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From Hate to Love: Discovering my passion for Reading

Great. Another novel. Another novel that I won't read, won't remember, and will have to weasel my way through for the next month. It always goes like this: The teacher gives us a novel, I read the first chapter or so, and then I give up because before I know it, I'm behind everyone else. I'm too slow of a reader to even bother trying to keep up. Don't even get me started on those confounded comprehension packets! I am so pokey at reading, by the time I end the chapter, I haven't hardly retained enough information to recall for answering the questions.

I remember during my middle school years, I didn't know how to cope with the reading assigned to us in English class. Heck, I didn't even realize that I had problems. I just figured most people had the same experience as me except for those select few that had finished the novel by the end of the first week. Others just learned how to manage well enough to get through it day-to-day. For me? My book just ended up being an extra weight I carried around for me like a unlucky rabbit's foot.

I guess I knew I had problems, but I didn't realize they were problems that could be fixed. I thought I just wasn't focused or determined or didn't care enough—at least that's how my teachers made the situation seem like. Every so often, I was being pulled out of English by my teacher giving me the third-degree about how I'm a good student, I just need to start doing the reading. That was when they gave me positive reinforcement. Then you have the one time when my seventh-grade English teacher, Ms. Cheney, took me outside the classroom but forgot

to shut the door. She had noticed next to none of my yellow *Phantom of the Tollbooth* comprehension packet had been filled out. She chewed me out about how I need to be doing these *and* that I needed to be on top of things *and* if I need help I should ask her or my classmates *and* I shouldn't be having this hard of a time, these questions are easy, *and* how I need to be doing my homework (basically insinuating I'm lazy if I can't get something like a comprehension packet filled out). She topped off the rambling lecture with a pink slip and an hour of detention for not getting my work done. Not only that, but now I had to walk back into the classroom filled with a big bunch eavesdroppers that hid their snickering as I slumped back into my desk with a red face and even more hatred towards our assigned reading. Actually, make that reading in general because at this point, I didn't enjoy any of it.

I got myself out of the scolding though as I progressed through my English classes by the adolescent hairs starting to poke out of my changing face with an ingenious technique that I like to call: *bullshitting*. Man, did I have those teachers fooled. I really crafted my art as I skirted my way through high school. To this day, I have trouble remembering what we read those first few years of high school. SparkNotes, skimming, and simply knowing where to look got me by when it came to tests and papers. I usually filled out the worksheets and packets haphazardly, knowing we'd go over them anyway in class, so I would fix my answers then. I read bits and pieces, just enough to swindle my way through another assigned novel. I mean, what was the point? What did reading those novels do for me beside bring me frustration and anguish? Those teachers just tortured us by giving us something to do. I couldn't keep up, I had a hard time remembering and recollecting facts after reading, and I just didn't like reading enough to stay focused. There just didn't seem to be much hope for me and reading. We had definitely gone our separate ways a long time ago—or so it seemed.

Senior English had something else in store for me and reading. English for this year had a strange path but a great line-up of teachers. I took the first semester of Senior English in the summer prior to the school year and the second semester in the spring with everybody else. I don't know if the English gods decided enough was enough, but they summoned me the two counselors of English to help me with my relationship with reading in ways I hadn't imagined.

Mrs. Danowitz, my summer school teacher, packed the semester with a syllabus of short stories, Beowulf, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. A concoction of intense and tiresome English entities that I figured I would have to trudge through with my bullshitting skills. First came Beowulf. Thanks, Mrs. Danowitz, for starting us off with a dense fantasy from the beginning of the second millennia. I rolled my eyes and opened up the twelfth-grade anthology that was so large they had to split it into two volumes. I flipped to page 6,043 or something like that and got ready to stare vacantly at the page. Until Mrs. Danowitz started the audio. The audio?

Don't think I'm that absent from the world of reading that I don't know what an audiobook is, but this audio she was using struck my ears differently. The recording wasn't some nobody sitting in a sound room with a monotonous voice reading with just as much effort as I would when I read to myself. No. This recording not only featured a strong-voiced heroic narrator, but they filled the passages with sounds, music, and suspense. I remember the boastful introduction of the story, Beowulf's flawless character description and superhuman qualities thrust into a courageous entrance. The passage engulfed me as this knight of high regards was being brought to life.

Pause. I can't believe she just stopped it right there. Just as the reading was getting good!

Woah. Woah, woah, woah. *Woah!* Wait... Did I just say that? The *reading* was getting *good*?! I was immersed in the *assigned reading*?! Must have been some sort of fluke because I could never like reading!

