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American River College

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Your ARC newsletter by and for ESL, multi-cultural, international students, Californians, and, well, anybody really...

The Parrot



Special Issue:

BOOKS

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The Calm Before the Storm

War and conflict have displaced countless families throughout history, forcing them to flee their homes in search of safety. Kao Kalia Yang's memoir *The Latecomer* tells the powerful story of the Hmong people's escape from the devastation of war in Laos, reflecting the struggles of many displaced families. My experience of August 15, 2021, when the Taliban took over Kabul, is closely similar to the events described in *The Latecomer*. Both experiences illustrate how peace can be shattered in a blink of an eye, how survival depends on the desperation to escape, and how war forces people to leave behind everything they once knew, basically a whole part of who they were, their soul, their identity.

A peaceful beginning can quickly turn into chaos. Chapter 2 of *The Latecomer* begins with the words "The day had begun like many others"; life was just like it was before the attack by Laotian and Vietnamese forces. Similarly, on August 15, 2021 my day started just like any other. I had my breakfast with my family, relaxed, and happily packed for our flight to London that was coming in a few days. I was texting my friends. My father received a call, and I watched his face fade, his eyebrows knitted together with worry in his eyes. That was when I realized that the Taliban had entered Kabul. My mind went blank. The whole world collapsed on my head. I couldn't process the reality of the situation. It felt like a nightmare, as if I had lost a game I never wanted to play. I couldn't believe I was facing the

very people, the Taliban, that I had heard terrifying things about my entire life. They were monsters. I had blamed them for everything; to me, they were the reason Afghanistan was in such a terrible state. Hearing that they were back, for the first time in my life, was ghastly and terrifying. I couldn't accept it.

For an hour, I lay on my bed staring at the ceiling, unable to comprehend how everything had changed in an instant. A wave of emotions, fear, disbelief, stress, anxiety, uncertainty, and worry for our flight attacked my soul. The world felt paused, and time stretched unbearably long. I was too weak for that. I had had a great life till then. It wasn't fair, I told myself. "GOD? GOD? Hello?"

Different families respond to crises in different ways. When the Hmong were attacked, they initially surrendered. However, later they had to leave Laos to survive. My family, on the other hand, knew immediately that we had to flee. There was no time for hesitation. My father, my

hero, without sleep or food for three days, worked tirelessly to find a way out of the country, reaching out to different people abroad. His Polish friends immediately offered help. Although our initial reactions were different, both situations led to the same conclusion: escape was the only option. Whether by surrendering or fleeing immediately, we were forced to leave behind our homes, possessions, and the lives we had built.

Leaving behind everything is one of the most painful parts of war. In *The Latecomer*,



Yang's mother packed only a small bag, carrying what little she could manage. My family did the same. We fit our entire lives into a backpack. At the airport, thousands of desperate people surrounded us. Some held onto their academic degrees, while others carried their most valuable belongings, all waiting in uncertainty. The air was thick with fear and hope. Gunshots rang from every direction. At first, they sent shivers down my body, but after hearing them so often, they became just another sound in the background.

Timing in war often determines life or death. Yang mentions in Chapter 3 that if her family had delayed their escape by just two months, they would have been massacred. My family faced a similar life-or-death situation. If we hadn't left the airport that morning, we might have died. Just two weeks later, an explosion devastated a part of the airport, erasing many who were waiting for a

chance to leave. Timing meant survival. The thought of what could have happened if we had hesitated still haunts me.

Both my experience and that of the Hmong people in *The Latehomecomer* reveal how war can abruptly and violently change lives. One moment, everything is normal, and another, everything is gone. These stories remind us that war is not just a thing of the past; it continues to displace and devastate families today. The unpredictability of war leaves little time to think or prepare, and survival often comes down to a matter of chance and timing. My experience on August 15, 2021 taught me that history is not distant; it is real, and it affects real people, real lives. I'll never forget this.

Narges Hussaini - ESL 325
Narrative Essay

Reading as Meditation

I really enjoy reading books, and to make it even more enjoyable, I follow these steps. First, I choose a book that interests me and brings me pleasure. Next, I pick a good location. It could be a room, a park, or simply a cozy corner. After that, I make myself some delicious tea with lemon and light a fragrant candle. Then, I really enjoy reading in the evening when everyone is asleep and I'm not disturbed. Finally, I start reading in peace and harmony with myself. In conclusion, reading feels like meditation to me because it helps me relax and find inner peace.

Dana Rusina - ESL 47
Descriptive Paragraph

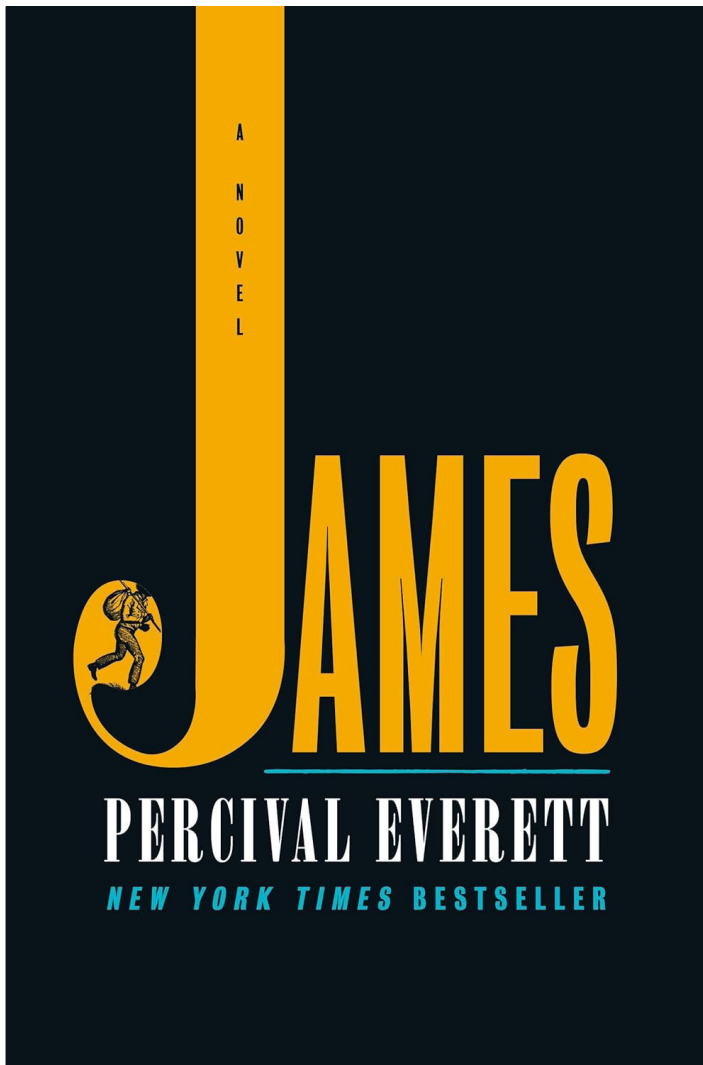
“ It was the hour of morning,
when the sun mounts with those stars
that shone with it when God's own love
first set in motion those fair things. ”

— Dante Alighieri

Shared by Ryan Payne, ESL Center

His Name Is Not Jim

James by Percival Everett



His name is Jim.

Jim, a Black man, has to pretend to be illiterate in front of white people just to avoid getting beaten again.

James by Percival Everett is a brilliant new take on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, offering a sharper view of the story through Jim's eyes. Honestly, every time I skimmed through *New York Times* reviews and admired its stylish cover, I felt an immediate urgency to read it. But somehow, something always stopped me. Then, during one of my usual visits to Barnes & Noble last fall, when I actually meant to buy a different book,

I walked in and immediately ran into a front-table display stacked with towers of *James*. That stunning black cover with the hot orange title pulled me in instantly, and I told myself, "I'll just look at it, nothing more." But the second I picked it up, the familiar woman with glasses – who works there and always recognizes me – came over with her hands behind her back and said, "This is so good." A subtle, quiet sign, but I felt it loud and clear: "You should definitely read it!"

It was so close to finals week, and I had planned to catch up on studying, but once I opened the first page, I just couldn't put this book down. That day turned out to be a deeply moving one – reading about Jim and his journey as he flees from the woman who owns him, Miss Watson, after she decides to sell him. That day also marked a personal turning point in my reading life – I finished the novel in just one day! I couldn't stop because the process of reading was so painful and intense. With each page, with each line, I was terrified. What would happen to Jim? Would he manage to find a safe place? What about his wife, Sadie, and daughter, Lizzie, whom he left behind but promised to return for and save? How many obstacles would he have to face to break the chains of slavery – chains that were carved into his life like scars – invisible to the eye, but always there, burning under the skin. With every sentence, I felt more heartbroken by how slavery is shown in this story – how unfair, how cruel everything was, especially toward Jim. Maybe that's why I read it so fast – I wanted to reach the resolution, to let go of that pressure building up in my chest.

Honestly, I don't really remember the character of Huck from Mark Twain's original book. I read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* in fifth or sixth grade, and Huck has faded from my memory. So reading *James* felt like a completely new experience for

me – a fresh wave – where Huck is a friend to Jim, willing to stay by his side no matter what, running away too, from his abusive father. Watching the relationship between the two unfold was intense. Jim constantly questions whether he can fully trust Huck with his secret – or whether doing so would put him in even more danger. Because the biggest, most dangerous secret of all was that Jim *can* speak perfect English. He *can* read and write. And that was considered the worst crime at that time.

The issue of language – how Black people were forced to suppress their intelligence and adopt a false voice – was one of the most striking themes in the story, introduced from the very first chapter. I found myself lost in a cloud of disbelief and misunderstanding.

Why did they have to pretend to speak in broken English? Why was it dangerous to sound educated? These moments hit like cold water. One of the most powerful scenes is when Jim gives a “language lesson” to his daughter and other children, teaching them how to behave as if they were illiterate, and how to speak incorrectly on purpose. “White folks expect us to sound a certain way, and it can only help if we don’t disappoint them,” he says. That line stunned me. Even more painful was the fact that he

had to teach this to children – full of curiosity – as if it were just another life skill they needed to survive. Jim explains, “They enjoy correction and thinking

you’re stupid.” The guidance he gives is chilling in its clarity. “Never speak first,” one girl said. And that performance might protect them. This chapter was more than a lesson for the children in the book – it felt like a revelation for me as a reader. The theme of language, explored deeply and consistently throughout the novel, revealed the heartbreaking truth of who was allowed to speak, and who had to stay silent. It filled me with an anger – that bitter sense of injustice – at the idea that intelligence itself had to be hidden just to survive.

James is definitely one of the best books I’ve ever read. The intensity of the adventure, the fast-paced narrative, the rapid shifting from one destination to another

– meeting new friends and enemies along the way – all made it feel like danger could follow you anywhere, no matter which direction you choose. But in the end, the force of will, of identity, prevails. And Jim, finally, chooses for himself who he wants to be.

He is not Jim anymore.
His name is James.

Parrot Staff Writer: Sofia Kovalko

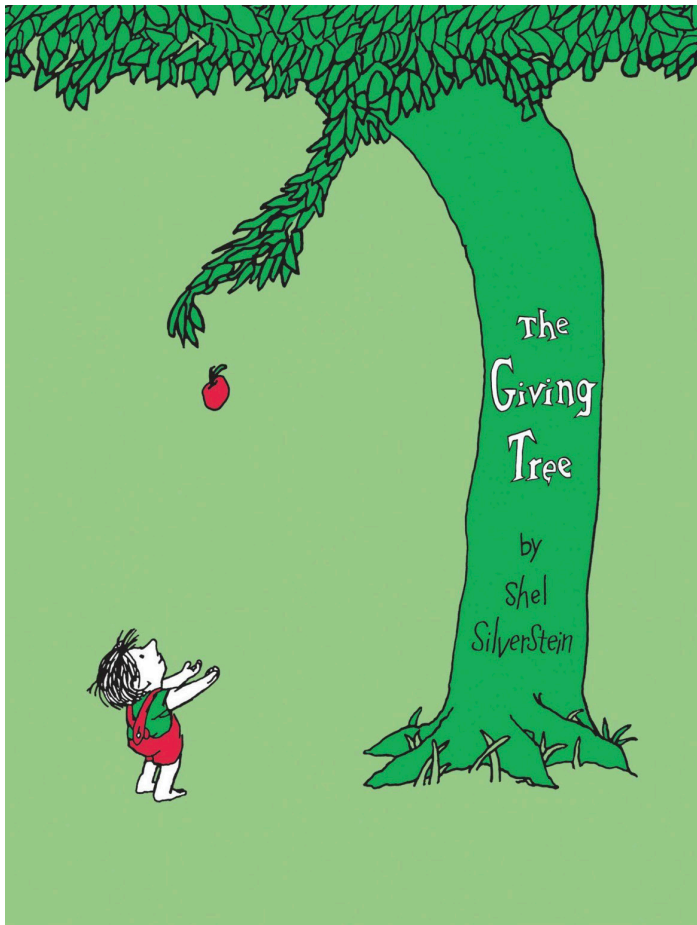


“Once men turned their thinking over to machines in the hope that this would set them free. But that only permitted other men with machines to enslave them.

