

Litanies of a Literature Lover, or Confessions of a Young Adult Reader

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Read—v. read, reading, reads—1. to examine and grasp the meaning of (written or printed characters, words, or sentences). 2. to interpret the nature or meaning of through close examination or observation. In the thesaurus, read can be changed to apprehend, understand, construe, comprehend, discern, perceive, make meaning of, translate, analyze, and pore over. Of all these various meanings and synonyms, I love the meaning “to pore over.” I have been known to sit and pore over a book for hours. It doesn’t matter if the book is school related or not, I’m happy just as long as I’m reading. My passion is reading. I love to read, anything and anywhere. Ever since I can remember, I’ve had a book in my hand. I’m seventeen now and a senior in high school. When I’m not reading for course requirements, I read what I like. I’ve loved books that have taken me on some glorious adventure. The varieties have been and continue to be endless.

I truly believe that the major influences on how well and how often a child reads is the parent and the teacher. If a child is read to nightly, as I was by my mother, then that child will take a healthy interest in books. And up until the time I reached fourth grade, my teachers always had scheduled story reading days. In second grade, we were faithfully read to. My classmates and I had books read to us written by Carolyn Haywood, such as *Little Eddie*, *Eddie’s Menagerie*, *B Is For Betsy*, and *Betsy’s Little Star*. We thrilled to the books of Robert McCloskey. *Homer Price*

and *Centerburg Tales* are still unforgettable to me. For several years after second grade, I got *The Canterbury Tales* and *Centerburg Tales* confused with each other. Geoffrey Chaucer must have rolled over in his grave several times. My third grade class enjoyed such books as *The BFG*, *James and the Giant Peach*, *Bunnicula*, and *The Phantom Tollbooth*. Later, when these story sessions had stopped, I remember eagerly awaiting the S.S.R. (Silent Sustained Reading) periods in the school day. I was more than content to read any book of my choice on my own.

Between second and fifth grade, favorite authors of mine included Beverly Cleary, Lois Lowry, Lois Duncan, and Judy Blume. My first love was definitely Beverly Cleary. Her Ramona books were a way for me to forget about me, and to step into the shoes of another little girl my age. To me, Ramona Quimby was a real kid with real problems. She had to deal with her older sister, Beezus, not to mention a mean after-school babysitter. Then there was always the problem of not getting enough attention from her family. Ramona had it rough. Beverly Cleary told me about this child's problems and adventures with a definite comic flair, and I loved everything she wrote. When I had watched a horror movie, which I loved doing, and couldn't sleep, I whipped out a Ramona book. When I wanted to laugh, Ramona was there. But don't think for a minute that the Ramona collection was the only work of Beverly Cleary's that I read. Before I moved from the Cleary phase, I had gone through thirteen of her books.

Another series that I faithfully read was the brainchild of Lois Lowry, none other than Anastasia Krupnik. The first thing I noticed about this character was her name. The names Anastasia and Krupnik certainly make for an interesting combination. The character herself has the same opinion and spends the entire book, *Anastasia Krupnik*, contemplating her name, her parents, and life in general. To make matters more interesting, her parents announce that after ten years they're having another child. What adolescent could ask for anything more? After reading the first of the Anastasia books, I was hooked. I couldn't get enough of the character and snatched up one book after another. Now, although I've long since left my Anastasia phase, occasionally I see a book about her that I haven't read and get this feeling that I'm missing out on something wonderful. Because I loved Anastasia Krupnik so much, I read other books by Lois Lowry, in some cases more than once or twice. I loved *A Summer to Die*. I

devoured *Find a Stranger, Say Goodbye*. I thought that *Switch-around* was sensational.

A third favorite author of mine (because good things come in threes) was Judy Blume. *Superfudge* was the first Judy Blume book that I read, and by the second page I was laughing hysterically. Thus, began my love affair with Judy Blume books. Aside from *Superfudge*; *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*; *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*, *Then Again, Maybe I Won't*; and *Otherwise; Known As Sheila the Great* were all read and loved by me.