Mrs. Danowitz asked us to pull out a sheet of paper. In big letters, she had us put our name on the top of the page. For the next ten minutes, she had us write a boastful epic introduction to ourselves. I used terrible bubble letters to scribble my name above, and before I knew it, I had taken the intensity of the introduction to Beowulf and the recording to write a two-age bragging about who I am. I felt like a modern-day Beowulf. Shortly after, we read our pieces to the class. I, still buzzing after the high of actually getting into the reading, stood up and announced myself to the class with just a tad less fervor than the narrator of the recording (but, you know, the spirit was there). My classmates may have looked at me like the odd kid that gets a bit too invested in the work, but at this point, I didn't care. I was starting to get the problem, and the problem wasn't reading.

The rest of the semester continued this way. Being our class was a summer course, we had more flexibility to learn and absorb the reading in different ways. Mrs. Danowitz used videos and narrations to enhance the text in ways past teachers hadn't. She involved us. She would pause, ask us questions (and not those lame comprehension questions either), and make us a part of the reading itself. The connections to myself and what I was doing with the literature was finally starting to kindle. Another way Mrs. Danowitz surprised me was when she showed us an episode of *Lost* in relation to *Macbeth*. She showed us how literature influences the world around us, especially television and movies. "Shakespeare's plays," she said, "can be found in references throughout media you consume on a daily basis." Using the show, she played a clip

and explained to us how the characters seen on the show are references to the three witches that provide foreshadowing to the main characters and audience.

The summer semester ended, and there was a large gap of time where reading and I remained distant. I thought about how enjoyable the summer had been with reading. I couldn't believe how easy she had made reading to me. I couldn't understand how my teachers didn't tell me sooner that audiobooks and video adaptations could help me comprehend what I was reading while staying at-pace with my fellow students. I felt cheated. Maybe it was karma for all the bullshitting I had done over the years. Going into spring semester, I knew I wasn't done with reading. We had some catching up to do for all the years of neglect.

Spring semester of Senior English I had my actual teacher, Ms. Owens, and we had our student teacher, Ms. Kennedy. Ms. Kennedy started the first novel of the semester: *Frankenstein*. Great. Another novel. I put the book on the desk and stared at it, the creature staring back at me. I rolled my eyes and stared at Ms. Kennedy as she started discussing the unit and the background of the book and author. *Frankenstein?* I thought to myself. *How on Earth am I going to get through this? Okay, so I might do an audiobook, but that doesn't mean I'm going to be able to recall info.* I already felt defeated, but then I started to see Ms. Kennedy's teaching shift. She started getting enthusiastic about the text. The way she described themes and quick summaries of things to look forward to in the book. Somehow, her excitement became contagious. I wanted to actually get through a novel before graduating high school.

After class, I went up to Ms. Kennedy's makeshift desk oddly positioned on the side of the room. I set my book down on the edge of her desk and took a shot at possibly getting some more assistance on how to get through this bound burden she handed to me about a half hour ago. "I have a history with reading, and it's not pretty," I explained to her, "I'm not fast enough

to keep up, I don't do great with comprehension questions, and I can't recall things well after completing the reading." She pondered; her new-teacher mind filing through freshly copied notes, materials, and resources she had gathered in her own schooling. "Here's a clean copy of *Frankenstein*. It's not the school's, it's yours." I looked at her and the new book like I had just been given the meaning to life, and I had no idea what the hell to do with it. Come see me during an open period or before school tomorrow. I'll show you some ways to make this easier for you.

I was unsure but did what I was told. I came in the next morning, Ms. Kennedy waiting for me at her makeshift desk. "Oh good. You're here. Let's go over the book for a second. Do you know why you have this copy?" I looked down at it. Everything was the same about it than everyone else's except it didn't have the library barcode on the back.

"Not really," I replied, "Other than the fact I told you I suck at reading then you gave me this copy instead of a school copy."

"That's right. I gave you a non-school copy because we're going to talk about annotating." She opened the book to the four letters that begin the novel. She read aloud the reading for today to me. As we went, she had me underline parts she thought were interesting, that I liked, that seemed like an important detail, or that were confusing to me. I had my pencil and a highlighter, and as she read, I marked up my text. After she had finished, she told me to close the book and explain the parts I underlined and why. I was waiting for some comprehension question to pop up for me to not recollect and get wrong, but it never came. Ms. Kennedy explained, "When you can take notes and mark the parts that stand out to you, there's a better chance you'll not only understand what's going on, but you'll remember and enjoy the reading as well." I thanked her for the help and continued my day.

Could that all be *that* easy? Just a simple underline or highlight? Listening to a recording while I follow along? Make my own comments on what's going on, rather than expecting some fill-in-the-blank, recollection comprehension question I'm not sure if I'll answer because I didn't memorize every detail of the assigned reading for that day? Shockingly, it was just that easy. Had I known these strategies a decade prior by teachers who recognized why I was having issues, reading and I could have a much different history. From my Senior English experiences on, I continued to build my repertoire of reading strategies to help me propel through college. Thankfully, the "skill" of academic bullshitting has been shoved to the wayside for more productive and gratifying relationship with reading.