

# the big red train

*Beanstalk. Been-stock. Been-stok.*

I try to articulate the words I see in the book, simplifying them in my head, making them easier to pronounce. I am 4 years old, sitting on a large, life-sized red and yellow train big enough to fit at least four more children. A slim picture book in hand, I climb up and down the hardwood seats, which almost feel taller than me. Slowly the words start to make sense, and I turn to the pile of books by my side, moving onto the next one.

I am 8 years old, sitting in what would be the driver's compartment of the train, peering up at the bright green of the chimney above me through one of the windows. I hop out the door and walk towards the rest of the children's section. In the last four years, this place has become my second home. I enjoy every moment I spend at the bookstore, glossing through the new releases, sitting for hours in one spot, finishing book after book, moving all the way from picture books to chapter books to series. I can get through a book an hour, as soon as I find one that piques my interest. Today's pick was *Judy Moody*. I pore through book number one, devouring every word of Judy's, her stinky little brother and the venus fly trap she had in her room. I too wanted a little brother to complain about and a venus flytrap to wonder over. I pick up the second book, feeling around the spine to make sure no corners of the book or edges of the pages had been bumped and bruised along the way - I always want the books I buy to be the best ones of all the available copies. After my careful examination, I skip to the stairwell that leads up to the little cafe on the top floor of the bookstore. Friday evenings are always a crowded time, but today was especially full. I stand on my tippy-toes, as high as I possibly can peering over the shoulders (or more like between the arms) of the waiters as they make their way through to each table. I finally spot my parents sitting in the far corner, each with a couple books in hand. As I sit down, my father calls out to the waiter ordering my favorite blueberry cheesecake - it has become a tradition. As I look around the buzz of the café, I feel a sense of calm in the chaos. This is my favorite place to be. I take a big bite of my cheesecake, as it arrives, careful to keep it as far away from my precious book as possible, gulping it down to the last crumb, the tangy taste of the berries popping in my mouth with each bite. After wiping my hands clean, the book gets placed in the basket, and I walk down, hand-in-hand with my parents, toward the checkout counter.

I am 13 years old, and we are now in a different store, in a country miles away. After unpacking all the boxes from the moving van only hours before, we've finally come out to get some food. As I walk with my parents to the food court, I come across a big red sign. Thousands of books line the shelves, propped up against each other by every author you can ever think of. I am transported back to my favorite little train. I walk in and sit on the floor, cross-legged, and rummage through the shelves looking for a good read. Upon finding one, I find my parents and walk toward the checkout counter, eager to get home and begin my new adventure. It is the most typical thing to say that books make people feel as though they're entering a new world. For me, it was an escape from my own world. For a couple hours there, all I did was worry about how Percy Jackson would save the Gods, or how Harry would escape the wrath of He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named or if Skeeter and Aibileen's book will be a success and if Augustus Waters could somehow come back to life. All these worlds collided in my head and created a new world for me, that was just mine.

It was where I spent all my summer and spring breaks, and as I read it was almost as if the stories became a part of me, and the experiences each character had, I felt or wished I could be more like. The stories even helped me find my own voice. Moving across multiple countries as I was growing up, the only constant in my life remained the books that I read. I clung onto them, every last word, rereading my favorite parts when I felt particularly upset, or missed wherever I felt was 'home' at the time.

I am 16 years old and trips to bookstores, let alone ones with trains have gotten lesser as I've grown - no one has the time anymore. Still, I read all YA literature I can get my hands on, taking my pick of the one-off historical fiction piece as well. In English class, I have always been one of the teacher's favorites (even though I do say so myself). At every parent-teacher conference, while other students are told to read more, my teacher's talk to my parents about how vivid my writing is and how it's such a pleasure to see a student who enjoys reading so much. This was all fine, up until I faced a required reading text, that turned out to be my biggest challenge yet - *Northanger Abbey*. Austen's work is not something I am familiar with. I read books to delve into another life, but I never thought it could be a life that was set *centuries* ago. As I begin, I see that the book itself is smaller than the other books I read. The blurb at the back seems strange to me, and I am still confused about what the story is actually about. As I begin to read the story, I understand more about the time period and the gothic genre. While I don't think it is a story that will particularly interest me, I continue to read it, visiting Tilney's home and reading Isabella's letter. Slowly, I am fascinated by how relevant the ideas, although presented in a different manner are to today's day. It is safe to say, Catherine Morland did not disappoint. Thus began a new phase of my reading journey.

I am 18. It is no doubt by now, that books transport me. I have a stack of them tucked away under my bed in my dorm and two bookcases full back home. I never understand the people who say they don't enjoy reading - instead, I believe they just haven't found the right book yet. Stories can make you believe in the impossible and help you through the toughest of times. A book in hand, the thicker the better, the smell of the pages musky, bound to the spine and the sound as one turns the pages moving onto the next, delving further into the life of a character brings me a sense of comfort that nothing else can. The big red and yellow train has since been destroyed. The last time I visited the bookstore back home, I was mildly brokenhearted to see that the place where my journey once began was now the home of a plain old table with a sign that read "Must Read: Book to Movie Adaptations." The power of stories within the age of up and coming digital media almost ceases to exist. People prefer e-books if anything and most would rather browse through a magazine rather than spend their time on a whole book. To me, I will always cherish the first time I laid my hands on a book, and every time I find one that suits my fancy, I will once again be transported to my big red train.