— Frank Herbert, *Dune*

”

My Modar is My Giving Tree



Everyone has one of those childhood stories that sticks with them as they grow up. Whether it's in the form of a book, song, or movie, it lingers with you and brings you the feeling of nostalgia; a craving for familiarity. For me, one of those stories began in a chaotic third grade classroom, my English class in Las Vegas, at Dr. C. Owen Roundy Elementary School. It was right after recess when we all huddled up together inside, while rain started to clash against the window. It took a while for my class to calm down. After all, we were immature young elementary students. It was time for our daily reading circle session and our teacher, Mrs. Utt, held a green covered book in her hands with an illustration of what appeared to be a boy and a tree.

Our class was still loud, like always, since it was just this class that took part after recess. Mrs.

Utt stood still and crossed her arms, furrowing her brows. "5 ... 4 ... 3..." she began to countdown, "2 and a half ... 2 and ..." Everyone pushed and ran to the colorful alphabet-and-number rug before she yelled "...1!" Mrs. Utt put on her reading glasses, and we all watched her as she raised the book in the air.

"What do we think *The Giving Tree* means?"

There were mixed answers. One girl, who had long black hair and often smelled like pickles, blurted that "it's a tree that gives."

"Uhhh. Yes. How about we be a bit more descriptive?" said Mrs. Utt.

My friend Angie, a girl with long brunette hair and glasses that were head strapped glasses that clung tightly around her head, raised her hand. "I think it means a genie tree. The tree grants wishes."

I remember I wasn't sure of that response. I thought it was going to be a story about trees and how they're used for building homes, making fires, and oxygen. But looking back, her answer made more sense, in a symbolic way. Mrs. Utt began reading soon after more kids gave their predictions. At that time, I found reading circles very boring. I often fiddled with the carpet's loose strands and looked at the clock, waiting for the time to pass by. But this time was different. This story was different. The pictures were cartoons and the colors were plain, but it somehow moved me. The simplicity, but emotional depth of this book was intriguing.

The Giving Tree was a children's story about a boy and a tree. The boy would go to the tree, ask for apples to sell, a shade to rest, and branches to build a house. As he grew older, his cravings from this tree grew, and no matter how tired and weak the tree grew, it continued to give. Finally, the tree was now a stump, with no more branches or leaves. The boy,

who had now become an old man, asked the tree for one last favor. "I want to have a quiet place to sit and rest," he said. The tree offered its stump, and the story ended there.

When Mrs. Utt finished reading, everyone said, "Awww!" I was still confused about the ending of the book. *Why did the tree, despite growing old and tired, keep giving to the boy? I wondered. The tree was stupid.*

Before the bell rang, Mrs. Utt gave us a writing assignment that was going to be due in the next couple of days. From what I recall, the topic was to write about someone that we loved in our lives who gave to us selflessly, like the tree had. Everyone was discussing with each other about writing about their siblings, friends, parents. *I'm gonna write about Modar, I thought, deciding to focus on my mother. She gives me the most in my life, and she's always there for me.*

After school, I was picked up by my uncle and returned home. As I was getting closer to the door, the smell of roasted bread and the onion aroma flared my nostrils. I could tell *Modar* had cooked *bolani*. I didn't like *bolani*. I rang the doorbell and *Modar* opened the door.

"Bya, bya ke boron ast!" (Come, come it's raining!) She yelled in Farsi as she pulled me inside. She told me to take off my shoes and bag and to come eat.

"Nay, ma namekхайom." (No, I don't want to.) I muttered stubbornly, my words piercing sharper than intended. Her gaze darkened, and I knew she was about to give me another talk about being

grateful for what we had. Being caught in my whirlwind of frustration, I went to my room and slammed the door. I heard her voice raise, and I pressed my ears against the cool wooden door. *My padar, dad, interfered, coming out of his room to ask her what was wrong. She told him that I was a spoiled brat.*



"Khaira, ma membar-omsha ke beron bokhora", he said calmly, offering to take me out to eat. *Modar* argued with him, shouting that he spoils me and that I should learn from my older sister, who was sitting at the dinner table, quietly nit picking at her food. At that moment, I remember I hated my mom. There was a childish reason behind it, but it affected my feelings towards her. Her words of comparison stung me.

I always thought of her as a strict parent. She would pressure me to do homework right after school, do thirty minutes of reading every single day (which was a requirement for my reading logs, but she found out I was forging her signature on them), memorize my *surahs* (chapters from the Quran), and all of the activities that didn't include going outside with friends or having a decent amount of screen time. One hour a day wasn't bad, but as a kid who just wanted to make paper squishies, watch TV, and play video games instead of doing homework, it was equivalent to one second of my time.

That night really upset her. When I came back from McDonald's, I went on my tablet and she told me to give it to her, but I refused. She tried to pull the tablet from my hands, both of us tugging. In the struggle, I finally let go, and the tablet flew out of my grip and smacked her against her forehead.

I do not know what had happened to make me behave that way towards her. Maybe it was because I was tired from school, or that I was just in a bad mood. But whatever the reason, I had accidentally hit my mom, and she was angry. I felt the tension in the air after there was a long awkward pause, as we both tried to process what had happened. Then suddenly, she snatched my tablet from my hands with a quick haste and stomped out of the room. She told my dad she was going to throw it away, loud enough so that I could hear. I yelled and ran after her, trying to stop her, but she went outside and locked the door behind her. She returned empty handed, and I just burst into tears.

After a while of sitting in my room, crying, I grabbed a pencil and started doing my homework. Not because she demanded it, but because I had a purpose. My writing topic, previously about my mom being *my giving tree*, had changed. It was now, "My Dad is My Giving Tree." A week later, I presented it to my class on the day of presentation. I spoke about how he gives me money to spend at the snack at school, how he gives me rides to school, works to pay rent, and all the other basic parenting stuff.

I did receive an A for that project grade. My mom was proud of me when she saw my report card. I didn't mention the topic to her, as I had a slight guilty feeling. She saw it herself as she placed a bowl of fruit, mixed with slices of oranges, grapes and strawberries by my bedside. She kissed both of my cheeks and told me that she was proud of me.

This was a cycle that was repetitive. My mom and I would argue, I'd do my homework, receive my full marks, and she'd be happy. It was a bit saddening at times knowing that my mom only appreciates me when I do good in school. But it's also her way of showing love, as I soon discovered.

"Ma, bege. Dega kat ma jang nako." (Here, take it. Don't fight with me again). She held my tablet in front of her, and my heart sank with guilt.

My mom grew up unable to chase her dreams of being a teacher. She was wed in her twenties and got pregnant when she was 21. In old cultural norms, the men were expected to work while the women stayed home and raised the children. My mom didn't care what was expected of her so she continued her university courses. But everything changed when my dad was asked to leave Afghanistan and come to America. Experiencing a whole different world added more pressure onto her giving up. Because of these expectations and the stress of raising two kids while also struggling to learn the English language, my mom stopped her education even though that is what she craved the most.



The story of *The Giving Tree* resonates with me much deeper than how it used to. If I could, I would redo what I had written. Don't get me wrong, I love my *padar*. But I have always credited him and avoided giving the same recognition to my *modar*. If I could, I would write about how she wakes me up in the morning so that I can go to school. How she cooks me meals, that I may sometimes complain about, so that I stay healthy. How she pressures me to study so that I don't fall behind. And finally, I would write how she gave up her dreams so that I could live mine. No matter how old she gets, she

does her best to be there for me so I am satisfied. Like the tree in the book, my mother is a selfless loving woman. Looking back, I realize it was not the tree that was stupid, but it was the boy who was. He never once thanked the tree for what she had done for him.

I will continue to reflect on and regret how I viewed my mom back then. Because of her pressuring me into constantly reading and writing, my love for books has grown tremendously. I feel at ease whenever I read because it is something that

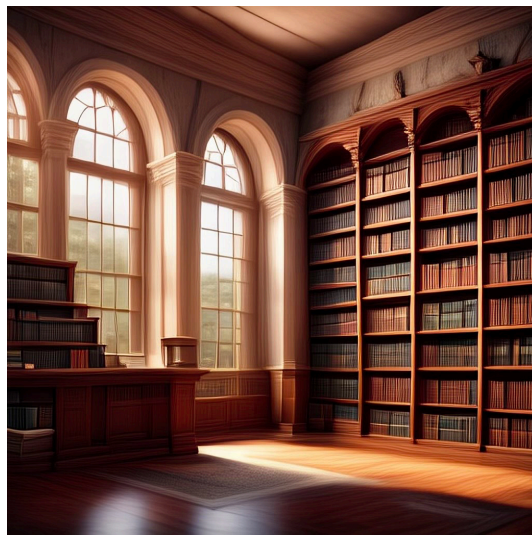
I have grown up doing. From the perspective of an elementary kid, I can see why I was mad. I wasn't spoiled, but I was blind to see that my mother, who sacrificed her education and her future career, was pressuring her children to not lose theirs, so that we could grow up to experience the American dream. Now, whenever I come up with the topic of an influential person in my life, I will talk about my *modar*, and how she is my giving tree.

**Ferohar Sina - English 300
Narrative Essay**

Parts of My Soul: The Library, Grandmother's House and Ukraine

Do you have special places where you truly love to be? Everyone has their own preferences when it comes to favorite places. Some people enjoy being in crowded and noisy places full of people and events. Others prefer calm, peaceful environments or spending time with family. For me, there are a few special places where I feel truly comfortable and at peace.

The first special place for me is the library. The library is a place where I truly enjoy spending my time. I get real pleasure from the atmosphere there. I especially love the smell of books that fills the room. At any moment, it's easy to find exactly the book I need. I can choose a book that matches my mood or helps me solve a certain problem. This place offers opportunities to discover new things. The library is a place where I can have interesting meetings and communicate with people who share my interests. Here, I can find the information I need, and it is also a place where I can simply relax and rest my soul and feel at peace.



The second special place is my grandmother's house. Her home feels like a second home to me, filled with a unique atmosphere of warmth and hospitality. The most precious part of this house is my loving grandmother, who always greets me with a hug and a sincere smile. She always cooks something delicious, and the taste of her food stays in my memory. On long winter evenings, I loved doing needle work with her, and those moments created a special bond between us. My grandmother's doors are always open to guests, so there are often many relatives gathered there. We often celebrate holidays together and share warm memories. I even have my own room there, where I feel completely at home. I also love the garden very much - the fruits from it are the tastiest. My grandmother's house is the place where I'm always awaited with love.

The third and most important place for me is Ukraine, which is in my heart and soul. It is located in Eastern Europe, and it is where the warmest memories of my childhood are kept in this land. Ukraine amazes with its natural beauty. The Black

Sea attracts with its warm waves, sandy beaches, and fresh sea air. The waters of the Black Sea wash the Crimean Peninsula. Many different nationalities live on the peninsula, but the Crimean Tatars – the indigenous people of Crimea – hold a special place there. The Carpathian Mountains are a true wonder of nature, with their majestic peaks, dense forests, and breathtaking landscapes in every season. Ukraine has all four seasons, and each one is incredible in its own way. It is the best place on Earth, and no matter where I go, Ukraine will always remain

such for me.