By the time I reached fifth grade, I had decided it was time for me, as an African American, to dip into the world of African American literature. I figured that since it was never assigned or discussed in school, I would have to read it on my own. Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*; *Song of the Trees*, and *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* were books I read and wrote book reports on. I also made an attempt to read Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, but was forced to stop due to parental pressure (my mother believed that ten was too young to read this particular piece of literature). Fifth grade also found me exploring the realms of young adult literature. Years later, *Sorrow's Kitchen*, a biography of Zora Neale Hurston by Mary Lyons was included on my reading list.

Up until this point I had been reading young adult literature sporadically, beginning with Francine Pascal's *Sweet Valley High* series in third grade. These books star the dazzling identical twins, Elizabeth and Jessica Wakefield. Elizabeth is smart, beautiful, and studious. She will do anything for anyone in need. On the other hand, Jessica is beautiful, boy crazy, adventurous, con-niving, and comes and goes as she pleases. The twins have a good looking older brother, Steven, as well as wonderful parents. In short, they are all living a basically utopian life in sun drenched southern California. I bought approximately thirty-five to forty of these books. My goal was to have possession of all one hundred or so that were then in existence. I lasted through about twenty-six. At the time, I believed these books were both romantic and realistic. I'm sorry to say this, but occasionally I even wondered what it would be like to have a twin sister and to live the marvelous lives they lived. Fortunately, I finally came to the opinion that these books lacked substance quite sometime before I actually stopped reading them. Nevertheless, I was determined to reach my goal of reading them all.

Because I had always been a fan of horror and thrillers, Lois

Duncan fit in nicely with my collection of authors. *Summer of Fear* is the quintessential tale of unwanted house guests. In this case, the heroine's cousin stays for the summer and turns out to be a bad witch (as opposed to a good witch, such as Glinda, the Good Witch of the East). *Killing Mr. Griffin* is a story that many high school students may fantasize about, if only briefly. For all you high school students, be honest— hasn't killing your most hated teacher crossed your mind? In this book, the students do more than just think about it. *I Know What You Did Last Summer* is a book that was written in the style of a nightmare that never ends. In the book, several teens are directly involved in a hit-and-run car accident and try to keep it a secret. Months later, they are threatened by an unknown person who apparently knows about the accident. *Down a Dark Hall* is a book that could make any young adult think twice before going off to boarding school.

Along with Lois Duncan, Christopher Pike was on my list of favorite writers of horror. *Spellbound* was the first book of his that I read. It really scared me, most likely because I was able to see the scenes so vividly in my head. While this happens with almost all the books I read, the imagery is formed more clearly in some than in others. If the writing is particularly descriptive, a clear picture is formed. This is the style of writing I found in Pike's writing. Most of the time, I was scared to death reading his books.

My reading of *Spellbound* sparked the beginning of a beautiful relationship. I read *Slumber Party* and for years thought of that book when I went to sleepovers. *Chain Letter* was a book that kept me eagerly turning pages, waiting to see how long those teenagers would be terrorized. The last book I read by Pike was *Gimme A Kiss*. It was from this book that I learned what a molotov cocktail is. One was used in an attempt to kill the heroine. This was heavy reading! I did start *Remember Me*, having been attracted by its cover. The cover was luridly illustrated with a girl's body sprawled out on the sidewalk to which she had just been hurled. This was a little too much. It was time to move on.

Two of the last young adult horror books I read were *The Seance* and *The Other Side of Dark* by Joan Lowery Nixon. In the first book, when several young people in a small town get together to have a seance, events more horrifying than they could have imagined occur. *The Other Side of Dark* deals with a girl who wakes up from a coma to find that years have passed

and that the person who tried to kill her is still at large. Both were satisfyingly haunting.

The works of Cynthia Voigt came into my life at age eleven. I read *Homecoming* for a book report. *Homecoming* was heart wrenching. Several children, all siblings, are abandoned by their mother in a shopping center parking lot. After hours of waiting for her return, they realize that she isn't coming back, thus beginning a very long walk to the only person who might take them in. I liked this book so much that I got my mom to read it. Later, I read *Dacey's Song*, *Homecoming's* sequel.

