

# Death of a Writer: A Literary Memoir

Author: Samuel Barth

Grade: 11

Teacher: Ronda Scott

School: Park Hill High School, Kansas City, MO

*The Poky Little Puppy*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, and *Goodnight Moon* were some of the books on which I practiced the basic procedure of deciphering words and sentences. From these humble beginnings, I progressed to the lyrical verse of Dr. Seuss where I began to sharpen my sword in preparation for the uphill battle that was finding significance in writing. The lessons I struggled to learn from Dr. Seuss, just to prove that I could, became my moral foundation. *The Butter Battle Book* taught the young Sam not to be narrow-minded toward those who eat their bread with the butter side down. Likewise, *Oh, The Places You'll Go* convinced me that I could do anything I wanted, I only had walk out my front door.

Short chapter books characterized the next stage of my reading career. Oftentimes these books were part of a series. Titles included *Stories from Wayside School*, *The Magic Tree House*, and *Junie B. Jones*. The connection I shared with the main characters in these series, as I followed them through countless adventures, was a precursor to the single greatest literary influence in my life.

Harry Potter.

I was eight and living in Columbia, Missouri, the year that Harry Potter debuted. I had been invited to a friend's birthday party. As an added treat, my friend's mother read to us from a book called *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Not one to be easily preoccupied, much less impressed by literature, it is significant to say that I was captivated, enchanted, and mesmerized by the young wizard. Chocolate cake and freeze tag were immediately swept from my mind as my friend's mother read two chapters of the inaugural Harry Potter. After the party, I rushed home to plead with my parents for my own copy of *The Sorcerer's Stone*. Soon I was not the only Harry Potter fanatic in my family. My mom and my sister, being much more proficient readers than myself, sped through the story at lightning speed. My father and I lagged behind, no less spellbound.

I continued to read Newberry Award nominees and Mark Twain Award winning books, but in my eyes, these tales paled in comparison to J.K. Rowling's masterpieces, which I read with ravenous thirst. I had tasted a rare delicacy, and now I could not be satisfied by anything less. It is impossible to calculate exactly how many aspects of my life Harry Potter influenced in some way, but I can safely say that J.K. Rowling at least inspired me to do my first bit of story writing.

I never liked writing as it never came easily to me. I was heartbroken by the way my sentences sounded in my head, but I persisted. I wanted to create a story of my own that would enthrall audiences the way that J.K. Rowling's story had captivated me.

But, as a man's nutritional needs cannot be met by delicious *Peeps*, I could not survive on a diet of Harry Potter alone. I knew that J.K. Rowling could not possibly be the only great storyteller in literature, so I went looking for something else that could satisfy a stomach that had grown accustomed to rich literature and hearty adventures. My mother recommended that I start at the top of her personal food chain, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In retrospect, I was too young to understand the significance of the book, but I did appreciate the writing. Lee wrote in a simple and elegant way that I would attempt unsuccessfully to mimic in my own literary endeavors.

By the time I had read *To Kill a Mockingbird* a second time, I had won a Scholastic Gold Key Award for one of my short stories, "Saving Joe." Overall, the story was a disappointment to me, and I could only compare it to J.K. Rowling and cringe. I adopted the tradition of not liking anything I wrote during this period.

I read on. *The Giver*. *The Green Mile*. *The Catcher in the Rye*. As I read, I became more open minded toward books that did not have titles beginning with "Harry Potter and the..." Eventually I read *Fahrenheit 451* for school and became intrigued with books about the future. *1984*, *Brave New World*, and *Animal Farm* I consumed eagerly. I came to regard George Orwell, Ray Bradbury, and Aldous Huxley as equals to J.K. Rowling. These books even inspired my own vision of the future, for which I won a second Gold Key (although I faithfully stood by my tradition of despising my own writing). "Cockaigne," as my story was christened, was about a mythical land of ease and luxury. Unlike my undoing flaw in "Saving Joe," which occurred because of the sheer simplicity of the plot, "Cockaigne" was quite simply too complex.

My third award for writing was bestowed upon me by Brigham Young University for the story "Lotto Man." In comparison to my other short stories, it was a triumph of a disaster. Weighing in at nearly fourteen pages in length, "Lotto Man" was the largest literary undertaking in my life. Using all of the literary stamina at my disposal, it still

took my mother nearly three weeks to coax it out of me. At this point, I would be remiss if I failed to disclose that I write nearly everything because my mother told me to write it.

Three stages of motherly bullying are effective in making me do what I do not like to do: write. The first stage is the dropping of innocent hints during seemingly coincidental verbal exchanges. "You know, Sam, Mother's day is right around the corner, and you haven't written anything in a while." The second stage happens when my mother argues that my entire future depends on writing short stories that I don't like. "Sam! If you expect to be accepted at Washington University you had better get writing or think again!" The third and final stage is when my mother locks me in my room and yells through the cat-flap, "No dinner until you've written ten pages, single-spaced!" I hope we never get to stage three.

However, reading has always inspired me. As Romeo fell in love with Juliet, I fell in love with Shakespeare's literary triumph. *Hamlet* was even better.

I soon found that I could devour books faster and with more ease by buying books on tape. *Zorro*, *The World According to Garp*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Cider House Rules*, and *Treasure Island* were conquered in this manner.

And then I found *Great Expectations*. For no particular reason other than the vague inkling to see if all the hype about Dickens was true, I set my mind to reading it. My copy of the book had once belonged to my Uncle Bob, a Jesuit priest, and I remember breathing in the musty smell of old Boston College as I let the pages fly by my face, tickling the end of my nose. Uncle Bob had scratched out notes in the margins in a loopy scrawl. I could imagine him sitting in his modest quarters behind a big wooden desk, hunched over this very book. Perhaps he smiled to himself as he wrote; perhaps he stuck his pencil between his teeth to think like my father sometimes does.

And then I read *Great Expectations*. Charles Dickens stopped me in my literary tracks. I had not reached chapter two before I discovered that I could never write another word knowing that I would always compare it to Dickens. The poor Pip could never know how worthless he made me feel about my writing. I envied the Great Dickens for every character flaw he corrected and every sentence he embellished.

*Great Expectations* opened my eyes to unattainable literary beauty elsewhere. If I had not been convinced that my carefully constructed plan to become an author had not been more than a fanciful daydream after *Great Expectations*, then the nail was certainly driven home by William Golding's social experiment masterpiece, *Lord of the Flies*. Only one book, or should I say group of books, has surpassed my love of *Lord of the Flies*.

The regard with which I hold Golding and Dickens is staggeringly grand, but it does not come close to that with which I hold J.K. Rowling. When I finished reading the seventh and final installment of Harry Potter, I carefully closed it, placed it on my desk, and commenced to be inconsolable for the next two hours.

Having the knowledge that I have ascertained by reading these books is very fulfilling. It means that my life was not wasted and that I have a little piece of what is good and pure inside of me forever. Strange to think, then, that my greatest ambition is to acquire amnesia and read them all again for the first time.

The ability to read and write has, until the very recent past, been a factor of human experience that has separated people in the world along lines drawn by poverty and social status. In modern times, however, the written word has taken great strides toward reconnecting these broken bonds of brotherhood among the human race. It is much easier in this age to attain knowledge on virtually any subject by reading and to let your voice be heard by any audience through writing. But like all noble causes, once achieved, it is easily taken for granted. I have been one of the worst offenders. In my life, I have fallen on my face more times than I can count, but I have only one regret: I didn't read enough books.