

THE BOOKS THAT MADE YOUR FAVORITE WRITERS WANT TO WRITE FROM EILEEN MYLES TO ZADIE SMITH

April 26, 2017 By Emily Temple

It's a question that's asked by interviewers all the time: how did you become a writer? It's kind of a loll, and for many authors, the answer is obvious. Reading made them into writers. What else? Besides actually, you know, sitting down and doing the work. But while many authors cite a lifetime love of the written word, or a storytelling acumen developed in the womb, or a childhood spent loosed in libraries, some can point to a specific book and say: that one. That's the book that made me who I am today—if only because it opened a door, or gave me permission, or even just a spark. Below, a selection of these: 30 recommendations plucked from interviews and essays the internet over. If you read them all, you'll probably become a writer instantly.

Rachel Kushner: Blood Meridian, Cormac McCarthy

Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* is without question the book that made me want to try to be a fiction writer as an actual serious undertaking.

Jay McInerney: The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas

The first novels I fell in love with were *White Fang* and *The Call of the Wild*, but the first book that made me want to be a writer was the *Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas*. I read "Fern Hill" in an anthology in eighth grade English class and I was knocked out by the musicality of Thomas's language—and probably by the extravagance of the sentiment. It was the first time I realized that language was more than a transparent medium for conveying information and telling stories; in Thomas, language is almost an end in itself. I devoured all of Thomas and I eventually moved on to other poets before finally moving toward prose fiction under the influence of James Joyce and others.

Dana Spiotta: Ulysses, James Joyce

Ulysses is my favorite novel, first read at age 20. It was the book, along with *Dubliners*, that made me want to be a writer, or at least it made me think about the formal possibilities of fiction. My second short story stole its structure from the *Wandering Rocks* section in *Ulysses*, only in my story it was downtown Seattle (my big swerve). I walked the length of the Belltown neighborhood with my notebook, trying for some of that Joycean precision. My third story was a cringy piece about the Irish Troubles called "Ourselves Alone" (Sinn Fein, get it? I know, so bad). My point is that Joyce is a life-long literary love. My obsession with novel structure was born with *Ulysses*. Whatever formal radicalism I aspire to have come from that book (plus Faulkner and Woolf). Eventually this lead me to more contemporary writers like DeLillo. My first short story, in case you are wondering, was not Joycean. It was about a girl's obsession with a long-dead Montgomery Clift. This was inspired by one faintly erotic scene in *A Place in the Sun*, a scene I could not shake. So my first literary impulse came out of George Stevens.

Zadie Smith: Hurricane, Andrew Salkey

A Jamaican writer called Andrew Salkey... wrote a YA novel called *Hurricane* before YA was a term. I remember it as the book that made me want to write. He was the most wonderful writer for children. I just found what looks to be a sequel, *Earthquake*, on an old-books stall on West Third, and I intend to read it to my kids. He died in 1995.

Alain Robbe-Grillet: The Stranger, Albert Camus

The two most influential books of the war years were Sartre's *Nausea* and Camus's *The Stranger*. Other novels by the same authors—for example Sartre's *The Roads to Liberty* or Camus's *The Fall*—are of little interest. I feel that I decided to become a writer when I read *The Stranger*, which

appeared in 1942, during the Occupation. It was published by Gallimard, a firm very much connected with the Occupiers. By the way, Sartre himself finally confessed that the Occupation hadn't bothered him much. But my reading of *The Stranger*, as I explain in the *Mirror*, is very personal. The murder committed by Mersault was the result of a situation, which is the situation of relationship to the world.

Eileen Myles: *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott

Do you remember what books you encountered, growing up in Massachusetts in the 1950s and 60s, that might have inspired you to want to become a writer?

The 50s is childhood up to age ten, so myths, sci-fi. Those didn't make me want to be a writer. They made me want to do drugs or have adventures, travel. Maybe *Little Women* made me want to be a writer because Jo, the star of it, was a writer. I didn't understand yet that that was the author. In the 60s I was a teenager. I liked *Franny & Zooey*, really everything by J.D. Salinger. I realized it was important who was talking. If you could tap into that you could get a flow going. Henry Miller came to me in the 70s. He said I didn't ask to be born. He wrote in a complaining, American working class speech. He was from Williamsburg. It was ugly. It reminded me of Somerville, where I came from. He made it clear that an unprivileged American could be a writer and could have a lot to talk about. He switched constantly from speech to surrealism. That shift was important to me because an unstable self was what I had to use.