Sometimes I read books that were given to me as gifts and not because I chose them. This was the case when I became involved with the books of Paul Zindel. *The Pigman* left me horribly depressed. It is a story about two teenagers who befriend a lonely old man who lives alone in a large house. The book covers everything from love and friendship to death and betrayal. The Pigman himself dies at the end of the story. *The Pigman* had a sequel, *The Pigman's Legacy*. I began reading it, but never finished, thinking that it too would be sad. But this didn't stop me from reading Zindel altogether. *I Never Loved Your Mind* is a very funny book in its own unique way. I read it more than once. It put an interesting twist on teenage romance. The same is true for *Pardon Me, You're Stepping on my Eyeball*. I suppose I needed laughter more than I needed sadness at this time in my life.

As I got older, I found myself reading less upbeat books and switching to ones with more sobering topics. During this period, I stumbled upon Norma Klein. *Give Me One Good Reason* was a book I had seen in a bookstore, forgotten about, and then decided I just had to read. The book is about a financially stable, single woman who has a career and a basically good life. However, she decides that the one thing missing from her life is a child. She decides to have one on her own and wants to know one good reason why she shouldn't. The book follows the course of her pregnancy and ends with the birth of her son.

Sunshine was the second and last Norma Klein book I read. It is a true story about a young mother who is diagnosed with incurable cancer. She spends the last few months of her life compiling a tape as a way to say goodbye to her baby. Needless to say, I was not made too happy by reading this book. This might be the reason that I read no more Norma Klein.

The *Anne of Green Gables* chronicles were a birthday gift to me

one year. I enjoyed the first of the series, *Anne of Green Gables*, and thought the second, *Anne of Avonlea*, was an interesting sequel. However, I never got past the second book in that series. Maybe the fact that I felt unable to identify with Anne explains why I quickly lost interest in her. I decided to read other books by L. M. Montgomery. I chose *Emily of New Moon*. Since it was a quick and good read, I moved on to *Emily Climbs*. Once again, I couldn't finish this second book. I decided to leave L. M. Montgomery forever. I just could not relate to the characters and the situations.

While still in elementary school, I began to stray from young adult literature and move into adult literature. I was finding it hard to relate to the characters, the plots, and the settings in books for young adults. I felt removed from that fare. I yearned for something different. But before I finally left that literature, I made one last stab at it. Ever since I could remember, *Cracker Jackson* by Betsy Byars had sat in the Wyoming School library ready to read, but prohibited to those students below the sixth grade. It actually had a little sign on its cover saying, **YOU MUST BE IN SIXTH GRADE TO CHECK OUT THIS BOOK**. The mere thought that the book had been censored made me desperate to read it. I vowed to read *Cracker Jackson* the second I became a sixth grader. I waited years to read it and expected blood, gore, and sex on every page. Instead, the book was about spousal abuse. This didn't seem to me to be a topic that needed to be censored. The book managed to be both informative and disappointing at the same time.

Finally, I read two books which were written about the African American experience. *Iggie's House* by my old favorite author Judy Blume is about a black family that moves into a white neighborhood. The book describes how the family is accepted by their new neighbors. Although not thoroughly captivated by the book, I could relate to it because I live in a predominately white neighborhood, as well as in a predominately white town. *Freedom Crossing* by Margaret Goff-Clark is about a young white girl who helps a young runaway slave to freedom. The book was interesting, and I liked, but didn't love it. But by the time I had finished reading these books I was already moving on up to the big leagues.

I was now reading books not only written by, but for adults. The book that actually started me on this path was *The Nurse's Story* by Carol Gino. I think what I liked most about it was its

graphic and gory detail about disease and injury. This kind of book led me naturally to the next level. For years an uncle of mine had several Stephen King books on clear display in a bookcase in his family room. For years I tried reading one when my family came to visit, but there was always something distracting going on. Rarely was I able to read more than a few pages. Eventually and much to my surprise, my uncle gave me all of his Stephen King books. Included in the collection was the hard cover copy of *It*. The book in its entirety was over one thousand one hundred pages long. I had never tackled such a long book before. But tackle it I did.