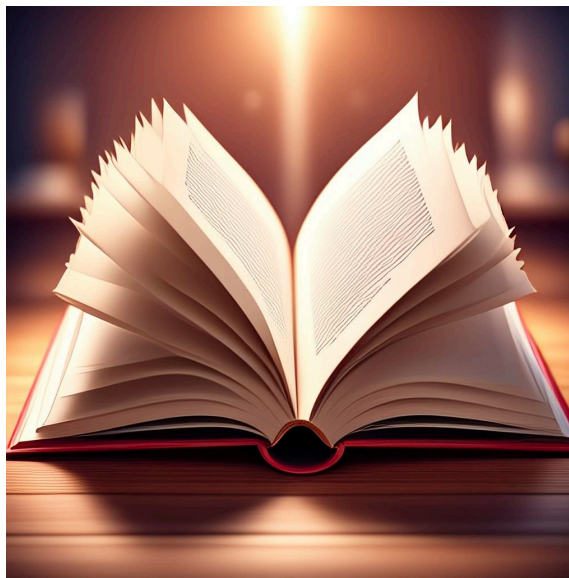
Indeed, the special places where I feel most comfortable are the library, my grandma's house, and Ukraine. These are not just locations on a map – they are parts of my heart. These are the places where I can truly rest my soul, where I always feel welcome, and which will always remain the most meaningful to me, no matter where life takes me.

Mariana Savchuk - ESL 47
Narrative Essay

The Lovely Poem "Book"

The Book

I am your loyal friend,
Wise and eloquent till the end.
I speak to you in countless ways,
Though I have no tongue to convey.
With wisdom, I will guide you right,
A trusted friend, a source of light.
A faithful companion, rich and true,
Bringing knowledge, harmless to you.
Ask of me anything you seek,
I hold the answers, clear and deep.
I am your loyal friend,
Wise and eloquent till the end.



کتاب

من یار مهربانم
دانا و خوش‌بینانم
گویم سخن فراوان
با آنکه بی‌زبانم
پندت دهم فراوان
من یار پنددانم
من دوستی هنرمند
با سود و بی‌زبانم
هر نکته‌ای که گویی
دانم که آن بدانم
من یار مهربانم
دانا و خوش‌بینانم

I first learned this beautiful poem in my third-grade class, and it has stayed with me ever since. I still remember the day when our teacher taught it to us. We all read it together, and I was the first student to read it aloud while the rest of the class followed along. The words felt so meaningful even then, and they still do today. This poem has remained one of my favorites, and I love reading it just as much now as I did back then.

Parrot Staff Writer: Asila Sadiqi

The Book That Makes You Smile

The Backyard Bird Chronicles by Amy Tan



#1 New York Times
Best Seller



The Backyard Bird Chronicles

Written and
illustrated by

Amy Tan



Foreword by
David Allen
Sibley



I always loved to listen to the birds singing. Their cheerfulness and carelessness. It was always like my own small affirmation of a good day, when the morning started with a slightly open window and the gentle chirping of sparrows (they often visited me right on my window back in my home country), and also dozens of other birds from the forest nearby. That incredible symphony always made me wonder about the beautiful nature of birds. And often I felt disappointed – listening to them but never able to find them, to see the ones who gave these charming sounds. But I finally saw them, in a way, while reading one of the most extraordi-

nary books I've ever read – *The Backyard Bird Chronicles* by Amy Tan.

The Backyard Bird Chronicles is Amy Tan's tender, witty, and unexpectedly moving combination of nature journaling and personal observation. Tan began watching the birds in her backyard in 2016, and this book captures her detailed entries up until 2022. "*The Backyard Bird Chronicles* has journalistic integrity and is true to its name," she writes. And she means it. Her records are rich not only in accuracy, but in personality, humor, and deep affection. These aren't just birds to her. They're characters. Family. Tan often calls them her children, and you can feel that closeness in every line. There's the Scrub Jay, who insists on "equal persistence," the Townsend's Warblers and Hermit Thrushes, the Lesser Goldfinch, and Anna's Hummingbirds – who practically steal the show with their passion for drama, flirtation, and surprisingly sharp memory. Her journal is full of beautifully human comparisons, like



when she writes, "Birds are creatures of habit in their habitat. Me, too."

The book is also visually stunning. Each bird comes to life not only through Tan's writing, but through her own illustrations – delicate, expressive drawings that make you pause and admire. And her humor runs quietly through it all, with moments of light sarcasm and small heartbreaks. She spent thousands of dollars customizing feeders (because, yes, birds



are picky), and mourns when baby birds fall, or fail, or simply fly away too soon.



watching back.

These chronicles are a gentle reminder that beauty hides in small, quiet things. The story is so grounded it makes you look up – literally. It reminds you that birds aren't just background sounds. They're sharp, intelligent creatures with habits, preferences, and even personalities. Through Tan's eyes, you begin to see that birds aren't simple at all. I was particularly lucky, as while I was reading this book, the birds near my house decided to organize an orchestra, blessing me with their invisible, yet very loud presence. Was it Anna's Hummingbird or maybe the Lesser Goldfinch, escaping from Tan's backyard to my window? I'm not sure.

This is a book that will make you smile. Maybe you will find your favorite bird here. It might even make you linger a bit longer the next time the birds start their morning chorus, wondering what else you've been missing.

Parrot Staff Writer: Sofia Kovalko

“

We are born innocent and free, but our experiences influence who we become.

”

— From Oprah Winfrey and Bruce D. Perry's *What Happened to You? Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing*.

Shared by Zsa Zsa Aranas, ESL Professor

Awakening the Phoenix: A Conversation with Krysta Tawlks

Fantasy creatures roam the California valleys, and the voices of Mexican ancestors call out from the shadows – inviting readers into *Children of the Wild*, a novel where the unseen and unheard become real!

Krysta Peterson, known by her maiden name Krysta Tawlks, is not only an ESL Adjunct Professor at American River College but also a passionate writer. In her historical fantasy debut, *Children of the Wild*, she tells the story of 14-year-old Elbert, who begins to change in strange ways – feathers spreading across his skin and a burning rising in his chest. A phoenix is awakening within him.

In this interview, Professor Peterson talks about what it means to be a writer, and how *Children of the Wild* came to life from memory, myth, and imagination.

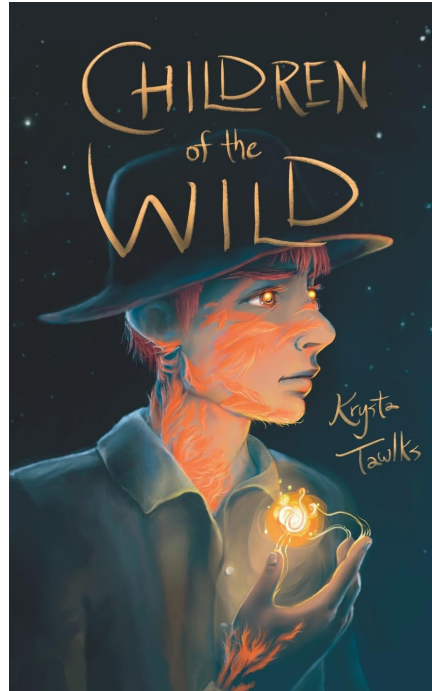
When did you realize you wanted to be a writer? How did this journey begin?

I've been creating stories since I was very young, but I didn't know I wanted to be a writer until my teacher told me I was good at it. After that, I ran with it and started drafting my first novel. I was twelve years old.

What is it like to be a writer? Writing a novel requires discipline – how did you develop and maintain it?

Writing for me means trusting myself for very long periods of time as I chip away sentence by sentence until suddenly, I have a novel. Nowadays, I have

many responsibilities – my work as a professor, my two very small children – so the only reason I have time to write is the kindness of my husband who gives me an hour or so to write here and there.



When did you start working on *Children of the Wild*, and how long did it take to write? How did the idea first come to you? Since it's a fantasy novel, what drew you to the genre?

Children of the Wild began as a short story called "Diary of a Phoenix." I wrote the story when I was a student at CSUS. A few years later, I stumbled on the story again and decided to turn it into a full-length novel. Then it grew from there. It took me about two years, maybe a little less, to write the novel. Then it took me close to a year to find a publisher. I love fantasy because

I can imagine things beyond reality, and I'm an artist, so to me fantasy is like art in fiction.

"I don't like this label she has pinned on me. It feels permanent, like I have no choice but accept it."

- Children of the Wild

***Children of the Wild* is deeply rooted in Mexican folklore and its magical creatures, with shapeshifting being a central theme in the**

story. Were you inspired by this tradition? Did you research it extensively, or was your interest in Mexican folklore something that developed during your childhood?

I am part Mexican on my grandfather's side, but I never learned deeply about Mexican culture until I researched the time period this book takes place. I read articles in the library database about Mexican

American life in California, and I learned about *herberas* and *curanderas*, Mexican women who use traditional and natural remedies. I researched Nahuatl folklore, which comes from Aztec heritage, but I only used my research as inspiration because I cannot call myself an expert in these fields. I hope my story comes across with respect and kindness.

The story is told from the perspective of 14-year-old Elbert. Throughout his narrative, it's impressive how mature he is despite his young age – his gentle care for his youngest brother, Finn, his willingness to take responsibility for his entire family even as a middle child, and the depth of his self-reflection. The way he processes his emotions and explains the world to himself makes the story magnetic and deeply immersive.

How did you develop Elbert's character? Was it intentional to portray him as so mature, perhaps to emphasize how childhood in the early 20th century was different?

Originally, he was more of a silly character and less mature, but yes, something about the time period and the sad story of his family made sense to show him

more mature. His self-reflection came naturally, and it is a shared personality trait with his father, who has a big impact on him as a person. This is considered a coming-of-age story, so he is going from his boyhood into his adult years.

Why did you choose the phoenix as the creature tied to Elbert and his family heritage? It's powerful that Elbert's ability to transform into a phoenix is in his blood – something he doesn't initially know about. The fact that his father, Pops, shares this magical ability as well adds a deep connec-

tion and complexity to their relationship.

Was this choice of the phoenix meant to symbolize something specific, and how did you develop this aspect of the story?

I didn't choose the phoenix for any particular reason at first. But as the story progressed, I realized Elbert had to rise above the pain of

his insecurities and traumatic past. This is similar to the transforming nature of a phoenix. Fire is important, too, as it can cause pain, or it can bring warmth. This is the lesson Elbert has to learn about his growing magic.

About the idea of Pops. In your dedication, you mention your Pops, and in the acknowledgments, you note that the character of Pops was not only important to Elbert but also deeply personal to you. You wrote that Pops carries certain qualities of your own father and that, like the character, your father has experienced grief in his life.

Could you share more about this connection? How did your own experiences shape Pops' character and his journey in *Children of the Wild*?

Yes, Pops is a very important character to me because he represents grief on a level deeper than a fourteen-year-old can comprehend. When I was quite young, my dad did something that hurt our family, and he carried a lot of shame for many years. Eventually, he was able to forgive himself, and now he uses his mistakes to help other families. He's a marriage and family counselor.

In *Children of the Wild*, we follow two families – the American Dowden family and the Mexican

"This could be good news. Something half-done might mean it can be undone."

- Children of the Wild

"Don't take my home away. Just leave us alone."

- Children of the Wild

Padilla family, the latter bringing such authenticity to the novel's Mexican folklore. The Dowden family's story focuses on the power of Pops' love and Elbert's strength, while the Padilla family highlights the resilience of three generations of women – Grandma (Abuelita), Mother (Lupe Padilla), and Daughter (Valora) – where hope is their greatest strength.

This contrast is fascinating. How did you develop it? Did you intend to emphasize the power of Mexican women and the role they play in shaping the story?

In this case, I was following the story and what made sense to me. I wanted to dig into Mexican culture because of my grandpa (his last name was Padilla). I took time intentionally observing people who are close to the Mexican culture – my sister-in-law, her mom, and her grandmother have such love for family, especially her grandmother. My grandfather passed away a few years ago, but he would have been so proud to read this book, I'm sure!

The story is set in Salinas Valley, California, at the beginning of the 20th century. Why did you choose this particular location? How did California's cultural diversity and the region's unique characteristics influence the creation of the story?

I was searching for a farm town near San Francisco and Salinas came up on my search. Then later, I searched for which cultures were prominent at this time in history, specifically in Salinas, and I was surprised to find that Japanese farm workers were very common. I loved this. The Padilla family comes from Los Angeles, and there has always been a big com-

munity of Mexicans there.

