

Upon a single shelf in my bedroom, shrouded by shadow and dust, I hide the books that are most important to me. I keep them away from the curious hands of my younger siblings, who often roam my room with wild abandon, to preserve them. I want them to remain in the state that I remember—in the state that they changed me. The lessons I learned from these novels are the lessons I still live by today.



I. *Anthem* by Ayn Rand was a novel I read first in eighth grade English, and then again in the summer before high school started. I'd heard all of the horror stories by then and was terrified of going to a new school. The mere thought of high school, with its towering upperclassmen and impossibly strict teachers, made my heart race. I'd learned that surviving high school meant blending in—a seemingly hopeless task for a Black nonbinary kid in Florida.

But *Anthem* taught me the opposite: it wanted me to emphasize my individuality. It reminded me that I don't have to conform to anyone else's ideas of what a person should be; I get to define myself. As scared as I was when I walked into school on the first day, underneath the storm of anxiety, *Anthem* already had laid the foundation for me to be my authentic self. And I still look back on this novel today for strength to remind myself to pursue my ambitions with a ruthless dedication, creating spaces for myself in rooms where no one else looks like me.



II. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky spoke to me in tenth grade. I'd already gotten used to high school, but as shy as I was, I hadn't completely grown into the person I wanted to be. I'd made a few friends the previous year, but I didn't feel like I truly knew anyone—or that anyone truly knew me. I felt like I only existed on a surface level.

*Perks* taught me the value of living in the moment and appreciating the depth that exists in everything. I dedicated myself to my passions, diving further into my school robotics team, and in doing so, I opened myself up to make new connections. I was reminded of how important it is to love and appreciate the people who I surrounded myself with—to build a community, a family, out of my friends. I expanded my horizons, forging new bonds that have lasted through the rest of my high school experience. In reading *Perks*, I became infinite.



III. *Ender's Game* by Orson Scott Card has remained with me through time. I read it first as a curious child, then again during adolescence, then once more last year. Last August, I turned back to the things that had inspired me in my youth in self-reflection. After combing through some of the other books on my dusty shelf, *Ender's Game* found me when I needed the motivation to face a world more turbulent than ever before. It reminded me to think critically, be

inquisitive, and most importantly, speak up. I began to interact with people in a new light, promoting education in diversity and inclusion in every conversation. *Ender* taught me how to advocate for both myself and others; in that advocacy, I finally found myself.

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These novels, like guiding hands, continue to nurture the person I've become. I appreciate the depth and individuality in both myself and others. I'm prepared to connect with new people, sharing the lessons and experiences I've gained and listening to what they have to share. As I move forward in my life, I continue to read as much as I can, searching for yet another book that might bring a new realization upon me.