint the orientations of various loops and lines in the folds of my brain. I brought my school work to the back of the classroom and sat, criss-cross applesauce, in front of the sight-word wall to copy down simple words like "what" and "then." Even when I "sounded it out," written language remained sticks and squiggles. Reading was a chore.

The bus was where I learned to funnel my imagination into something tangible. I went on adventures, not only with friends, but also with collections of paper and ink. It was because of my time on the bus that I discovered a love for literature.

In kindergarten, I spent fifteen minutes of every morning bus ride sitting with the girl my big brother had a crush on. He introduced us, in hopes I could be his spy on the inside and generate relationship advice. K, we'll call her, was my first bus friend. We transformed into vampire babies when the imaginary family members said the trigger word "fish-sticks" and imagined a stalker named "Brian" (who looked a lot like Justin Bieber in my head) was madly in love with us. We also had misadventures, including the time we found a moldy grocery store cookie in "the buscrack." We were BBFFs (Best Bus Friends Forever). However, K lived in town, and she only rode in the mornings.

I made another friend to keep me company during afternoon rides. One day, I flaunted a picture I drew of a zebra donning a rainbow afro. A second-grader told me I was a bad drawer, to which a girl named "J" (who was in *fourth-grade*) said, "I bet she's a better drawer than you." From then on, I sat with J. She was the first stop on the route, so we didn't have long, but we colored pictures of Hello Kitty together. I was determined to prove my status as a good drawer. We fabricated dynamic plots and characters out of crayons.

J got an iPod for her birthday. She lost interest in crayons and Hello Kitty coloring pages. Even then, I knew when people wanted to be left alone, and so alone I left her. I also lost K, who moved to a nearby town, one not on my bus route. We said our goodbyes, exchanged poorly made au revoir gifts, and promised to always be BBFFs. She grew up, and we grew apart, but the stories we made together stuck with me like songs from Busdriver Rick's favorite radio station.

The time I had to myself was spent flipping through *Eyewitness Encyclopedias*. My favorite subjects were space, weather, and horses. I hid my choice volumes at the backs of library shelves, behind other books, so nobody could take them, as if elementary students leisurely thumb through volumes of research material. I was not aware of the difference between fiction and non-fiction. I still struggled with the alphabet, after all. Did I read the encyclopedias? No. Did my mom read them to me? Sometimes, bless her heart. I examined the books' pictures on the bus, thinking I was reading, just like Mom. In truth, I simply imagined what the squiggles and lines meant based on the images beside them. I remember graphics of red dwarf stars and black holes warping blankets of space, categories of clouds, tornadoes and hurricanes, and most of all, charts of horse breeds. From this bank of image-based knowledge, I told myself stories of Clydesdales surviving hurricanes on the sun. It didn't have to make sense.

In first-grade, I got glasses. I was dying to have glasses in kindergarten because both K and J wore them. I wanted them so badly that I pretended to believe K's purple coat was brown like the sky. However, it was not until I sounded out "dress" on the white board and said

“cheese” instead, that my parents discovered I was the first of their children to fall to nearsightedness. It was inevitable, seeing (haha) as they both own glasses thick as a pencil. I was overjoyed. While I sat in the examination chair, squinting at a blurred “E,” my optometrist asked if I was a reader. “Nearsighted kids are usually bookworms,” he said. I claimed the title with pride. When I wore my glasses to school for the first time, something clicked. I clearly saw *words* on the whiteboard instead of fuzzy markings. Reading became simpler.

From then on, I read two hours every day on the bus. Even though I wasn’t a fast reader and certainly never won awards for my literacy interpretation, I feasted on books because my optometrist said I was a bookworm. The difficulty of the books I read grew along with my eye prescription. In first-grade, I only read *Henry and Mudge*. My second-grade teacher pushed me to read more diverse picture books. I devoured *Junie B. Jones* and *The Magic Treehouse* in grade three, even though black and white sketches within the pages were sparse. By that time, my teachers encouraged me to write short stories and help with the school newspaper. I burned through *The Boxcar Children* and *Geronimo Stilton*, and guzzled every *Who Was?* biography in the library in fourth and fifth-grade. In my last year of elementary, I was reading *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, *The Hunger Games*, and Irene Hunt historical fiction. I shared stories about magic herons and cloud aliens brimming with conflict.

On the bus, I continued to make friends and play games with them throughout elementary. We were airplane racers who only ate low-fat chocolate, or mutated zoo animals on the run from a mad scientist. However, there comes a time when every child is weaned from toys and games of pretend, and begins to play in other ways instead. In Junior High, I made a new BBFF. “A” and I rode together, knees pressed into the adjacent seat, noses in books. She loved sci-fi, and I followed suit. This introduction to worlds and characters who enabled my imagination to go bananas once again was life-changing. I borrow from A’s personal library to this day. There are a dozen of her novels on my shelf I should probably return soon. My hope is,

one day, I can share my own worlds and characters with her, as a thank you for being my BBBFF. Best Bookish Bus Friend Forever.

As my friends got driver's licenses, I became embarrassed that I still rode the bus. Then came my sixteenth birthday. For several months, I didn't miss the jarring bumps, dust that poured through the windows, and crazy loud children playing crazy loud games of pretend.

Then I hit a deer. Dang thing sprinted out of a cornfield, right in front of me. I nearly totaled Yucky the Yukon. I whined to Dad over the phone about not having a way home after school. His response? "I guess you'll just have to ride the bus."

The first thing I did when I sat in a duct-taped seat that afternoon was pure habit. I put my knees on the seat in front of me and retrieved a book from my backpack. I opened it, but didn't read. Instead, I reminisced. For an hour, I bathed in school bus nostalgia. And dust.

Reading is a form of play. I played with stories before I knew how to read, and once I learned, I realized words themselves were playing. Authors play with strangers through story, just as I made friends out of strangers in my youth. Even encyclopedias play, if you let your imagination loose. I've never outgrown play and neither have you. Your methods of playing have only adapted and refined themselves. All these years later, I still desire to play, which is why I read and write. The school bus was fundamental to the development of my literacy skills. It also granted me 17,850 hours to fall in love with the realm of story.