



## Life-Changing Literature

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**W**HEN I WAS A CHILD, I loved books about animals. *Watership Down*. The Redwall series by Brian Jacques. *The Deptford Mice* by Robin Jarvis. Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH. My favourite book of all, though, was *Jurassic Park* by Michael Crichton. Yes, I was a precocious child. It's been all downhill ever since. I remember stealing a copy of *Jurassic Park* from the bookshelves at my parents' church. I loved the cover, which looked scary. More importantly, I loved dinosaurs. I often wished I *was* a dinosaur, or a talking mouse.

Why was I so obsessed with inhabiting an animal's point of view? Maybe it was due to my own background. As a child of British-American parents, living in 1980s Colombia, I was often conscious of how my family stood out. I was also a twin, which set me apart from most children. Dinosaurs, talking mice, travelling rabbits — I must have found them relatable in their strangeness. I think everything useful I've ever learned about writing — imagination, adventure, escapism, point of view, voice — I learned from these books.

The next stage in my life, in terms of life-changing literature, is a stage I will call my Dark Phase. You can think of it as the Goth album of my reading career. In middle school and high school, I was all about what I'll call dark literature — dark topics, dark themes. The more messed up the better. I especially loved *The Colour Purple* by Alice Walker, which gave me terrible nightmares. I even kept it hidden outside in the garden shed, because I was afraid if my parents found me reading it, they would be



appalled. To my parents' credit (or perhaps their detriment), they never censored anything. I loved Lois Duncan, who wrote about murderers, serial killers, and witches. I loved Chuck Palahniuk's earliest novels: *Fight Club*, *Survivor*, *Invisible Monsters*. And I loved *American Psycho*.

Why this obsession with violence and death? Maybe I was just a moody, pretentious teenager — wait, I definitely was; but the nineties was a particularly turbulent time in Colombia. I think my subconscious was trying to make sense of what was happening around me. Violence went on to become a key theme in the first two books I published, *The Lucky Ones* and *The Anthill*. Both these books are an attempt, of sorts, at making sense of my life in Colombia.

Looking back, I wish I'd had more exposure as a teenager to local Colombian writing — literature from Cali, my hometown city, and literature from the Afro-Colombian community. I wasn't exposed to these books at all until much later in life. It makes me sad. It's terrible that Colombian fiction wasn't an earlier part of my literary development, although it's definitely extremely important now. There's one Cali-based writer in particular that I love, a writer called Andrés Caicedo. He wrote a fantastic novel called *¡Que viva la musica*, (*Liveforever*), about a degenerate young woman from Cali obsessed with salsa, rock and roll, dancing, and drugs. I would have absolutely loved this novel as a teenager. But there's no way any teacher in my conservative high school would have put it on the syllabus. I suspect it would have been seen as subversive, immoral, and possibly even communist.

My creative-writing students often share that it was their earliest experiences as readers that made them want to write. This makes sense to me: who we are is formed early. Fortunately, reading is a lifelong project, especially in terms of finding life-changing literature. What are the recent books that have changed my life? To be honest, there's too many to list. Roberto Bolaño, Anne Tyler, Toni Morrison, Philip K. Dick, J. G. Ballard, Iain Banks... And then there's rereading books: *Don Quixote*,



the short stories of Borges. At some point in my life, I will have to make a choice between rereading what I love, and reading new material. It's going to be tough.

Ultimately, life-changing literature has reframed my way of looking at the world, at myself, and at the act of writing itself. I find this comforting: it's truly never too late to change your life.

Ultimately, I see the books we read as talismanic objects, gifts we can carry with us throughout time. To this day, I keep rereading the books I read as a child, as a teenager, as an adult. Every time I read them, they've changed. And even years later, they still change me.