***Children of the Wild* is a fantasy book, but there are also clear elements of realism, particularly in how the daily life of American farmers is depicted. Given that the story has connections to your own family, how did you weave together these elements of fantasy and realism in your writing?**

Fantasy can feel too light and unrealistic, so I purposefully did as much as I could to make the world feel real by adding in traditions and practices, sights and sounds, and descriptions that are true to this time in history. For me, that makes the fantasy elements feel more real and like it could be true!

What are your plans as a writer for the future? Are you planning to write another novel, or perhaps you're working on something right now?

I am in the revision stage of my next novel, *Wilderroot*. It is a companion novel to *Children of the Wild* and follows Valora's character. We learn more

about the Padilla side and the history of the trappers. We also get to know other cultural groups, specifically the Italian Swiss!

And to wrap things up, what is your all-time favorite book?

I've probably read *Pride and Prejudice* the most out of any book. I love the witty dialogue and the interactions between the characters. The subtle humor makes me laugh.

Thank you so much for this great conversation. Looking forward to reading your next novel!

Interviewer: Sofia Kovalko

"If you believe something is real when it's not, then it becomes dangerous. And I used to believe in something that wasn't real."

- *Children of the Wild*

"This is more than magic. This must be hope."

- *Children of the Wild*

No Time to Read Junk

Do you know how many books are in the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.? There are more than 25 million! Consider that in light of how long the average person lives. The average American lives about 77 years.

The average Canadian lives about 81 years and the average Brit about 82 years. To keep the math simple, let's say that the average life span is 80 years. If you can read one book per week for your entire life, then you will be able to read only 4,160 books before you die ($52 \text{ weeks} \times 80 \text{ years} = 4160$)

if you are born with the ability to read fluently. Or maybe you're some crazy fast compulsive reader who reads a book a day; that still is only 29,200 books you can read in a lifetime. That means you will not even be able to read .1168% of the books in the Library of Congress.

But let's shift from thinking about quantity to quality. Let's say 1 in 1000 of the books (.1%) in the Library of Congress is worth reading. (And that's probably a conservative estimate!) That's 25,000 if I did my math right, right? However, maybe 1 in 100 books are actually worth reading; that's 250,000 good books waiting for you to read, and remember: that's just in the United States! That's not even taking into account books written in other countries with much longer literary traditions than the U.S. In 2010, Google estimated that there were 129,864,880 books in the world excluding serials and many self-published books.

Do you know what that means?

That means you don't have time to read junk.



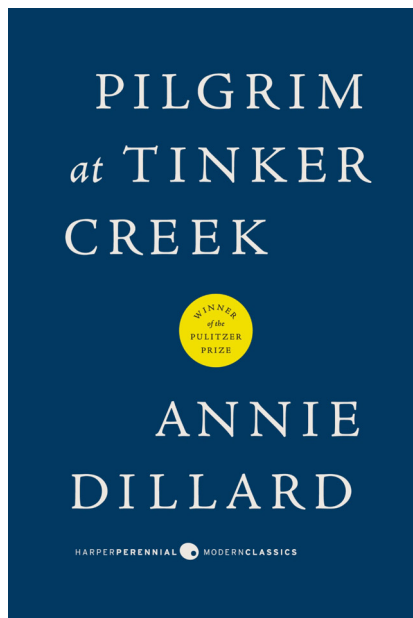
My advice to you. Find the best books. Ask people what books they love? Ask them what books have changed their lives? Ask them what books they have read more than once? Ask them what books they can't stop thinking about? Ask them what books have made them cry? Of course,

everyone has their interests and priorities about what's important, but try to find the best books.

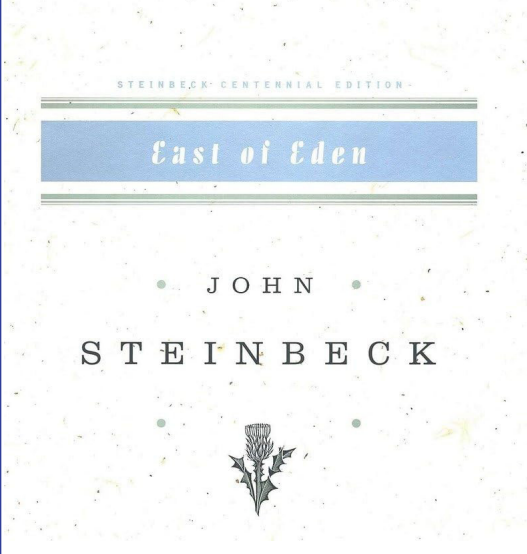
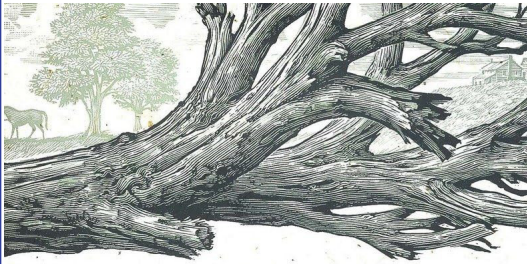
Having made that plea, let me add a caveat.

As great as it is to find the "best" books, there is something to be said for not having an agenda when you browse a bookshelf at a bookstore or the library, or when you search online. Be open. Just because 100 people dislike a book on Amazon doesn't mean you should avoid it. The universe might surprise you with a book you never imagined. Let whimsy and serendipity guide you. Most people can't always have a volume from the [Harvard Classics](#) in hand. Maybe it's not healthy to always be thinking that hard and deeply anyway. Sometimes we need some light reading, or we need some-

thing totally different to help us see the world in a different way or feel the world from someone else's perspective. Some of the best books I have read have been books that I wasn't looking for. Some



books found me. For instance, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard, was a book a friend said I should read, and which I had never heard of. It was so thought-provoking, and the prose was so beautiful. I'm so glad I didn't stick to [Time Magazine's All-Time 100 Novels](#) list to guide my reading.



There are some great books on that list, but *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is non-fiction and didn't make the list because it was the "wrong" genre. So, browse the books lists, but don't be constrained by them. Browse used bookstores, but don't stay in one section. I hope you find books that you love, books whose prose makes you gasp like I did when I read John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* and Amor Towles's *A Gentleman in Moscow* (my favorite book of the decade!). And don't discount a book because it was assigned to you by a teacher. I bawled at the ending of *A Day No Pigs Would Die* by Robert Newton Peck, a book I had to read in 9th

grade thanks to my teacher, Mr. Serigstad.

Lastly, please don't give up on a book because it's hard. Some books take effort, lots of effort. Some books we have to grow into. Although my brother read *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* as a teen, I couldn't get past the first few pages when I picked it up. I tried again in my early 20s and still didn't get far. Finally, after I had earned a master's degree in German and then another master's in linguistics, I was ready. So I was in my 30s when I finally discovered this trio for myself, and I ate them up! I even read the appendix.

If you're not a book-a-day reader like my friend Malia, and if you're not even a book-a-week person like many are, the numbers are a bit depressing. If you can only manage a book or two or maybe three a month like me, then you're down to only being able to read about 960-2880 books in your life. I don't even like to think of how few books that is in comparison to all the books out there. Even though I love reading, and even though I took a speed reading course in college, I'm a bit of a slow reader. I still vocalize quite often as I read. I know that slows down my reading, but it helps me think better, and I have discovered that I like to savor the sounds of words. I like the rhythms of sentences. I marvel at the flow of exceptional prose and the intertwining of ideas in a solid argument or web of plot. I hope as you find "the best books," or as they find you, you may find yourself in the midst of wonder, and find the time you have traded for a book was a worthwhile trade.

Contributor: Patrick Hoggan, ESL Professor

“

Do not be afraid; our fate
Cannot be taken from us; it is a gift.

”

— Dante Alighieri

Shared by Ryan Payne, ESL Center

My Forever Favorite

The Emphyrean Series by Rebecca Yarros

It was a gray, drizzling day in New Jersey about a year and a half ago. I sat in the passenger seat, staring out the window at the cold streets of a small town – its name has long slipped from my memory.

"Do you want to go to Barnes & Noble?" the wife of my cousin asked as we drove out to do some Christmas shopping.

"What is it?" I asked, genuinely unsure.

"It's a bookstore," she replied.

I hesitated. "Ah... I'm not much of a reader, so maybe not." At the time, I didn't enjoy reading. I was still trying to figure out how to love it. But a few minutes later, something inside me shifted.

"You know what? Let's go," I said. I'm still not sure what changed – just a quiet nudge from somewhere within.

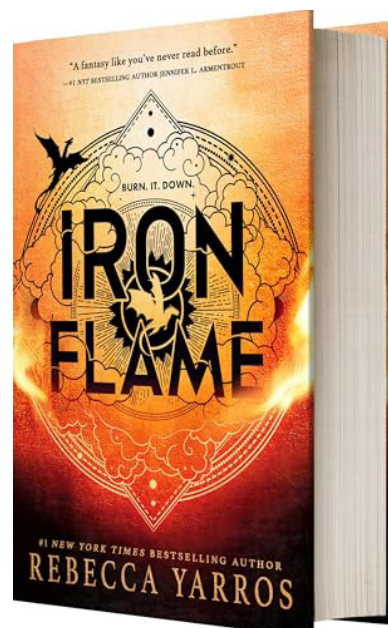
Did I expect that tiny decision would become a turning point in how I felt about books? Absolutely not. But looking back now, I feel grateful that I said yes, that we turned the car around toward the plaza, and that it led me to the book that changed everything.

Fourth Wing by Rebecca Yarros became an instant love for me – just twenty pages in, and I was hooked. When I was buying it, out of hundreds of books, my eyes landed on a bold gold cover with dragons. On the cover, a quote by author Tracy Wolf caught my eye: "The most brutally addictive fantasy I've read in a decade!" Something about it sparked inside me. I knew right then, this was the fantasy I needed to read!

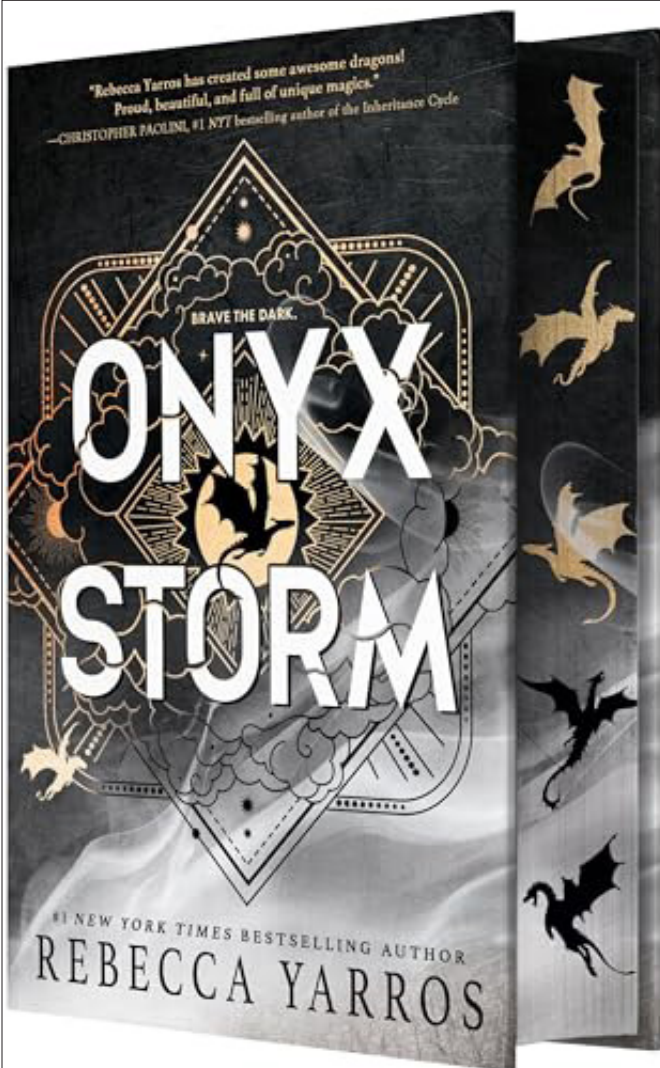
The story follows Violet Sorrengail – the

narrator – who is small, fragile, and considered weak, yet forced by her powerful mother, a general, to enter Basgiath War College in Navarre. It's a brutal, unforgiving place where only the strongest survive. At Basgiath, cadets train to become dragon riders.

