

# Books as Signposts in Our Life

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As I lay there in bed, I tried to think back as far as I could, exercising my memory as if it were a flabby muscle. Pictures spindled across the photo album of my brain. I leaned forward and squinted my closed eyes trying to decipher them. Book jackets. *Freddy the Pig*, *Barnyard Detective*. *Charlotte's Web*. *Little House on the Prairie* with the Garth Williams' illustrations. *Little Women*—I

actually saw the chapter illustration where Jo peers into Beth's trunk and is overcome by grief. Piles and piles of Nancy Drew mysteries, and sitting on the back porch two-seat rocker with my legs dangling over the armrest and a glass of sweetened ice tea sweating on a small stand near by. Stories were intertwined with my life story. Books served as the chronological markers of my personal history.

The Newbery shelf at the local library where I felt as if I were reaching into a crock of gold and pulling out rainbows—I read them all beginning with Hendrik Van Loon's *The Story of Man*. I remember falling asleep at night beneath a coverlet of books, and characters swirling around me like a shadow box show. As a teenager I stayed up all night reading *Here I Stay* by Elizabeth Coatsworth, about a Colonial girl who chooses to live alone when all her neighbors migrate west, abandoning their small village in Maine. Reading this coming-of-age story. I left my childhood behind and crossed over into becoming a woman book-aholic. It is the type of book seldom read these days where the rise and denouement are all within the main character, and very little action takes place. Instead of me reading the book, it felt like it was reading me. I wondered at how something as abstract as words could be so intimate. I lost myself inside books, becoming another person and living vicariously through the characters.



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In high school I fell in love with *Jane Eyre*, another solitary narrator, nearly crushed by the pressures of a caste-like hierarchy filled with dehumanizing adults. During the Cold War everything seemed reduced to a race, a contest between the Soviet Union and the USA. Good versus Evil. As an adolescent I felt the tension deeply, hoping to some day defeat the Superpowers, whomever they may be. During this pubescent period, I also fell in love with the notion of undying love. From across shrouded heaths and misty moors, I fell asleep dreaming of *Wuthering Heights* and a handsome mystery man calling my name.



One summer on a vacation with my parents to a cottage at Houghton Lake, I spent the entire time reading. I forgot my bathing suit but remembered to bring a dozen novels. I believe it was also the summer I discovered the poems of Emily Dickinson and her twitchy punctuation. She gave me hope that some day I could be a writer. I mean, what did she know—she never left her room.

In college I read *Silent Spring*, *Catch-22*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Catcher in the Rye* and was shaken to my core. I had never before read anything like them. The themes disturbed me, got under my skin, and lived in my mind for months after I'd finished them. I was constantly revisiting the characters, applying new overlays to the narratives while at the same time trying to make sense of the small planet upon which I lived. These books were pivotal, hitting me at a time in my life when anything could happen. If literature was a marker in my own personal history, then some books were milestones.

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Later, after graduating from college, I vacillated between smut and serious literature—some being more equal than others. I was in my late twenties when I stumbled upon the short stories of Flannery O'Connor. She was a writer from the American South, a region dominated by writers with such fantastic first names as Eudora, Harper, Walker, and Shelby, and of course, Flannery. For a short time I contemplated changing my name to Mason. Flannery wrote short stories populated by misfits, self-righteous racists, tattooed Bible salesmen, and one-legged agnostics. She wrote in a style referred to as the grotesque, where only the craziest, most mixed up people were reliable enough to tell the truth (even as Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* climbed up on top of his car and declared there was no real truth). I experimented with the grotesque, penning a story about a young woman married to a fundamentalist preacher who yearned to break out of the rigid landscape of her life. One day while cleaning out the deep fryers at the diner where she worked as a waitress/short order cook, she slipped and fell, the hot oil melting her skin down to the bone. As she lay bedridden, numb from pain and the painkillers, scattered hallucinatory visions came to her, allowing her to escape her oppressive marriage and legalistic church upbringing. Upon rereading it a few years later, I was embarrassed by my unbridled emulation of O'Connor.

According to Flannery O'Connor, by a young age we have emotionally already what it takes to be a writer:

*Anybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days.*

—Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*

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