I basically became the talk of the fifth grade, as I carried that book to and from school every day, reading it whenever I could. The other kids would say, "There goes Kim with her Stephen King book." Soon I began to see them come to school with King books. I was, for a very brief moment, a trendsetter. After I read *It*, other King books followed. *The Dark Half*, *Pet Sematary*, and *Thinner* were all much to my liking. Fairly recently, however, I've sworn off of King because more and more his books involve a great deal of cruelty to animals, and I love animals of all kinds. *Needful Things* was the book that finally pushed me over the edge. I was never able to finish it. My fellow students, however, still seem to be reading the master of the macabre with gusto.

Don't think that all I read at this time was fiction. I also read non-fiction. My favorites were on the mysterious and the disconcerting. I was most interested in books on the Loch Ness monster. My elementary school library had only two books on "Nessie," but this in no way stopped me. I merely read the same two books over and over. How neat, I thought, that an actual monster possibly lived in the murky depths of the Loch. The dark, freezing, unfathomable depths of the Loch, the old castle overlooking the it, and the reported sightings of the monster all made Scotland seem like the ideal country to visit.

I loved to read "true" ghost stories, books about witches, and those about natural disasters. But by now, I definitely needed a change—a bit of fluff. Thus, 1991 began the age of the romance novel for me. I actually went to the bookstore and stood in the romance novels section for a full fifteen minutes, trying to find the perfect book to feast my eyes on. There were such interesting authors: Shirl Henke, Amanda Quick, and Johanna Lindsey. It was all so very exciting. Romance novels have classic lines in them like, "Her voluptuous breasts heaved as her blood raced,

and she arched her back to receive his kiss." I finally chose a Johanna Lindsey book, entitled *Savage Thunder*. Lindsey specializes in historical romances, and this particular one is about a rough and rugged western outlaw and the upper class woman whose heart he eventually wins. Although I gave up romance novels soon after this, I must have subconsciously liked the genre, because about a year later I was back in the romance section looking for another book. It was right before midterm exams, and I needed to unwind. Johanna Lindsey became my favorite romance novelist. In fact, she is the only romance novelist I've read.

Although it began with *Savage Thunder*, my collection increased significantly after that. *Prisoner of my Desire* is probably my favorite. It tells a tale set in feudal England. The heroine, Rowena, is of royal blood, but is forced by her evil stepbrother to bear an heir and if she doesn't, he will have her mother killed. Rowena does the logical thing. She has her servants capture a serf, whom she rapes, apologizing the entire time. The serf is released after his forced service to her, and Rowena becomes pregnant. The serf, however, turns out to be a knight who is very, very angry at her. He, in turn, captures her and makes her his slave. After many trials and tribulations, they fall in love, and Rowena bears their child. What adventure! What romance! The other Lindsey books I've read and gotten a great kick out of reading are *A Gentle Feuding*, *Heart of Thunder*, *Tender is the Storm*, and *Love Only Once*. After my then best friend became interested in Lindsey's books, the novelty wore off.

While it may seem that I've read romances for a long time, the phase only lasted for a year. One day I abandoned Johanna Lindsey, just abandoned her, and stepped up to Jackie Collins. I think her last name had something to do with my fascination. Jackie Collins has never been classified as a full-fledged romance novelist. Since she is found in the "plain" fiction section, I felt more respectable. Collins' books have a lot of sex in them, but her books are not formulaic in the same way that the romance novels are. Books such as *Hollywood Wives*, *Sinners*, *Rock Star*, *The World is Full of Married Men*, and *Lovers and Gamblers* have many different characters, all of them being fairly well developed, physically, emotionally, and sexually. Yet, if you've read one, you've read them all. Each falls into a certain pattern that is not difficult to predict. Alas, I haven't read a Jackie Collins book in a year. But I am always open to reading

any new Collins book that seems interesting.

