I grew up with stereotypical Indian beliefs. I was to be at the top of my class, to never lie, and to never show too much skin. I was destined to cook and clean for my future family and to be an altruistic mother, sister, daughter, and friend. I felt as though I was a bird locked up in a cage instead of one soaring free underneath the endless sky.

I didn’t know what to do with myself. I needed an escape from reality, and as a result, books became a drug I couldn’t live without. Throughout the years, I’ve been a resident of Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County, marveled at the white whale while aboard the Pequod, journeyed alongside Odysseus, danced the night away with Jay Gatsby, and strolled down Swann’s Way. I live, love, laugh, and cry with these fictional characters I feel a connection with. When I read, my world fades away and I’m left with a new reality. I knew I’d found something special.

Reading is my therapy, inspiring me to be more open with my thoughts and feelings. I developed a tenacious attitude, ultimately being more successful in anything I did. I’ve adopted an adventurous spirit from Robinson Crusoe, empathy from David Copperfield, and wit from Marquise de Merteuil.

There is a part of every book I read that will stay with me forever. It forces me to grow more compassionate, honest, and determined with every novel I read. The characters from these novels have molded me into a more resilient person--one who is content with what she has, but also willing to fight for what she wants.

When looking at myself now, I no longer see that insecure, fear-stricken embodiment of who I was. Instead, I see a strong, confident, courageous, leader who will someday conquer the world. I’ve finally become a free bird, self-assured and ready to take flight into the unexplored skies above. I’ll continue to grow and better myself, as my life is an unfinished book with me as the author.