Reading List

Trying to narrow down your favourite books to just nine feels like an impossible task for a book lover, let alone one who is doing their PhD in English Lit. So what you’ll find below are a selection of favourites that struck a cord with me; that described thoughts and feelings and experiences that resonated with my own; books that taught me to be more critical of myself and the world that I live in; books that taught me how to act ethically and with compassion – both towards myself and others. I hope that these books inspire you, challenge you, make you cry, make you think, and make you want to act.

*The Argonauts,* Maggie Nelson: Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* is everything that I want to be as a writer. Seen as one of the pioneering texts in the genre known as “auto-theory,” Nelson artfully blends memoir and critical theory in order to tell the story of becoming a mother at the same time as her partner is transitioning. Nelson’s text also grapples with the ethics of writing, of representation, and radical intimacy. After I finished reading *The Argonauts*, I laid down and had a gentle cry.

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*Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë: You’ve probably heard the Kate Bush song, in which Cathy sings to the man she loves but can never be with – because, well, class and race and all that stuff that people really cared about, especially in the 19th century. But if you haven’t read the book, you should get on that ASAP. This is one of the books that made me fall in love with literature and helped me understand that love, is, well, complicated. As Kate Bush/Cathy sings: “I hated you. I loved you, too.”

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*Collected Stories of Carson McCullers*, Carson McCullers: Despite the fact that Tennessee Williams proclaimed McCullers to be the most important writer of the 20th century, very few people have ever heard of her. McCullers is most famous for *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1946), published when she was just 22! Her novella, *The Member of the Wedding*, is perhaps my favourite. Set in the American south, the story follows 12-year old Frankie as she tries to find her “we of me.” McCullers’ stories are populated by freaks, strange girls, and misfits who’re all trying to figure out how to foster intimate relationships with others.

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*what purpose did i serve in your life,* Marie Calloway: I might be one of the only people ever to say, “I love this book.” Calloway’s text blurs the lines between fiction and memoir, as it offers 12 stories in which the protagonist, also named Marie, follows her desires. From losing her virginity to a man she just met to fleeting moments of prostitution, her sexual odyssey addresses the ambivalent nature of desire: sometimes the things Marie wants don’t make her feel so good. Instead of judging herself, Marie recounts these experiences with a detachment that unsettles readers. But that’s the whole point.

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*Citizen: An American Lyric,* Claudia Rankine: I can’t count the number of times that I picked up this book, read a section, and had to put it down. As a white woman living in Canada, *Citizen* made me confront my white privilege in a way that was deeply uncomfortable and painful – just as it should be. Rankine’s collection of poetry, which is also in part a memoir, is not just about addressing the rampant systemic racism in America, but about anger and grief and the ways in which those feelings are deemed inappropriate by the white status quo. Rankine’s text is necessary reading.

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*Rookie Yearbook*. Words can’t begin to describe how much I love *Rookie Magazine*, an online magazine for teen girls started by Tavi Gevinson in 2011. *Rookie* is everything that I wish I’d had when I was a teen girl: stories that address – but refuse to judge – all of the feelings that teen girls have. With stories like “Everybody Farts” and “How to Make it Look Like You Weren’t Just Crying in Less Than Five Minutes,” *Rookie* is not just a breath of fresh air, but it’s vital reading for teens and adults alike.

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*The Empathy Exams*, Leslie Jamison: I can’t count the number of times I’ve reference Jamison’s essay “The Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain.” Like Maggie Nelson, Jamison is a major inspiration for my own writing. Her ability to blend theory and her personal experiences appears effortless. If you want to think about the ways in which we talk about bodies and the ways in which we subject ourselves to pain, seek it out, the pains that we’ve experienced against our will and need to put into language, and the how to foster empathy (towards yourself and others) you should read this book.

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*Diary of a Teenage Girl*, Phoebe Gloeckner: Reading Gloeckner’s *Diary* was a revelation. Most stories of female coming of age that involve losing one’s virginity end with death, abandonment, disease, and I every other bad thing ever. As someone who lost her virginity at a young age, who enjoyed sex but didn’t know how to seek out healthy sexual relations, and who managed to figure things out in the end, I’ve always wanted to read a text that reflected my experience – and what I imagine to be the experiences of many young girls. Gloeckner’s graphic novel did just that.

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/6/6f/Diary\_of\_a\_Teenage\_Girl,\_cover\_of\_revised\_edition\_2015.jpg

*H is For Hawk*, Helen MacDonald: Grief is perhaps one of the hardest emotions we’ll ever have to deal with. In MacDonald’s memoir she recounts how she undertook the task of training a goshawk, and how this task forced her to confront the loss of her father.

As someone who lost her mother at a young age, I’ve always been drawn to narratives that talk about loss and the ways in which that loss shapes the lives of those left behind. More recently, I’ve begun to think more about the ways in which we process – or fail to process – grief.

https://files.allaboutbirds.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/H\_is\_for\_Hawk\_cover450.jpg