Why I Read

When I was in kindergarten, I once tried to eat a piece of blank printer paper. All I can say to describe the experience is that paper tastes exactly how it feels against your fingertips, and that when your mother sees you nibbling on the edges of the smooth sheet she will inevitably take it away from you. I never need to say that I've been reading since I was very young, instead I just say that I am terribly and acutely aware of the sensation of paper against the roof of my mouth.

I don't wish to write an essay about the age in which I learned to read. A good story does not waste words, and thus neither will I. There was never a specific moment where I learned to read, no instance where the words were foreign and then suddenly familiar. Therefore, it's no use in building off of some arbitrary point in my life,. Instead, I will remove my hard-hat, put down my blueprints, and present my personal philosophy.

Reading is an act of consumption.

When you read something, you are eating its words. You are chewing on its sentences, swallowing its morals. Reading, like all acts of creativity, is destructive. You don't just read a book, you consume the content inside.

I have read e*xactly* 99 books over the last three years. I meticulously track each one, categorizing and assigning ratings to each. Most of these books have retired themselves to my shelf, worn survivors of my purse and couch and bumpy car rides. Still, some are lost to time. My dog-eared copy of *Hello, Beautiful* by Ann Napolitano, for example, was left on the Amtrak train I took the last time I went to the East Coast. Sometimes, I like to think that it is still there, crammed between two seats somewhere, forever cycling between Connecticut and Rhode Island and then back to Connecticut.

It's important to note that the specificity of my numbers only applies to each *individual* book, and not to any subsequent rereads. I have never fully comprehended a book that I have only read once, and I feel strongly that nobody else has either. Most people would assume that's because you find new things each time you read the same book, or you gain a better perspective on the characters. I, however, believe that you have to reread books because you gain more perspective on *yourself*.

I like to think of it this way: I don't remember the first time that I ever saw the ocean. I was born in Boston then moved to the Bay Area, and thus have always lived in close proximity to one coast or the other. But, if I could see the sea for the first time all over again, I would imagine that there would be no words to describe it. I could stare out at such a massive body of water, feel the wind whipping my cheeks and the burning of the horizon against my corneas, and the word *ocean,* which I had heard a million times before, wouldn't even come to mind as a description. Reading is the same way. Words can only paint a picture, but they can't give you the *feeling* of an experience.

If I read a passage from a long time ago, maybe from when I was little or even from a few months prior, I find that I see it through a different lens. Books are a lot like perfume. In the

sense that, when I experience them again after a long period, it brings me back to that specific moment in my life in which I used it. *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt smells like flight UA2416 from San Francisco to Newark. *My Brilliant Friend* by Elena Ferrante reeks of the sour disinfectant my parents use on windows, and *On the Calculation of Volume I* by Solvej Balle stinks of my part-time job, and that particular laziness of reading behind the counter instead of cleaning the machines. Reading has a remarkable power to take you away from where you are, but sometimes it lands me in a place where I have once been. And each time I open a book, whether it be my second, third, or fourth time, I can draw a direct comparison from the person I used to be and the person I am now with all that has changed.

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I find that there are a million ways to describe a good book, but very few to describe a poorly-written one: Great books, terrible books, harrowing novels, terrible books, epic sagas, terrible books. I have many favorite books, but I also have one that is my absolute least favorite and that is *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho. I'm not sure why I dislike it so much, but it's possibly because I don't really remember anything that happened. There was a guy, or maybe he was a kid. He had sheep, or goats, and he had to sell them for some reason. There was also a female character who did absolutely nothing but wait for the main character to come back. *That* part I remember.

I had to read *The Alchemist* for a class on mythology, and it may have been the only time when I have ever understood why some people don't like to read. As I sat hunched over the kitchen table, rereading the same passage for the third time, I had a sudden sympathy for those who proudly claim that they *haven't read a book since elementary school*. Maybe they were all assigned my same book and gave up entirely. Maybe there are a million ways to describe reading and only one experience is needed to unlock the word *terrible* in your vocabulary.

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Reading is a reflection of the world we live in, and serves as a portal to our past and future. If you can envision something, it *could* exist, and therefore reading helps us pave a new path forward. I like to read the most when I travel, and when I am supposed to be doing other things, like sleeping or doing my homework. I change with the books I read, and I let the books change my mind. Still, after all of my posturing, I couldn't really tell you what reading is. I think that every person reads differently from the next, and we all consume books in a different way.

I read to understand, mostly. I'm not sure that I have ever succeeded.

Process Reflection

At the beginning of writing this essay, I was kind of lost on what I wanted to write about. There were a lot of different creative subjects that I was interested in, and probably could have written a decent essay about any one of them. However, when I first picked up my pencil and wrote an essay about why I like to write, I felt like something was missing.

When I went back to my Writer's Notebook and consulted my Core Values page, I just felt like I didn't have enough to say about my writing experiences. Later, I spoke to Mr. Greco about my essay. As I tried to explain and justify my draft, it only became more clear that I needed to pivot. In fact, all of my love for writing stemmed from a different passion: a love of reading. We settled on a switch-up: instead of writing about why I like to write, I should focus on why I like to read.

I was really inspired by George Orwell's essay for this project. I liked how he would list out his particular philosophies as they occurred in his life. Since I knew that my ideas would likely follow a similar formula, it was really helpful for me to consult his essay when I was stuck.

I thought a lot about the passage where he shares a poem he wrote in his youth, detailing his thoughts on the current political climate. In it, he ends with a particularly daunting line:

I wasn't born for an age like this / Was Smith? Was Jones? Were you?

This line helped me form the basis of my essay, focusing on individual perspectives. The idea that the way I read is entirely my own, and constantly evolving, seemed like a good perspective to jump off of. As I began to reshape my essay, it helped to view these two ideas as my common ground.

At first, my essay contained a lot more prose then it does now, but peer feedback helped me reign in it a little bit. It was suggested to me to add more filler and condense some of what I was saying, in order to make it more cohesive. Although I was particularly attached to certain passages, I was able to adjust them for the greater good of the essay.

My version history shows a lot of different ideas, beliefs, and paragraphs, ultimately mashed up into the version I have now. I switched paragraphs order and contents multiple time, and even originally started with what is now my third paragraph. I also made the creative choice to divide certain passages with the - sign, as I felt it marked clearer divisions between different ideas then just having paragraph spaces would.

I think that my essay is for anybody who likes to read, and anybody who doesn't as well. The purpose is to present reading as a creative process by highlighting the individuality of it's experience, which I hope I succeeded at.

Level 4 - I put a lot of work into this essay, and believe that it fulfils all of the needed requirements.