The blurb alone pulled me in: a girl who clearly doesn't belong in a violent, ruthless world, and everyone around her wants her dead – just because of who her mother is.



I'll admit, I was nervous. I didn't think I'd be able to read an entire book in English. I even thought: "It'll probably take me six months to finish this." But the story pulled me in so deeply, I read it in just one week! I understood everything. It felt like I was reading in my native language. That's how powerful



the writing – and the world – was and still is for me. Yarros's world-building is outstanding. I understand that at first sight it may seem like a very typical story – dragons again? There are hundreds of books about dragons! But this one is different. The idea behind it is complex and unique, and the brutality of this fantasy pulls you in like a high-quality action and fantasy movie. Along with Rebecca's incredible writing style – which is, sometimes complex and packed with detailed information about the world – it's the characters that truly make this story powerful. Violet is a perfect narrator, but what makes this story shine is how every secondary character feels essential. The story couldn't exist without them. Each one adds something brilliant to Violet's growth and her journey toward becoming a rider. Even the worst antagonists, as terrible as they are, are written so well that they feel real and necessary. They're not

just there to be hated – they add depth and tension, and that's what keeps the book from ever feeling cliché. It gives the entire story a sense of sophistication and richness that makes you love every part of it.

And of course, the dragons. They're not just distant creatures like in *Game of Thrones*, for example – they're individuals. Their personalities are so vivid and unforgettable that millions of readers have a crush on them, myself included. And yes, they can talk – but only in the minds of their riders. It's not silly at all; those inner conversations are often intense and even terrifying. When a rider bonds with a dragon, they also gain a signet – a magical power that develops later and is shaped by the rider's personality. The bond between dragon and rider happens during Threshing, a brutal trial where cadets either die or earn their place as riders – the elite of Navarre. The stakes are high, the danger constant. There's fist-to-fist combat between cadets, and yes, it can end in death. And remember, Violet is fragile – she was supposed to be a scribe – but she's incredibly smart.

Then there's the war, not just between different continents, but something much darker. There are secrets – things forbidden to know. But some are here to uncover them. The marked ones. They're considered enemies of the continent – children of traitors. Their parents led the rebellion and were executed, and now the children are being forced to become riders, as punishment, with the unspoken hope that they won't survive. The marked ones are some of the most fascinating characters in the series, and you'll absolutely love exploring them. One of them is Xaden Riorson – the Wingleader of the Fourth Wing (there are four wings in Basgiath, like divisions within the college). His father led the rebellion and was personally executed by Violet Sorrengail's mother. Two enemies. And it's set up in a way that makes you believe Xaden would be glad to see Violet destroyed. But every character brings in a twist that builds throughout the first book and explodes in the second part of the series, *Iron Flame*, and now in the third book, *Onyx Storm*, which was

just released this January.

I cannot explain how I felt reading the first part for the first time. I was so engaged – I became addicted. Everything is perfect. And Yarros is a kind of “cruel” writer (but that’s exactly what makes her series so good – these aren’t banal books with happy endings). This isn’t a sweet tale. It’s brutal fantasy! That’s why I was absolute-

ly destroyed at the end of *Fourth Wing*. For the very first time in my life, I was crying because of a book. Literally crying – because of the emotional power and perfection of one of the secondary characters. I finished reading it late at night, and the next day I had to fly back to Sacramento from vacation. I was still electrified by the story. Just one day after returning home, I found a Barnes & Noble (which now feels like a holy place to me as a reader) and got *Iron Flame*. Both books were released in 2023. I tried to savor the second part slowly, not rushing it, because I knew we wouldn’t see the third book for a while. And I became fully addicted, just like millions of other readers in the U.S. and around the world. *The Empyrean* series became an instant *New York Times* bestseller, and in many countries too. Readers are already calling it even better than *Harry Potter*, *Game of Thrones*, and *The Hunger Games*. The sales are wild! In March 2024, I preordered the special edition

of the third book, *Onyx Storm*, and I could barely wait for its release in January 2025. Overall, there are supposed to be five books in the series, so there are still two more to go, and I don’t know how I’m going to wait for them! Even the book designs are magical.



There are thousands more words I could say about these books. They feel like home to me – not just because they’re amazing, high-quality fantasy, but because they

changed how I think about reading. I started reading again. A lot. More than I ever had before. And the craziest part? Now I read everything in English! Every single book. That still surprises me sometimes. *The Empyrean* will always be my favorite series, even though my mom says I’m a little crazy about *Fourth Wing* (especially since I have three different versions of the first part – thanks to Yarros’ very clever marketing – each with a bonus chapter from Xaden’s point of view, even though the main story stayed exactly the same. Not my smartest move, but no regrets! It’s my favorite book!) It’s a stunning, brutal fantasy – smart, addictive, complicated, gorgeous, intense, and sophisticated. The best. And it will always be special to me.

Welcome to Basgiath!

Parrot Staff Writer: Sofia Kovalko

“What do you care what other people think?”

— Richard Feynman, *Surely You’re Joking, Mr. Feynman!*

Shared by Julia Meyer, ESL Center

Leaders Are Readers

What book would you recommend to ARC students?

You Sound Like a White Girl by Julissa Arce.

Last year ARC hosted Julissa Arce, in collaboration with the Youth Development Network's leadership program Creciente. She is a leading voice in the fight for social justice, immigrant rights, and education equality - and her book is a testament to that work.

—Dr. Lisa Cardoza, President of ARC

The Name of the Wind, by Patrick Rothfuss. Rothfuss supposedly wrote the book while pursuing his BA in English, so it was written by a student rather than a "professional author." Despite that (or perhaps because of it), it is one of the most engaging reads I've enjoyed in recent years. It is a fantasy novel, so it has aspects of magic and the supernatural, but the magic is grounded in physical rules that make sense and have limits. Rothfuss's world is original, but it feels full: the history, cultures, and magical rules fit together in a self-consistent way, and the issues of class struggle and young romance transcend any genre. I recommend it to any fan of fantasy novels.

—Adam Windham, ARC Associate Vice President, Instruction and Enrollment Management at ARC

I would recommend *The Imposter Cure: Beat Insecurities and Gain Self-belief* by Jessamy Hibberd. I really like the opportunity to reflect on the value we add to the spaces we are in and that we belong to.

—Angela Milano, ARC Vice President of Instruction

Leaders Are Readers

What book would you recommend to ARC students?

I just finished *Revenge of the Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell. I liked the original *Tipping Point* and thought that it was interesting that Gladwell would re-explore concepts from 25 years ago. The book did not disappoint and provided interesting perspectives into epidemics such as COVID and the opioid crisis.

—Frank Koboyashi, Los Rios Associate Vice Chancellor of Instruction

The Devil and Daniel Webster
Short story by Stephen Vincent Benét

Having read the story in my mid-teens I realized that *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, on many levels, had made an impact in my then view of adversity and hardships. So many times, through the years in the midst of hardships, I have reflected back on this very well-crafted short story. Perhaps. Just maybe. Those reflections have led to better choices in those particular situations. Although *The Devil and Daniel Webster* is a short story, readers may justifiably find themselves going back and re-reading it more than once. There was also a film adaptation, however, like is mentioned so often it paled in comparison to my imagination. I wouldn't let my opinion stop anyone from watching the film though. Make up your own mind on that one.

—Shane Spencer, ARC Parrot IT Team

Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts by Maxine Hong Kingston

This book is a powerful combination of memoir and myth. When I discovered the book in college, I was excited to read the stories of a Chinese American girlhood, and I still have the original paperback version I bought then.

—Pamela Chao, Interim Dean Language and Communication at ARC

Leaders Are Readers

What book would you recommend to ARC students?

It's hard to narrow it down to one, but one of my favorites is *Krik? Krak!* by Edwidge Danticat. It's a collection of short stories about Haitian women, and the way that the book weaves together themes about migration, history, culture, memory, and storytelling is really beautiful and moving. I read it when I was in college, and then felt very fortunate later to meet the author and have her sign my copy.

—Carina Hoffpauir, Ph.D., Dean of English

Notable books I have read recently include: *Prophet Song* by Paul Lynch. A bit of an eerie cautionary tale. *James* by Percival Everett. Interesting new take on Huckleberry Finn. Any of the *Will Trent* series of books by Karin Slaughter. This is a guilty pleasure that helps me escape from the day-to-day realities.

—Melissa Fish, MBA, Dean of Natomas Center & Dual Enrollment

I recommend *Piecing Me Together* by Renée Watson because it is a story of belonging and hope!

—Kaira Bradley, Language & Communication HomeBase Specialist

Leaders Are Readers

What book would you recommend to ARC students?

The Chronicles of Narnia and of course Harry Potter were favorites when I was a teen. I liked both for how easily it was to immerse yourself in the stories and how many of the characters rise to the challenges in front of them – imperfectly but with a commitment to persevere.

–Kaitlyn Collignon, ARC Public Information Officer

A People's History of the United States by Howard Zinn was required for a high school class and really changed the way that I thought about history. I still think about it – less about the actual content and more about how it re-framed my perspective of history from events to people.

–Kaitlyn Collignon, ARC Public Information Officer

The Sookie Stackhouse and Stephanie Plum books are both series I've read for fun in my post-college years. It is easy to get whisked away into the stories and many different characters even though both series are very different.

–Kaitlyn Collignon, ARC Public Information Officer

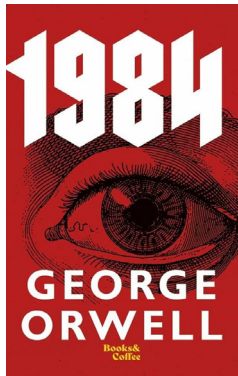
A Little Bit of Everything

My Top 10 Books

I'm absolutely obsessed with fantasy and thrillers – but don't worry, this list isn't just a love letter to dragons and magical chaos! I've mixed in a little bit of everything. You'll find fresh new titles from 2024 alongside some nostalgic classics – books you might've already read, but may feel like picking up again.

Important disclaimer: The numbers are just for organization, not some dramatic countdown – no book battles here!

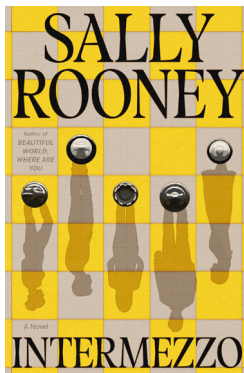
1. 1984 by George Orwell (1949)



I would call this book the birth of the dystopian genre. It's a world where the Party and totalitarianism prevail, but democracy and truth begin to rise in the eyes of Winston, who deep down feels that something is wrong: the delusion of reality has captured the minds of everyone. What really hooks me is the intricate battle between Oldspeak and

Newspeak, where everything is built on doublethink and rewritten history. Along with language, reality is destroyed. As one interesting quote from the book says: "It's a beautiful thing, the destruction of words."

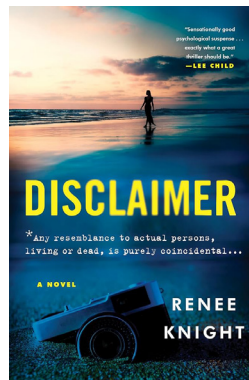
2. Intermezzo by Sally Rooney (2024)



At first, I wasn't sure whether I'd love this psychological novel, but the plot completely outwitted me! The story revolves around two brothers, Ivan and Peter, who both date women with a significant age gap. That was supposed to be the main theme, but the heartbreaking and distorted relationship between the brothers – both grieving the death of their father – stole the show. This is

one of those stories where you expect the growth of one of the brothers, whose personality is pretty obvious. But the complexity of the other brother (who I won't reveal) won me over, and his surprising revelation at the end really squeezed my emotions.

