

The Coherence of Books and Memory

Books are part of my history. They are dropped pins on the map of my memory. They mark the places I read them or flag a moment significant by calendar or emotional context. Each new book delivers its original story but also creates an index of the events of my life, thus helping to write the story of me.

Let me give you an example. In fact I'll give you several.

I have always been a fan of *The Wizard of Oz*. Never one to fawn over the likes of fairies or dragons, it is my brand of fantasy – a girl, a dog, a long and winding road, with a few flying monkeys thrown in for good measure. A longtime fan of the movie, I didn't come across the print version of L. Frank Baum's masterwork until a library book sale late one summer in my thirties.

The vivid colors on the cover, the cartoon icons greeting each new chapter, it made me feel like a kid again. Sometimes it's good to feel like a kid. I would of course have to skip the literary timeline and the thoughtfully worded introduction, complete with footnotes. No one who has retraced their steps to Neverland would ever bother with such trivia.

My exciting new tome bided its time on my shelf, a treat waiting for just the right moment to be unwrapped and consumed. So when my mother fell ill, terminally so, and I was preparing for long hours in a hospice chair, I took the book down. Everyone was telling me to be kind to myself and what greater kindness than a favorite book, or one you know will become one.

As it turns out the throes of lung cancer left me little time for reading. It wasn't until my mother fell into a stupor, the final stage of drifting from this world, that I found time for any sort of levity. I finally cracked the cover, but hadn't yet finished *The Council with the Munchkins* when there was a gasp from the bed, what would turn out to be the last one, and the book fell to the floor.

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz is now back on my shelf, never finished. It probably never will be. I'd rather watch the movie.

I read *Housekeeping*, by Marilynne Robinson, when it was my dad dying. It was a much more suitable book for the job, full of grace and catastrophe, solitude and metamorphosis. "...and the perished, whose lack we always feel, will step through the door finally and stroke our hair with dreaming habitual fondness, not having meant to keep us waiting long." It was nice to try on someone else's grief.

On my daughter's fifth birthday, which lamentably fell on a Tuesday, we were headed to the McPlayPlace to manufacture a little grandeur while we breastfed the span until her weekend party. A friend had loaned me a copy of the latest young adult craze, *The Fault In Our Stars*. I grabbed the book on a last minute impulse to stave off the boredom I knew was imminent, and frankly to discourage interactions with other parents – the sort of people who do non-birthday dinners at McDonalds on a Tuesday night.

And so I sat, reading and openly weeping under the vast array of safety netting and PVC tubing circumscribing the ceiling. In retrospect it was a cruel gesture for my best friend to give me a book about cancer kids when my mother was

dying from this affliction. I still love that damn book though. I neglected my daughter, on her birthday, to stay up into the wee hours finishing that heartbreak.

But not all my book and memory pairings end in tears. A reasonable amount do not anyway. I read the endlessly chic *Breakfast at Tiffany's* for the first time on a pilgrimage to my mother's decidedly unfashionable homeland of West Virginia. Charleston, a top ten contender for obesity capital of the country, was noticeably lacking in sidewalks and ridiculously jungle-like off the beaten path - very conducive to reading.

While the coherence of a book and memory is often random, occasionally matches take on a new significance when the result is complimentary. Like merlot pairs with chocolate, beer with pretzels, some books' flavor combines so well with a particular memory that one is tempted to call it fate.

I read *In the Cut* when I was engaged, telling myself all the while that I had snared a keeper because I would never have to wonder if my beau would cut off my head for sport. There was *Go Ask Alice* as I stumbled into puberty at eleven, fancying myself quite grown up with my age-inappropriate reading material. And *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* when I re-entered college in my early twenties, convinced that these snot-nosed kids (not even half a decade younger than me) didn't know anything, especially how to party.

And I imagine more pairings yet to come. I've set aside *The Naked Ape* for my son's entrance into the teen years. *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* is a top candidate for my mid-life crisis. I may even buy a motorcycle to go with it. *Their*

Eyes Were Watching God is reserved for when I feel a little too comfortable in the suburbs (we're getting close).

I'm hopeful I can skip any life events that will lead me to *Anna Karenina*, and that I won't see the day when someone says, oh, you should have read *1984*! But *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory*, or a little *Mary Poppins*, now wouldn't that be nice.