I believe that mystery loves company. I love a good mystery. It all began in elementary school with the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series, and my interest in mysteries has never left me. Currently, all of the authors I have read regularly are women. I hadn't exactly planned that my favorite authors would be women, but I'm definitely not complaining.

Sara Paretsky—V. I. Warshawski—Chicago—private investigator—heaven! Out of all the mystery series and all the investigators and all the mystery writers, Sara Paretsky is my favorite author, and V. I. Warshawski is my favorite female private investigator, brainchild of Paretsky. I was prompted to read the V. I. Warshawski series after seeing the movie starring Kathleen Turner. Although the movie was not a huge success, it did give me great pleasure. For me, Kathleen Turner was perfect as Warshawski. She played her the way I thought she should be played. Warshawski is intellectual, extremely independent, with a very fashionable wardrobe. What's more, she is tough as nails. Who could ask for anything more? I certainly couldn't.

After the movie was over, I didn't want the story to end, so I rushed out and bought the first book in the V. I. Warshawski series. I now think that it was one of the best purchases I have ever made. *Indemnity Only* is the name of that book. It was rapidly followed by over six more. After reading the last and most recent book, *Tunnel Vision*, I've been experiencing withdrawal symptoms. I can't wait for Paretsky's next book.

The second mystery writer I read was none other than Dame Agatha Christie. However, I am very particular about which Christie books I read. I've always stuck strictly to Hercule Poirot. I began reading his series after becoming addicted to the *Mystery!* television series on PBS, starring David Suchet. His Poirot is so perfect. Out of all the actors who have played Poirot, I like Suchet the best. Now when I read any Poirot mystery, I always envision Suchet as Poirot. I can't envision any other Poirot.

The third female mystery writer I have discovered is Lynda LaPlante, and I've just done that recently. *Prime Suspect* is the only book of hers that I've read. The television series that began my fascination with Jane Tennison, the protagonist in the show, was actually three separate programs, *Prime Suspect*, *Prime Suspect 2*, and *Prime Suspect 3*. Only the first *Prime Suspect* is in book form to my knowledge. My interest in this book and in the

British police officer, Jane Tennison, flow naturally from my seeing the television series.

Beginning in 1991, Helen Mirren has played the role of Detective Chief Inspector Jane Tennison. In the first of the three programs filmed so far, Tennison is up against a myriad of incredible obstacles, including extremely sexist and uncooperative colleagues, an impossible murder case, and a chaotic personal life. Mirren played the role to such perfection that I've watched some of her scenes so often that I have memorized whole segments of dialogue. It was due to Mirren's performance that I decided to read the actual book. Needless to say, I loved it.

After reading about my interest in mysteries, it is obvious that movies or television have played a role in what I read. But plays have also played a role. Several years ago I saw the Broadway play *Gypsy*, starring Tyne Daly as Mama Rose. I was so impressed that I ran to the library and got everything I could find on Gypsy Rose Lee. I read *Gypsy, A Memoir*, the work that made the play possible. I also read *Gypsy and Me*, by Gypsy Rose Lee's son, Erik Lee Preminger. After a failed attempt at finding *The G-String Murders*, a mystery written by Gypsy Rose Lee herself, I saw the movie based on the book, starring Barbara Stanwyck.

Another Broadway play I saw recently that made quite an impact on me was *Medea*, starring Dame Diana Rigg. The first thing that made me want to see *Medea* was Diana Rigg. She is elegant, refined, husky voiced (I like husky voices), and British. So off I went to the theater. The play was wonderful, the set was stunning, and Rigg was a breathtaking Medea. Never in my life had I seen a play so powerful. I wanted to see it over and over again. Since I couldn't, I bought and read Euripides' tragedy to relive the magic. I was not disappointed.