3. Disclaimer by Renee Knight (2015)

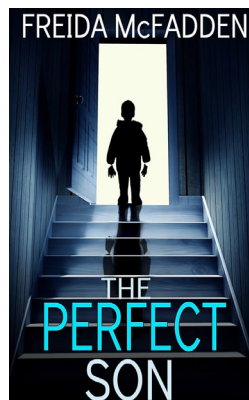


A novel within a novel that could destroy Katherine's perfect reputation. In this thriller by British author Renee Knight, you'll encounter two perspectives on the same events – one distorted, the other real. The attitude toward the main character shifts dramatically, moving from one viewpoint to an entirely different one.

4. Martyr! by Kaveh Akbar (2024)



Have you ever read poetry within a novel? I hadn't – until this debut by Iranian American poet Kaveh Akbar. *Martyr!* explores the complicated and devastated inner world of the main character, Cyrus. He struggles with addiction and depression while mourning the loss of his parents. His journey unfolds step by step, as he slowly becomes someone new – someone with the soul of a poet.

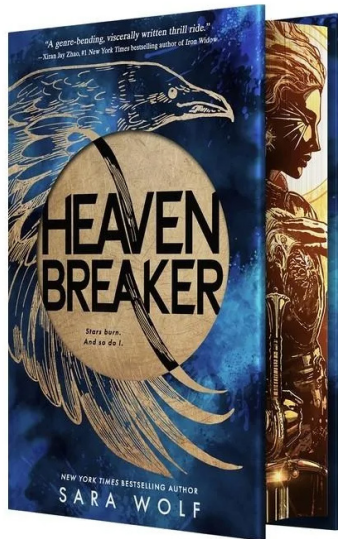


5. The Perfect Son by Freida McFadden (2024)

Freida McFadden is truly amazing in the thriller genre, and this story will definitely pull you into its intense narrative. Erika loves her son Liam, who may

seem like the perfect high school student – but a mother's instinct knows when something isn't right. Deep down, she feels her son might be dangerous. The story begins with the disappearance of a high school girl, and Liam was the last person to see her. It's a gripping, fast-paced thriller told from several points of view – with, of course, Freida's signature twists along the way.

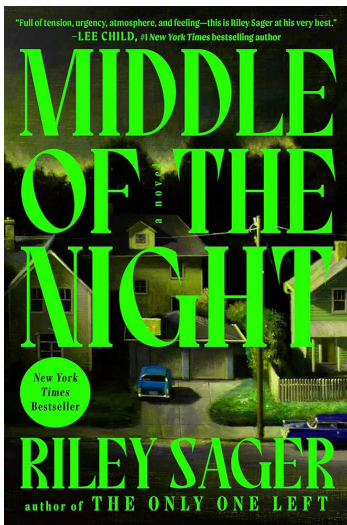
6. *Heavenbreaker* by Sara Wolf (2024)



This is a sci-fi fantasy I remember reading slowly because of its complex narrative and detailed world-building. It hits hard from the very first page with a brutal beginning, but Synali Hauteclare is far braver than anyone in this post-apocalyptic space opera could imagine. It's all about a battle in space, fought by people in massive machines –

and Synali pilots the Heavenbreaker. It's a unique fiction, slow-paced but powerful, with a subtle *Hunger Games* vibe, only this time everything happens in eerie, dark space stations.

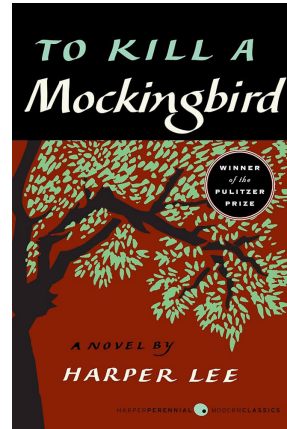
7. *Middle of the Night* by Riley Sager (2024)



It may sound like a basic thriller – a small boy disappears from a tent one night. But this story is anything but simple. It's dynamic, suspenseful, and genuinely chilling, with a strong narrator at the center. Years later, Ethan returns to his childhood home – the same place where his best friend mysteriously vanished. Now, he's determined to uncover the

dark truth, which may be hidden in a long-forgotten building deep in the forest. And be ready, because the ending is so ruthless, it'll have you dropping a tear.

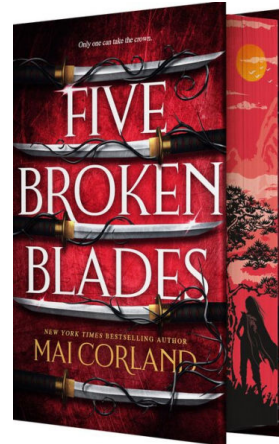
8. *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960)



An iconic classic story with elements of realism, but one that may still resonate with you today. It offers a fascinating narrative on the complexity of racial inequality in the South, seen through the innocent lens of young Scout. The theme of family is incredibly strong here, and of course, the character of Atticus is impossible to feel indifferent

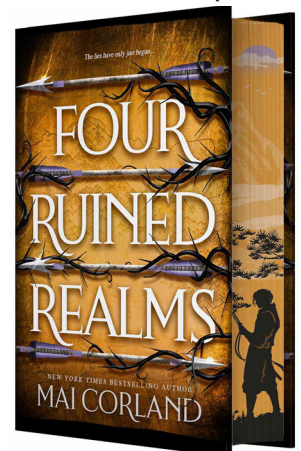
toward. As hope always proves to have the strongest strength.

9. *Five Broken Blades* by Mai Corland (2024)

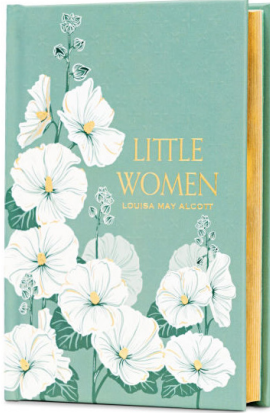


An amazing fantasy novel by American author Mai Corland, *Five Broken Blades* is deeply inspired by Korean culture. The story is told from the perspectives of six different characters, creating a dynamic and fast-paced narrative that can be devoured in just a few days. Its sequel, *Four Ruined Realms*, released in 2025, broke me with its unexpected

ending, and the third book in the series – promising more of the same gripping storytelling – will be coming soon this year. With perfect characters, impeccable pacing, and constant suspense, this series will keep you hooked from start to finish.



10. *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott (1868)



When I first read this light-hearted story, I immediately thought of *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. I'm not sure if that's a strange comparison, but something about it just clicked for me. Maybe it's because one novel deals with greed during Christmas, while the other shows how even the tiniest gifts can be deeply appreciated. Either way, whether

you've read it before or you're picking it up for the first time after this article – get ready to be amazed by the astonishing, playful March sisters: Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy.

Parrot Staff Writer: Sofia Kovalko

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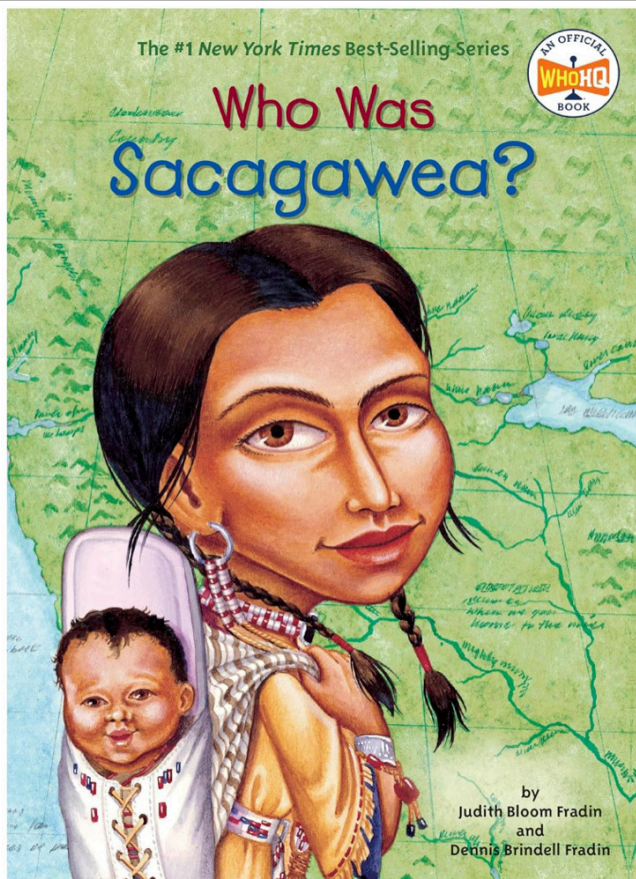
I try all things, I achieve
what I can.

”

— Herman Melville

Shared by Ryan Payne, ESL Center

Who Was Sacagawea?



The story of Sacagawea is not just a historical account of the Lewis and Clark expedition; it is a testament to resilience, intelligence, and the undeniable importance of women in shaping history. In a time when women had no recognized rights, Sacagawea emerged as an indispensable figure, playing a role so vital that without her, the expedition's success would have been uncertain. The book *Who Was Sacagawea?* presents a compelling portrait of this remarkable woman, highlighting her courage, knowledge, and unwavering dedication to the survival of the explorers.

One of the most striking aspects of Sacagawea's journey was the rare equality she was given in a male-dominated era. While the norm of the time dictated that women were inferior and incapable of making significant contributions, Sacagawea shattered those beliefs through her actions. She was not just a passive guide; she was a rescuer, a provider, and a diplomat. When supplies ran low, it was her knowledge of the land that secured food for the men. When the expedition faced threats, it

was her presence that diffused tensions. And most importantly, she was granted a vote in the crucial decision-making process of the journey—an extraordinary acknowledgment of her value at a time when women had no political voice.



This story serves as a powerful reminder that women, when given the same opportunities as men, can not only contribute equally but, in many cases, prove to be even more resourceful and capable. Sacagawea's legacy challenges the outdated notion that men alone drive progress. Her intelligence and bravery ensured the success of a historic mission, yet history has often overlooked the full extent of her impact.

Today, as we continue to fight for gender equality, Sacagawea's story remains more relevant than ever. If a woman in the early 19th century, despite immense societal restrictions, could lead, protect, and provide under extreme conditions, imagine what women can accomplish today when

given full access to education, leadership roles, and equal rights. This book is not just about a past heroine; it is a call to recognize and uplift the countless women whose contributions continue to shape our world.

Sacagawea's journey proves that gender does not determine ability—opportunity does. If we embrace this lesson in our modern society, we will not only honor her legacy but also pave the way for a more just and progressive future.



Sources of photos used in the article:

1. <https://www.amazon.com/Who-Sacagawea-Judith-Bloom-Fradin/dp/0448424851>
2. <https://www.inforum.com/news/north-dakota/sacagawea-is-famous-from-the-lewis-and-clark-story-much-of-what-you-know-about-her-is-wrong-book-argues>

Parrot Staff Writer: Sayed Edres Sadiqi

“

If you're going to change your life, you have to change your thinking.

”

— Craig Groeschel's *Winning the War in Your Mind*

Shared by Zsa Zsa Aranas, ESL Professor

I Don't Like Annotations

Everyone I ask – everyone I know – seems to annotate their books. They highlight favorite lines with neon markers, write notes in the margins, bend corners, or stick in colorful tabs to mark significant moments. I understand why people do it. These techniques can be helpful when it comes to finding quotes quickly, remembering key points, or simply feeling more connected to the text.

Occasionally, I make exceptions when studying with textbooks, though even then, I experience a small sense of regret after making a mark. Once you bend a page or highlight a sentence, it becomes permanent – something that cannot be undone or reversed – and from that point on, the book is no longer quite the same. It changes, in a way that feels as if its original state has been broken.

People often describe annotating as “talking to the text,” and I can see how it might feel that way for some readers. However, I avoid annotating for one simple reason: it distracts me. The moment I stop to write a note, I break the rhythm of reading. I have to pause, reflect, and write something down, and that interruption pulls me out of the experience, distancing me from the narrative. On top of that, my handwriting tends to take on a whimsical form – let’s just say it’s terrible. It’s so messy that it ruins the book more than it helps, drawing attention away from the text itself and toward the disorganized marks I’ve made. I prefer to keep the pages clean and untouched – preserved in their original form – so I can experience the book as it was meant to be read, without my personal markings interfering with its intent.

Instead, I store my thoughts in my mind. When a book resonates with me deeply, I can usually recall the moments that stood out, even without having written them down. In some cases, I even remember the page number, as if I’ve memorized the route of the book itself – a kind of mental map that shows just how deeply the words have stayed with me.

