

More Than A Thousand Words
1st Place Stuckey Contest Winner
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They say that a picture is worth a thousand words, but who could put such value on *any* combination of words like that? It is true that every word, every sentence, every story, is simply a rearrangement of twenty-six different letters in different combinations; it is also true that a picture can capture a single moment for eternity with the simple click of a button.

What a picture cannot do is capture an emotion.

Emotions are internal and ever-changing based on experiences and the passing of time. An exultant, exceedingly drunk twenty-year-old may get a tattoo in the excitement of the moment, yet wake up the following morning and view that tattoo with regret. The anger that pushes two people to an argument may be reflected upon in despair after an accident leaves one comatose in the hospital.

A picture can only capture the surface of any one moment. A person who was there at the creation of the picture may again experience the emotions they felt at that time; however, to an outsider, it is just another moment that they have no connection to and can overlook. A picture is stagnant; each person who looks upon the picture can see the exact same things in the exact same way. Very few pictures can capture a heart as easily as it can capture a moment.

That is not the case with a book.

A book is as limitless as the bounds of the reader's imagination. Anything that can be dreamt can be created within a book; unconfined by the bounds of technology, a good book can take an imaginative reader where no man has gone before. The same story can be seen a million different ways depending on how the person imagines it. Every word can be interpreted a different way, giving each individual a customized experience. It is a medium for storytelling that has no equal.

In what other way can a storyteller refine and detail the contents of their imagination so deeply? In what other way can a person pour the very essence of themselves into their work than through the drying ink on a page? How else can a person gain the wisdom of a thousand lives as if they had experienced everything themselves? A thousand dreams and joys and sorrows can be lived and loved and lost in the hours it takes to devour a book.

Reading is much more than simply words on a page or an enjoyable story. Each book, no matter how fantastical, has underlying truths waiting to be learned. *Harry Potter* taught me the importance of friendship, loyalty, and trust. *Red Rising* taught me that people are more than the labels we put on them, and each person should be given a chance to show who they really are. *The Martian* showed me what humanity can do when it comes together for a common purpose rather than letting borders define our differences. Brandon Sanderson's books taught me what it means to stand up for what is right no matter the cost.

No two people will be affected by a book in the same way, though. While some people devour classics like fine cuisine, I have to struggle my way through each course, trying to figure out what the heck is happening on each plate before I come to a hesitant understanding. On the other hand, I could read a thousand fantasy and science fiction books while others are still trying to figure out how an envelope equates space travel.

No two people will experience a book the same, nor will they find the same meaning in it. The value placed on a moment and on the written word are dependent on the audience. Books can help people cope with tragedies by seeing their same fears and doubts reflected in the characters of books. Books show us that no matter how we feel about our own lives, we are never alone in those feelings; there is always someone else who has to go through that struggle, and through reading it is easier to understand and deal with it. Knowing that I am not alone in my feelings and fears makes it easier to get through life's daily struggles, and I have come to rely on the knowledge that I can always turn to books for encouragement when I am struggling.

I didn't always have that comfort, though. There was a time before books were the foundation of my life. My parents had gotten a divorce when I was six, and I was left reeling and slipping on an ever shifting ground even years later. I had moved several times, and my closest friends had moved the times I had stayed. I changed schools like I changed clothes. I had a few friends, but I felt so alone. Lost. I wondered how long it would be until they left me, too.

Changing schools so frequently had left me behind my peers, and I struggled to read even the shortest of books or complete the easiest of homework assignments. I wanted so badly to give up and go play, but my father made me sit at the table until my assignments were done each night. Most days, I didn't leave the table until it was time for bed. I was absolutely miserable.

Two of my friends, both very intelligent for our age, were always talking about their favorite series. Like our teacher that year, they absolutely adored the series, and they were always making references I didn't understand. Their excitement was infectious, and I figured anything they praised so highly must be good. I decided to check out a copy of Harry Potter, determined to get through it so I wouldn't feel left out.

By the time I finished the book, I was reading for an entirely different reason.

I found something magical in those pages, something that sparked my imagination. Where once I had only seen words printed on a page, I saw the story as if it was a movie playing in my mind. Where once I had viewed reading as a form of punishment, I saw gateways into worlds that I could never imagine on my own.

Somehow, within the pages of books, I found everything I had longed for in my own life. I found compassion and trust; I found friendship and loyalty; I found bravery and courage. I found that I could be a wizard and a gunslinger and a demigod and an astronaut. I found love that could shatter nations, and I felt pain that could cripple kings. For every moment of courage, I found a moment of fear. For every moment of strength, I found unbearable weakness.

I slowly saw some of the world outside the little bubble of my life, and it wasn't until then that I could see myself clearly. I saw pieces of myself echoed in the characters of books. However, where I had seen flaws and scars in myself, these characters had seen the potential for strength. As I found myself through the pages of books, I understood that I couldn't be as broken and scarred as I had always feared, because if I labeled myself that way, I would have to label my heroes, who I had found myself in, just as terrible as I was.

The problem was that I could never do that; I knew their value as clearly as I knew the sun would rise each morning. If I couldn't change how I saw them, though, I would have to change how I saw myself. I realized, as I watched characters both rise spectacularly and fail awesomely, that I was not a failure just because I wasn't perfect. I came to realize that making mistakes is how we learn, not a source of shame.

I realized that I wasn't perfect, and that was okay.

Something clicked within me, and suddenly I didn't have to disguise who I was. I could be goofy and loud and silly and ridiculous; I could laugh and cry and show the truth of who I am inside because I know that the people worth keeping around wouldn't care. For the first time in a long time, I found happiness in my life.

If I placed a picture of the girl I was before I found reading beside a picture of the girl I became through reading, only the physical effects of time would be visible. No picture could depict the hope in my eyes or the dreams in my heart, stronger and clearer than ever before. No picture could capture how the light in my soul brightened, how the hope had set my soul afire, and how joy had infiltrated every fiber of my being. Others may see books as a simple combination of words, but I know better. Books change lives; I know, because of the immense impact they have had on my own life.