Since I've always been a big fan of the movies, old movies, that is, it was only natural that I became interested in the lives of the actresses and actors I'd become so accustomed to watching. I was raised seeing *The African Queen* from the time I was five or six. It is my mother's favorite film. She knows it backwards and forwards. While I don't know it as well as that, I do know it well. As a result, Katharine Hepburn and Humphrey Bogart have always been favorites of mine. However, the first celebrity life I read was Ava Gardner's autobiography, entitled *Ava: My Story*. After seeing *55 Days at Peking*, not even her most famous movie, I became intrigued with Ava Gardner. I absolutely loved the book. It was fabulous and funny. I've read the book more

than once, and might read it again. She wrote about her three rocky marriages, her incessant battles with her husbands, her on again, off again relationship with third husband Frank Sinatra, her movie roles, and her bi-continental lifestyle with a light touch and a comic flair.

The second celebrity that I latched onto was Susan Hayward. This Susan Hayward kick has gone on for several years and is still going strong. The first Hayward movie I ever saw was *A Woman Obsessed*, actually a pretty bad movie. The picture was in color and took place in the country. To make matters worse, Hayward had an accent that never did sound quite right. Nevertheless, I was flipping television channels and stopped at the American Movie Classics channel. When I saw this woman with flaming red hair, I couldn't figure out who she was. Every time I heard the name Susan Hayward, I pictured Rita Hayworth. I actually knew they weren't the same person, but was merely confused about them. So the next time I saw her, this time in the movie *I'll Cry Tomorrow*, I was hooked. I rushed out to my nearest library and got a biography on her. In all, I've read three, some good, some bad. Whenever I go to the library now, I still look for biographies on her I haven't read.

While none of my other "kicks" have been quite as strong as Hayward and Gardner, they still were significant. I've not read any biographies lately, but ones I have read have included those on Rosalind Russell, Ginger Rogers, Lauren Bacall, Vivien Leigh, Barbara Stanwyck, Natalie Wood, and Robert Wagner. I also managed to include a biography on Zora Neale Hurston. With the exception of Hurston's, all the other biographies were prompted by my seeing an old movie I liked.

I'm now in the midst of reading feminist literature. My interest and ultimate involvement with feminism actually began with Gloria Steinem. After having problems with low self-esteem and low self-confidence, I chose to read a self-help book. I read *Revolution from Within*, a book by Steinem on self-esteem. It is an understatement to say that I loved the book. It helped me to see that many other women, including Gloria Steinem, have suffered from this malady. The book made me feel better. I felt so much better that I wrote Gloria Steinem to tell her how I felt. She wrote me back! Gloria Steinem actually wrote me back! The letter was on her personal stationery, written in her own hand, and signed "Gloria." I was on cloud nine. Furthermore, a few months later, Steinem's assistant wrote and then later called me

about participating in a young women's feminist group. I joined the group. Today, I have more than my share of books by Susan Winters, bell hooks, Naomi Wolf, Dorothy Dinnerstein, Katie Roiphe, Alice Walker, and Gloria Steinem.

Looking back and seeing many of the books I've read over the years down on paper, I think its quite a collection. I suppose I have what might be called eclectic taste. I've gone from Johanna Lindsey and Jackie Collins to *Medea* and *Prime Suspect*. Although the connections might be strange, there are still connections. One thing seemed to flow from the other. One book seemed to naturally lead to another on the same topic or by the same author. And there were definite phases. I had my humor stage, my "kid like me" stage, my Black stage, my horror stage, and my romance stage, to name a few. All were extremely interesting and filled a need I had at that moment. And I like the way my reading seems to dovetail with television and the movies.

Some people might wonder why I stopped reading young adult literature so early. My first thought was that I don't have the slightest clue. But on giving it further thought, I think that I wanted to be different from all the other kids I knew. I wanted to read different things and to know different things. In many ways, my interests were already quite different. I loved old movies in elementary school, and I was nuts about horror movies—still am. It seems natural that my reading habits would also be different. So I quickly moved to books that were more in line with my interests. Young adult literature didn't seem to be dealing with the breath of things I was interested in. Perhaps that has changed to some degree now. In any case, most of the books I read were unique, whether I liked them or not. People may come and go, relationships may change, the sky may fall in, but I'm certain of one thing: it's going to take a lot to stop me from reading. I love books, and I love to read. Who could ask for anything more?

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