Recently, I’ve discovered a method that feels like a compromise between preserving the book and preserving my reflections. As I read, I type notes into my phone – quotes that move me, page numbers, thoughts – and while it’s not a perfect system and at times even feels a little daunting, as if I’m moving something special from the book into a colder, more distant digital space, it still allows me to revisit what draws me in. Later, I often scroll through those notes, sometimes searching for something I wrote months ago, and although it can take time, I usually find what I need. There’s something almost like a small treasure hunt in that process, and even though it demands a bit of effort, it always feels worthwhile. In this way, I manage to hold onto the parts of the book that matter most to me – without ever altering the pages themselves.

Maybe that’s the beauty of it – some readers leave their mark on the book, and some let the book leave its mark on them. I choose the latter. Quietly, invisibly, the story stays with me. No highlighter needed.

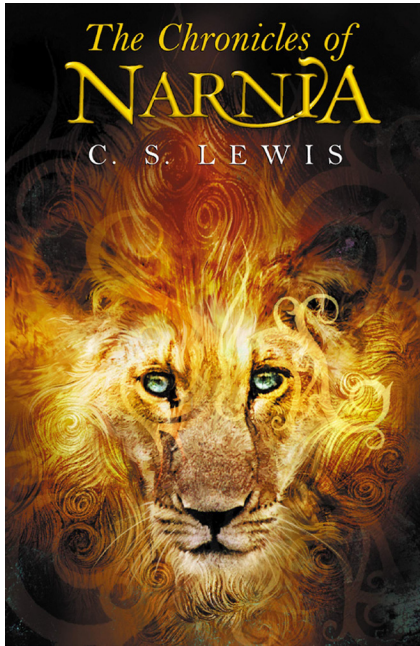
Parrot Staff Writer: Sofia Kovalko

“ My thoughts were full of other things
When I wandered off the path. ”

— Dante Alighieri

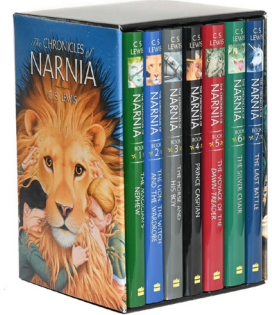
Shared by Ryan Payne, ESL Center

The Chronicles of Narnia



A series of books that profoundly impacted my childhood and shaped my philosophy as I grew up were *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis. Growing up in a Christian family, my parents exposed me to Christian-oriented entertainment, including books.

The books beautifully teach about love, encouragement, and faith while introducing mystical characters and their interactions. One quote from the movie adaptation of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* has stayed with me: “In our world,” said Eustace, “a star is a huge ball of flaming gas. Even in your world, my son, that is not what a star is, but only what it is made of.” This quote moved me to tears when I first read it, awakening a sensation within me that only a writer’s words can evoke.



Although I’ve read many books related to Christianity, including the Bible, none have had the lasting impact that *The Chronicles of Narnia* have had on me.

Getting to know the Pevensie siblings and their magical adventures in the enchanting land of Narnia was always fascinating. I love how Lewis crafted stories that, while rooted in Christian themes, appealed to a broad audience, including non-believers. The series is about the fantastical land created by the majestic lion Aslan, who embodies fierceness, love, fairness, and justice.



Since then, stars have taken on a deeper meaning for me. When I’m photographing the Milky Way, I feel the same sensation that quote evoked. *The Chronicles of Narnia* have become a part of me, and their themes continue to inspire me. Lewis’s writing has a way of touching hearts, and I’m grateful for the impact his stories have had on my life. The way he weaves together fantasy and reality is truly remarkable, leaving a lasting impression on readers.

Parrot Staff Writer: Manny

“

I learned very early the difference between knowing the name of something and knowing something.

”

— Richard Feynman, *Surely You’re Joking, Mr. Feynman!*

Shared by Julia Meyer, ESL Center

Print Books vs E-books

Screens don't feel like stories. The experience of reading e-books, for me, lacks the sense that the story will carve itself into my memory after I read it.

In the past, I read a lot online. I really tried to love it. But the artificial weight of a device will never replace the real weight of something authentic. I love that very first opening of a new book – clean, neat pages, sometimes still sticking together because of fresh printing ink – and that incredible feeling of discovering a treasure that will soon belong only to me.

I know that new generations mostly prefer electronic versions of everything, but I will never betray the classic. Print books are my way of preserving memory. They hold onto the sensory feelings from the first time: the crumpled corner, the front page I accidentally bent too much, and, most importantly, that amazing feeling of holding the book in my hands and hearing the rippling sound of turning page after page. I even loved doing that as a child – flipping through the pages of my mom's books. She is a true reader, and one drawer in our living room is dedicated to her hundreds of books. Just flipping through the pages gave me the feeling that I was smart, even if I didn't read a single word!

Each print book gives me a memory of the past. When I used to spot, from the corner of my eye, the grey-colored cover of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by Clive Staples Lewis on the shelf in my room – my favorite book of childhood – I would instantly remember sitting in the big armchair, reading it with wide-eyed curiosity. That's what print books give you – memory, the act of reminiscing about your reading experience, which Kindle books or any e-book simply can't offer. Other memories come too. I once accidentally (well, not once – it happened often) ripped the corner of a page while flipping too quickly. I was furious with myself, sitting there as if I had betrayed a friend. But it was my book! That tear became part of its story. You can't "accidentally rip" a screen. It's those tiny scars on your books that make them even more yours.

Maybe it's old-fashioned, but I don't want to let go of the feeling of holding a real book, of turning its pages, of seeing it wear and change with time. A print book doesn't just carry a story. It becomes part of your own. Every wrinkle, every corner, every mark you didn't mean to make – it all stays. Screens go black, batteries die, models get replaced. But my books stay.

Parrot Staff Writer: Sofia Kovalko

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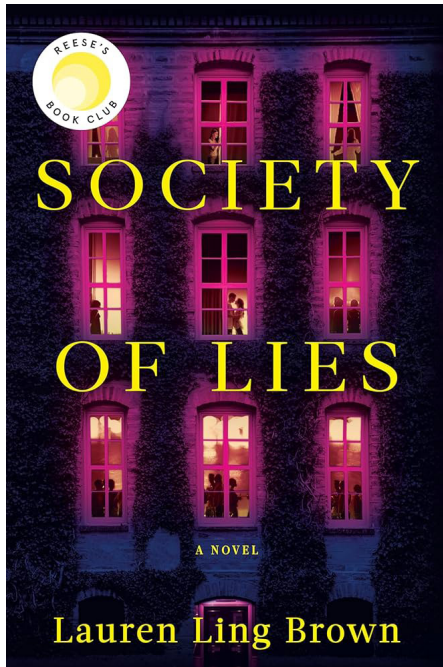
...to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee.

— Herman Melville

”

Shared by Ryan Payne, ESL Center

You Are Invited to the *Society of Lies* by Lauren Ling Brown



Do you pick a book to read because it has gained popularity on social media? Or do you choose it randomly, guided by an inner feeling? In my past experiences, the latter option has worked well for me. Since I am a passionate reader, my journeys to Barnes & Noble bookstore are some of my

most exciting and brightest days. A while ago, I was driving there to buy a book I had planned to get (here you can see the first option) according to the fuss I had heard everywhere – beginning from the review in the *New York Times* to the hubbub on Instagram – but my plans changed a bit in a different direction when I saw it – on the table spot dedicated to thrillers – *Society of Lies* by Lauren Ling Brown. I picked it up, read the blurb. Was I excited? Yes! But I put it down and continued my path to the book I was planning to buy. After that, returning back, I made a circle around that tricky spot with the thrillers – the magnetism of it worked, and I bought it.

What is behind the gorgeous walls of Princeton University? What's the price of being a student there, but moreover, what's the price of being invited to dinner clubs – secret societies where only the selected can join? Maya, the main character, who graduated from Princeton 10 years ago, must again face the harsh realities of secret societies by knowing that her younger sister, Naomi, was found dead in the lake near her alma mater one day before her graduation from Princeton.

(Don't worry, it is not a spoiler; it's just how the story begins). Maya suspects that it is not a coincidence – that her little sister was killed.

I was captivated by reading that book from the first pages. Two points of view, but three different timelines. The present, when Maya is trying to figure out what happened to Naomi. The second, the past, when the younger Maya is trying to recall what it is like being among the elite and paying a big price for being part of THEM. And the third, also the past, when Naomi is trying to follow the very same path her sister did – join THEM.

Reading *Society of Lies* was for me like entering a world where I wanted to be invited, but simultaneously, I was stunned by the implicit meaning of being there. When I was reading the story about Maya and Naomi, I reminisced about my visit to Princeton last Christmas, remembering how I was astonished by the excitement of wandering through the University. Did I imagine then what was going on inside the campuses? No. But do I want to visit it again after this dark story, where Princeton was pictured as a threatening academy? Yes.

Reading this book, I couldn't put it down, as the fictionalized reality of Princeton forced me to think – is it fictionalized? I was twice impressed when I found out that *Society of Lies* is the debut by Lauren Brown, who was once a Princeton student in real life; her very first novel, but how beautifully, engagingly written – the content on these pages made me feel anxious even after I finished.

The themes of sisterhood, the strong bond, truth and lies, secrets and trust, price and consequences – being always on the edge – these you will find if you decide to read *Society of Lies*. You are invited. But are you ready to become a member?

Parrot Staff Writer: Sofia Kovalko

The Book House

There are so many special places in the world, and each person has their own. Some people like famous places such as a museum, theatre, national parks, and others. Other people like quite and special place related to memories, like a parent's home. I have three very special places: a bookstore in St. Petersburg, my home, and a park.

The bookstore "Book House" in St. Petersburg, Russia, is a lovely place for me and my family. The store is located in the old part of the city in the vintage and famous building "Singer Home" and contains two floors. The atmosphere inside amazes me at the entrance because the smell of books and coffee shop scents makes me feel happy. On the first floor, you can find many kinds of postcards, sweet desserts and souvenirs with symbol of the shop or the city for friends presents, as well as shelves of books and a lot of people reading. Also there are more interesting locations with the newest book, where you can talk with an author about their books. I like walking through the rows of books and finding interesting books for myself. On the second floor, there are many board games, interactive books, and toys for kids. There are a lot of interesting children books, and sometimes I get lost among them. I love looking for children's books with my kids, and it's like an exciting adventure. I look at and pick up all the funny covers, hoping that the book will be interesting for me and my kids. After a few hours, I like sitting in the cafe with my family, and drinking coffee with dessert, and admiring the view from the window. In summary, "Book House" is one of my special places that I loved to visit, and I hope I

can find a store like that here.

Another special place for me is my home. We have moved many times, and for me, "my home" is not a special building, but the place where my family lives. Today we live in America, and my home is a two-bedroom townhouse with a small backyard. My daughter and I like to make our home cozy by decorating the walls with many photos, children's paintings and posters. Curtains, rugs and furniture

make our home feel alive, especially the "art-chaos" in the kids' room. My favorite place is the backyard because it is my relaxing place. There, I have all my flowers, palm trees, patio furniture and a grill. I can spend my time here, taking care of flowers, doing homework, drinking tea or coffee alone or with my husband, or having a barbecue party with friends. On Saturday, we have a home group with our friends from church. We have dinner, sing songs with a guitar, talk about God and the Bible, and

pray. Indeed, home is a special place for me, and it's a place of power for my soul and love.

Like for many people, parks are special places for me, too. I like local parks and national parks the same. In local parks, I can walk or run, relax, or do yoga with my friends. We often go there for church picnics, where we barbecue, sing, talk, and play volleyball, tennis, and board games. We can spend the whole day in nature. I also love parks because they are great places for my kids. They play on the playground, ride bikes, play football, and do other activities. After that, they eat and sleep better, and our home is not destroyed. I really love national



American parks because the ones which we visited with our friends were beautiful, amazing. We had a great time and saw many interesting things like big trees, mountains, and waterfalls. In my opinion, parks are beautiful places where you can enjoy your time, have fun, and often want to return again and again.

