

Books as Bridges
2nd Place Stuckey Contest Winner
Grace Whitaker
Harrisburg High School
Harrisburg, MO.

Some kids carry around stuffed animals or security blankets. Others find comfort in a certain lullabye. Me? I found solace between the pages of books. Every night before bed, my parents would read to me. What started off with *Goodnight Moon* and *Where the Wild Things Are* quickly evolved into *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* and *The Hobbit*. Eventually, I was old enough to read to myself, and, after the exchange of “goodnights” and “I love you,” I would grab a flashlight and read on, sequestered under the covers of my bed. I couldn’t get enough. If I found a book I *really* like, I would read and reread, wrapping myself in the beautiful, familiar words, as though they were a soft, cozy blanket. I loved how those books promised both consistency and surprise. Even though I know every turn of the plot, I never ceased to notice some new detail.

No matter what was going on in my life, I knew I could always retreat to the fantasy worlds of my books. Those stories had unfailingly happy endings, and it gave me hope that “story” would end happily, too. This became especially true when I was about eleven years old.

At the time I was living in Seattle, Washington. In the same way that my favorite books felt comfortable and familiar, the city of Seattle made me feel as though I belonged. It was my home – when I grew up, where all of my friends were, where most of my memories originated.

One night, I overheard my dad talking to my aunt on the phone, discussing our imminent move to Missouri at the beginning of the summer. I didn’t want to move to Missouri – the word itself sounded like *misery*. To me, it was just another inconsequential Midwestern state, like Iowa, Illinois and Kansas. Leaving wonderful Washington State for mundane Missouri felt like trading a crisp, new, hardcover copy of *A Wrinkle in Time*, one of my all-time favorite books, for a waterlogged, outdated edition of *Reader’s Digest*. However, I did not call the shots in our family, so my indignance was somewhat pointless.

We moved, right on schedule. Though I thought I had boxed up everything I needed, I knew I had left something intangible behind: my confidence and sense of belonging. It was as if I were a book and, Seattle, an important chapter in my life, had been ripped out. Without it, my story just didn’t make sense. So, here I was, a girl from the city, no friends within 1,500 miles, 20 minutes from the nearest Walmart, living in a big empty-feeling house in a tiny town (population 281), felling all-together lonely.

I don’t mean to overdramatize the situation or make anyone feel sorry for me. Of course, I still had my family, whom I love very much. But I will say, no matter how great my family is, I felt pretty pathetic when I turned twelve, and they were the only guests at my birthday party. They were basically obligated to come.

The birthday party was just a part of the bigger, lonelier picture that was my first summer in Missouri. Everything around me seemed so foreign and opposite to my West Coast life. So, naturally, I retreated to settings that I knew well: the garish, glittering streets of the Capitol in Panem, the cozy hobbit-holes of the Shire, 20,000 leagues below sea-level in Captain Nemo’s submarine. When I read, I wasn’t thinking about how I could feel my long-distance friendships fading away, or how I would enter school in the fall as “the new kid” or how many more snakes there were in Missouri than in Washington. I wasn’t thinking about myself at all, actually. I could focus on the characters and their problems instead of me and my own worries.

That “worked” for a while, but somewhere along the way, I realized that that really wasn’t good enough. What would my favorite characters do if they found themselves in my lonely situation? Certainly not hide away in their rooms and block out their problems by reading. If I wanted to change my situation, I would have to take action.

School would start soon, and it was time for a plot twist. In the best books, all heroes have a moment when things look bleak and they’ve lost hope. And *that* is the moment just before things start to get better: the turning point.

It was time that I began to emulate the heroes of my books. *The Hunger Games* was my primary read for that summer, so, naturally, I looked to Katniss Everdeen first. She was taken away from her home in District 12, just like I was taken from Seattle. She was thrust into an environment very different from her own. She was put into the games with several other teenagers and had to form alliances. Eventually, she emerged the victor.

Obviously, I wasn’t involved in a passionate, star-crossed romance, fighting for my life, or battling against the government, so, all things considered, I had it a lot easier than Katniss. I was just looking for some sixth grade “allies” and I knew to do that I would have to put on a brave face and step out of my comfort zone, just like Katniss. If at first I was a little nervous or intimidated, that was ok. I just need to show people who I was and win them over – just like how Katniss won over the people of the Capitol. I could do this.

The first day of school came, and I was ready. I stepped through the door of the classroom, trying to be as confident as Katniss in her flaming, fiery dress. I held the bravery, perseverance and conviction she demonstrated close to my heart and thought of everything she overcame when I needed a little motivation. I guess “the odds were in my favor” because, although it was an adjustment, I found friends and ended up having a surprisingly great school year.

In *The Hunger Games* and so many other books, I have seen paragons of the person I want to be. No character is perfect, of course, but they’ve each shown me how to succeed in the face of difficult circumstances, devastating odds or their own mistakes. Those examples have helped me countless times in life, in the past and today. It’s a big part of the reason that I think reading is so important, not just for myself, but for everyone.

In society, not all kids have a good role model in their life. Not everyone has someone in their life who understands what they’re going through. But through books, everyone has access to a role model. They’re able to read about a character facing the same trials that they themselves are facing and not feel so isolated or anomalous. It’s estimated that there are over 130 million books in the world, each with an important story to tell, and the story speaks differently to every person who reads it. Whatever an individual is going through, there is a book to help them through it.

In sixth grade, the book that helped me was *The Hunger Games*, but more recently, books like *Unwind* and *Scythe* by Neal Shusterman, *All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven, and *Shiver* by Maggie Stiefvater inspire me. In one way or another, they’ve all challenged me by making me question my own ideas, pushing me to demand more of myself, or drawing me attention to social issues.

Today, I would no longer consider books a security object. This is not because I have outgrown them, like children do with other security objects. It’s actually quite the opposite. As I’ve gotten older, I’ve realized the potential of books not just to make up comfortable but to make us *more*: They expand our thinking, teach us important lessons, and open our eyes to new worlds.

An author and Baptist preacher, Joseph Fort Newton once declared, “Men build too many walls and not enough bridges.” When I was younger, my books were like walls. They made me feel safe inside, but I wasn’t climbing them. I wasn’t using them to grow or venture out into the real world. No, I think of books as bridges. They take me places. They have carried me from childhood to adulthood. They have helped me travel through hard times and into new beginnings. They have the potential to transform all of our lives from ordinary and extraordinary. I will never stop reading and can’t wait to see what adventures these “bridges” lead me to next.