

Pass the Torch
By Kristen Shifflett

I fell in love when I was 4 and haven't looked back.

It's not the most conventional one, but I know I'm involved in a committed relationship I won't ever quit.

I am a book lover, bibliophile, bookworm, however you want to call it. I just love to read books. While others easily fire off their favorite titles of *Harry Potter*, *The Hobbit*, or even *The Count of Monte Cristo*, my love is unspecified. I love to read from fiction, nonfiction, historical thrillers, mysteries, romance, memoirs, and even manga and graphic novels.

I know it's odd. One of the first-get-to-know-you questions and I always end up explaining my inability to pick just one. It's an impossibility.

Maybe it's a love of a different kind.

My parents helped strike the spark of a love for reading books through their avid reading. After a long day at work, my father sat in his armchair and quietly perused the news and finance sections of the newspaper. Whenever my mother had a chance to take a break from kids and work, she picked up one of her hardback mystery novels and settled in to while away an hour or two deducing the killer's identity.

"Why did they do this?" The question burned at me to figure out what was so interesting.

When I started learning to read at 4, reading frustrated me, which in turn made me hate it. I struggled to understand the allure. But at that age, I adored my parents and wanted to mimic everything they did. Kids question everything if allowed and I was no different.

In the manner of every kid who ever asked a why question, I asked my mom, "Why do you like to read?" "Well, honey," she said, "it's fun."

Her answer cinched it. I had to keep trying if it could be fun. So I picked up a Dr. Seuss book and buckled down to figure out how.

At first, it was stubbornness driving me on, but I kept at it. It took a couple months for me to end up falling in love. I soon began devouring one book after the next. I discovered a fierce and passionate love for reading because I finally figured out what was so interesting and captivating about it all, the little microcosm inside the book.

I believe books matter. Nothing captures my attention more firmly than its siren call. They transport me to lands of fantasy, mystery, romance, and adventure faster than any means of transportation. Who wouldn't want to journey to so many different worlds?

There's confusing mysteries to ensnare and entrap the mind with thrilling twists. Sappy stereotypical romances suck you in with romantic ideals and drama. Historical thrillers winding back the clock and showcasing the past and fictional present with interesting ideas about what could have happened. Memoirs laying bare a person's hopes, dreams, secrets, triumphs and disappointments.

The branching possibilities of life portrayed in books captivated me.

I signed up for my first library card when I was 7 (I still use the original) and promptly made the library my usual weekend haunt. My dad was strangely (to me, at least) accommodating and patient with my penchant for wandering the local library branch for a couple hours or so almost every weekend. He would patiently wait with newspaper in hand while I scoured the children's section and later the young adult and fiction sections in search of a good book.

I frequently checked out around 10 books almost every weekend. One time I even managed to hit the maximum allowed, 50 books! I can tell you that was a busy two or three weeks.

My parents granted me a lot of trust and laxly monitored what I read in my pre-teen years. They never restricted or banned books from our household and trusted me to be mature enough to understand what I encountered would be either too mature and to skip ahead or to learn new information.

Growing up, the worlds I explored were Disney fairytales, *Nancy Drew* novels, the *Harry Potter* series, Tamora Pierce novels, and *The Chronicles of Narnia* but my interests have evolved. While my childhood favorites will always have their place, the books of adult life have expanded my world even further than I ever imagined as I've delved into the existential and how we look at ourselves, others, and society.

Life teaches lessons but alongside ones learned in reality, I gleaned sage advice from books about how to navigate life, relationships, friendships, love, fear, disappointments and dealing with death. I experienced the uplifting moments and crushing disappointments alongside fictional heroes and heroines I so avidly followed. They were dear friends waiting to catch me in times I didn't feel as if I had any.

There was never a 'What Would (insert fictional character's name here) Do' moment in my life so far but the lessons I've learned from books are vast. I carry them with me in life.

Disney showed me the magic and creativity individuals are capable of creating.

J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series taught me about the importance of loyalty and friendships. Steve Kloves, the writer who transformed the *Harry Potter* series into screenplays, drafted one of the most inspiring quotes of the entire series about hope and perseverance in the face of adversity. It's conveyed by fictional headmaster Albus Dumbledore, "Happiness can be found even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light."

Nancy Drew taught me to be curious about the world, to question everything and to not be deterred by the first rejection.

Tamora Pierce wrote young adult novels about teens with magical abilities. Her protagonists Alanna, Kel, and Daine showed me the importance of striving for excellence when faced with misogyny and a woman's power.

C. S. Lewis' Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy taught me the value of bravery, intelligence, compassion, and levity. Such a small selection from a much wider pool and yet the lessons passed on will continue to resonate with me.

I devoured those books and quickly moved up in reading levels because I had exhausted the options I found interesting at the library. By the time I was 12, I travelled back and forth between young adult and fiction and literature section. I would patiently prowl up and down the

stacks, occasionally grabbing one from the shelf to add to the pile I had already started. I was always searching for a good page turner I could lose myself in for an hour or two.

I lost myself in countless pages and used them as an escape and a tool to broaden my worldview because the more I read, the more I wanted to know and continue exploring. Reading allowed me to expand my vocabulary, improve my spelling and taught me to convey my thoughts on paper how I perceived the world around me.

My mother and father have influenced what I've grown up to enjoy. I hold a special place in my heart for mystery novels, especially works by authors James Patterson or Janet Evanovich, because of my mom's love for them. An affection for mystery novels developed my interest in historical thrillers, classics, and memoirs. My dad's daily perusal of the news and finance sections of the paper pointed me towards nonfiction works.

Let's be honest though. Not every relationship is perfect. There are high and low points so don't think it's been all sunshine and rainbows. Some selections are a struggle to get through with chapter after chapter of trite, boring, or useless blathering. With the variety available today, it baffles me how the search for quality works can be akin to trying to find an exceptional voice in a crowd of tone deaf vocalists.

Just like the idiom 'there's plenty of fish in the sea', there are plenty of books in the library to discover. I'm a bit of a serial dater, jumping from one to the next and falling in love quickly and breaking up just as quickly. But when it ends, I move onto a new relationship still treasuring the memories.

As I'm a little older now at 24, I'm still involved in a deep and abiding loving relationship and books remain my most treasured possessions. There's a running joke in my family that I've collected so many over the years that I'm building myself a library in my room. I own around 200 right now. Novels and classics by great authors like Austen, Brontë, Dickens, Orwell, Kerouac, Albus, Tolkien, Martin, and numerous other modern fiction and nonfiction authors are stacked around, under, and even on my bed. Those miniature worlds surround me and beckon me onwards to follow the call.

Sometimes I think that maybe I have too many, but I can never bring myself to give them away even if I have outgrown some of them. My books are like snapshots of my childhood growing up that I will treasure and keep on collecting.

I'll always be grateful for the lessons my parents and books have taught me about life. I hope that one day I can strike the same love my parents instilled in me in others and that they too will read books and love them just as much as I do.