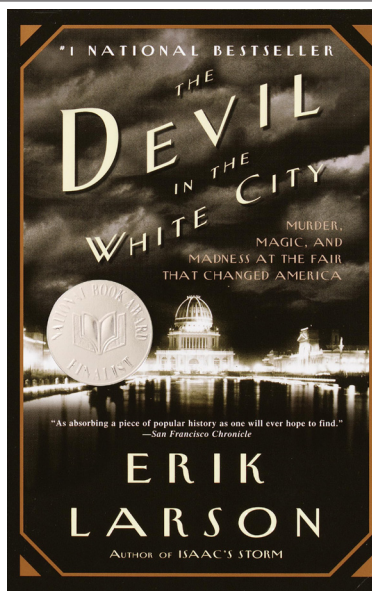
In conclusion, the bookstore, my home, and parks are all special places for me, and I love them

in different ways. They are places of my love and power for my body and soul, and I want to return to them again and again. I hope everyone has a favorite and special place they love and want to go back to or think about.

Natalia Zababurina - ESL 47
Opinion Essay

World Book Day

When the Cover Was Better Than the Story



Have you ever been disappointed by a book you chose?

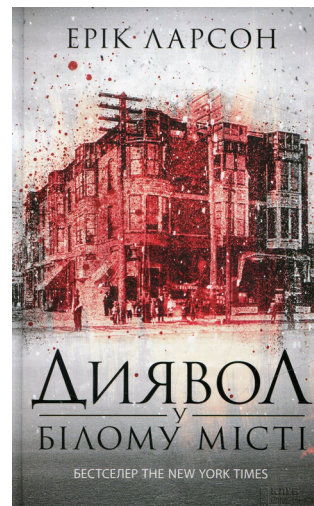
On April 23, World Book Day was celebrated. Normally, this day inspires us to think about our favorite books or the ones that changed our lives, but I decided to approach it from a different angle – by reflecting on a book that I absolutely hated.

It was years ago in Ukraine when I wasn't much of a reader, but I went to a bookstore with my friends (who are devoted readers). I spotted a very interesting cover – gray with red colors – striking! I picked it up, thinking it would be a provocative crime fiction novel. Even the title was loud: *The Devil in the White City* by Erik Larson. I started reading it, and I was extremely disappointed.

It turned out to be nonfiction, based on American history – specifically about the Chicago World's Fair. I was expecting a suspenseful story, but instead, it was more of a documentary. I thought it would have a bit of suspense, but no. The book was packed with

excessive research – details on the architects who built the fair, how they designed it, what kind of soil they used for planting flowers, how the buildings and fountains were constructed – I was so bored and frustrated. At one point, I decided to stop, and that's when I realized it was a complete mismatch and failure. I was expecting something different and got something entirely dry.

Sorry if you loved that book (I know it was highly praised), but it just wasn't for me. It happened because the blurb on the book promised a completely different angle to the story. Instead, I felt like I had entered the world of a documentary, packed with details that weren't necessary for me. I read it until about the middle, then closed it for good, never giving it another chance.



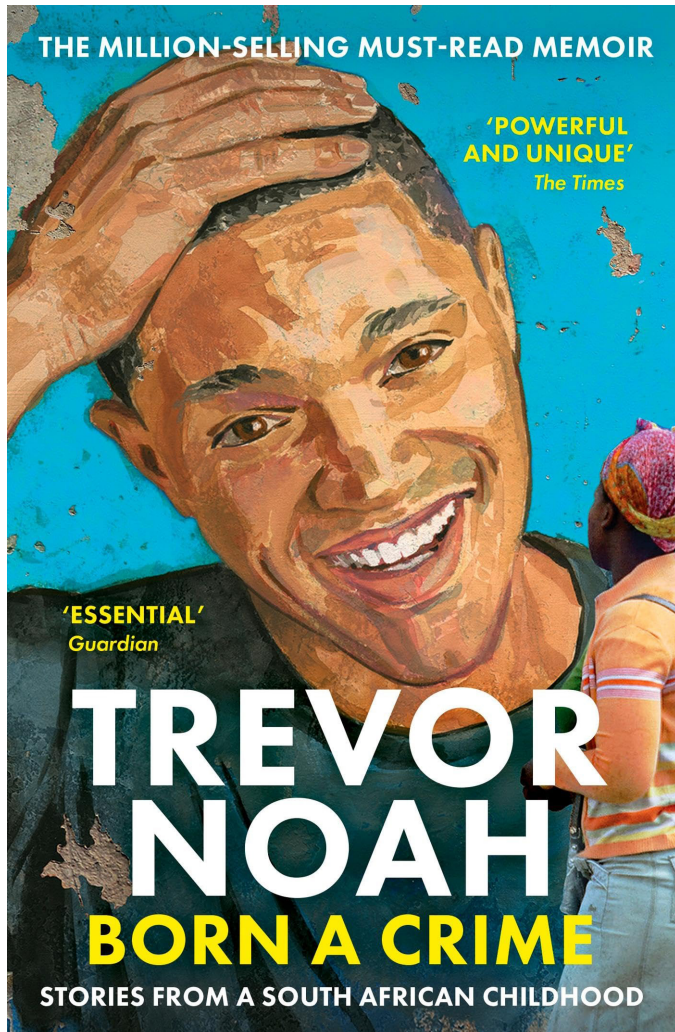
Ukrainian edition

I guess that book taught me one thing: sometimes the real “devil” in the bookstore is the blurb that tricks you into thinking it’s something it’s not!

Parrot Staff Writer: Sofia Kovalko

Read and Response to *Born a Crime*

This essay was originally published in issue 160.



Trevor Noah's book *Born A Crime* is a story of his life that is an autobiography. This book tells the story of Trevor Noah and his family in South Africa during apartheid. Trevor learns a lot about what the world is like and encounters many situations in the book. The challenges he faced helped him become who he is today. In writing this book, Trevor Noah wants everyone to see what he went through and what it was like to live this life. Noah is of mixed race, with a white father and a black mother, which makes his very existence a violation of the laws of apartheid against interracial relationships. Noah and his single mother are believed to be suffering from poverty: apartheid laws are designed to keep

non-whites too poor and hopeless to fight the government. But the end of apartheid does not end this poverty or inequality, rather, it leaves lasting wounds, especially in indigenous African communities, who remain trapped in a world limited by violence, poverty, and suspicion. In the book *Born a Crime*, Noah achieved his purpose very well as he gives a deep insight into what it was like to grow up in apartheid in South Africa and presents a deeply personal view of how racism has shaped itself.

Trevor Noah emphasized a lot of powerful examples for the readers to learn. One of them involves his mother, Patricia, as he wrote in his book, "We tell people to follow their dreams, but you can only dream of what you can imagine, and depending on where you come from, your imagination can be quite limited. The highest rung of what's possible is far beyond the world you can see. My mother showed me what was possible" (Noah 73). Patricia decided to give birth to Trevor during apartheid and raised him herself. More importantly, she wanted Trevor to be free to go anywhere, do whatever he wanted, and be who he was. She also gave him the tools to do so. She taught him English as a native and read to him constantly. She talked to him like an adult, which was unusual for South Africa. She kept telling him Bible stories and asking how they related to his life. She taught him what the school could not think of. She said, "Even if he never leaves the ghetto, he will know that the ghetto is not the world. If that is all I accomplish, I have done enough" (Noah 74). Her main point in life was to show Trevor that there are far more opportunities in life, she wanted him to go out in the world and not stay in his place in the ghetto like most of the people at that time did.

Another example that stood out in the book is when Noah wrote, "Maybe I didn't look like you, but if I spoke like you, I was you" (Noah 56). In this quote, Noah refers to his knowledge of a few languages. He could get along with anyone from

different cultures and it helped him overcome some bad situations.

My favorite chapter from *Born a Crime* is chapter 5, "The Second Girl". The reason it stands out is of Noah's mother, Patricia, who said to Noah, "I chose to have you because I wanted something to love and something that would love me unconditionally in return" (Noah 63). Patricia never felt like she belonged anywhere, she grew up with nothing, so the reason she had Noah was to have someone in her life. Despite all their difficulties in life, she still somehow managed to show Noah the world, the life she never had. Patricia expresses her love for Trevor, showing him opportunities that others do not see. She acknowledges that even if he never succeeds, this expanded sense of opportunity is his own reward, as it gives him a perspective that will never be available to those who have spent their entire lives trapped by Soweto. Just as he sought his own freedom by living in the white part of Johannesburg center during apartheid, she seeks Trevor's freedom by showing him things he can achieve himself, even if the world does everything it can to stop him.

I really liked this book as it showed me a lot

about apartheid in South Africa. This book gave me a better idea of the system of racial discrimination before and after its cessation by survivors. His mother seemed to be a strong, intelligent, and religious woman who passed on much of her wisdom to Noah. In Noah's place, I would listen more to her religious stories and not argue against God. In this book, Trevor Noah tries to teach readers how to find your path in the world, how to belong somewhere, despite the difficult life you have. I would recommend this book *Born a Crime* to others as it is a great opportunity to learn about the apartheid regime in South Africa. Since Noah was born a few years before it was exterminated, he offers a deep immersion in the country's culture before and after apartheid. He skillfully deconstructs the effects of apartheid that have affected society.

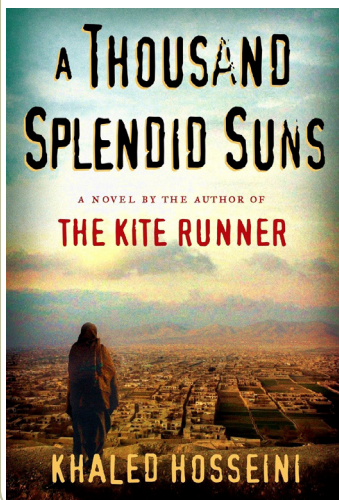
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Sofiya Sidorchuk - ESL W340
Opinion Essay

Book Review: *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

This essay was originally published in issue 162.

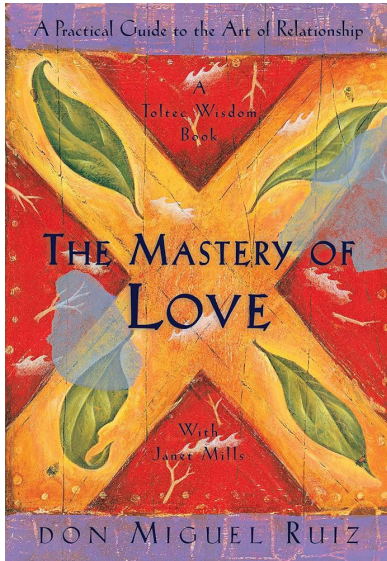


I want to talk about the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Afghan writer Khaled Hosseini. Last year I read this book. The author talks about the tragic fate of two Afghan women who were the wives of one man. Several months have passed, and I cannot forget these two women because it is hard to read about them. Life brought these women closer. Now they are not rivals, but close people who support each other. They wanted to be just happy, but only one of them waited for her happiness. Another died without trial or investigation. I want to re-read this novel, but I think it is challenging. I would rate this book five stars.

Nina Polyakova - ESL L310
Opinion Paragraph

Book Review: *The Mastery Of Love*

This essay was originally published in issue 162.



I really like to read books. The content of the last book I read was very useful, and while reading it, I was very relaxed. The book itself is a peace-bringer for the mind and the soul. I think the title *The Mastery Of Love* illustrates how deep Don Miguel Ruiz's thoughts are. This is a must-have type of book for a person with a busy lifestyle. I read this book recently during the winter holidays. While being on a plane for a 6-hour flight, this book delighted me so much that when I returned home to Sacramento, I bought Don Miguel Ruiz's entire collection of books. I like how the author describes the feeling of love for children, for the husband, and for God. I haven't read the other books yet, but their titles are just as captivating. On a scale of 5, I'll score this book the highest. *The Mastery of Love* deserves to be among my most beloved books.

Lidia Cebotari - ESL L310
Opinion Paragraph

“

There is no folly of the beast of the earth
which is not infinitely outdone by the mad-
ness of man.

”

— Herman Melville

Shared by Ryan Payne, ESL Center

Student Editors: **Tuyet Le, Emmanuel Madrid, Mohammed El mrani, Sayed Edres Sadiqi, Asila Sadiqi, and Sofia Kovalko.**

Faculty Advisors: **Patrick Hoggan and David Evans**

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