Ross Gay: the poetry of Amiri Baraka

I love so many different writers from different eras. But a few—of, really, zillions, so this is an incomplete list—would be Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Ralph Ellison, Jamaica Kincaid, Toni Morrison, Percival Everett, Philip Roth and Junot Díaz on the novel side and, lord, the poets—too many to even mention. But right now I'm re-reading and re-reading Robert Hayden's poems, which are absolutely beautiful and brilliant. And about to read, for the first time, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. And just beginning a book of poems by a young poet named Valzhyna Mort that looks exciting. *Factory of Tears*, it's called. Just finished Victoria Chang's new book, and about to pick up a new book by Ronaldo V. Wilson called *Narrative of the Life of the Brown Boy and the White Man*. I think Amiri Baraka's work made me want to write poems too. Especially his beautiful poem, "An Agony. As Now." A really, really beautiful poem.

Sue Monk Kidd: *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë

Which novels have had the most impact on you as a writer? Is there a particular book that made you want to write?

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, which I first read in college. The story of Edna Pontellier's struggle with the limits her culture placed on women made a deep and lasting impression on me. *Jane Eyre* was the book that made me want to write.

Peter Levi: the poems of Sir Walter Scott

I don't know why people become writers but I can tell you how I became a writer. When I was about nine or ten at boarding school I was imprisoned in a room called the "Round Room," shaped rather like the top of an old-fashioned key. There one had to do one's homework for what seemed an interminable period—actually it was about an hour and a half. You weren't allowed to read novels or comics during this period, you could only read school books. But I discovered that if you'd done your exercise quickly you couldn't be prevented from reading poetry, because poetry was thought to be work. Therefore if you were reading poetry they couldn't reprimand you. So I then found poems of Sir Walter Scott. I suppose I read the whole of his poetry in those hours. They seemed to me jolly jingles, and easy to imitate. No doubt I underestimate it, I haven't reread it. And then one day it was raining and there was nothing else to do and so I wrote a poem in what, at that

age, I conceived to be the style of Walter Scott. Since then I have never stopped writing. It's a natural activity, you see, writing. More people do it than will admit to it, and the difference between people who regard themselves as professional writers and other writers is much more shady than we suppose.

Jodi Picoult: *Gone With the Wind*, Margaret Mitchell

My favorite writer is Alice Hoffman; she's brilliant. One of my favorite books in recent years was Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*—I wished I'd written it, which is my highest form of compliment. The book that made me want to be a writer in the first place was *Gone with the Wind*—I read it and wanted to create a whole world out of words, too.

David Sedaris: *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, Raymond Carver

I remember being floored by the first Raymond Carver collection I read: *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. His short, simple sentences and familiar-seeming characters made writing look, if not exactly easy, then at least possible. That book got me to work harder, but more important it opened the door to other contemporary short story writers like Tobias Wolff and Alice Munro.

Sofia Samatar: *Gormenghast*, Mervyn Peake

There was a library and it is ashes. Let its long length assemble.
These words made me a writer.

When I was in middle school, my mother brought home a used paperback copy of Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast*. "I thought this looked like something you might like," she said.

Reading this at the age of 13, I understood that fantasy, the place I was looking for, is not to be found in dragons, ghosts, or magic wands. It resides in language. Fantasy is death by owls. It's mourning through gesture. It's music, incantation in half-light. An inverted heart.

David Mitchell: *The Earthsea Cycle*, Ursula K. Le Guin

There was no single epiphany, but I recall a few early flashes. When I was ten I would be transported by certain books—Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* trilogy, Susan Cooper's fantasy novels, Isaac Asimov—and burn to do to readers what had just been done to me. Sometimes that burning prompted me to start writing, though I never got more than a few pages down. A few years later I would indulge in a visual fantasy that involved imagining my name on the jacket of a book—usually Faber and Faber—and I'd feel a whoosh inside my rib cage.

Chuck Wendig: *The Chronicles of Prydain*, Lloyd Alexander

I remember reading the *Prydain* Chronicles by Lloyd Alexander while sitting on the beach and being transported away from the sand and the sea to this fantastical place and I was so moved by moments within those mythic stories that I have since wanted to be a writer—a fierce need only increased by the great authors I read and love: Robin Hobb, Robert McCammon, Joe Lansdale, Bradley Denton—and since then I've been rejecting the beach and the sea and the sand and the sun to hide in my penmonkey cave ever since. (Which probably explains why I'm butt-white and pasty. But hey, I got color in Australia! The kind of color where my forehead looked like a boiled lobster and has been shedding its flesh for the last two days. CURSE YOU OZZIE DAYSTAR. This is why I stay inside and read books and stuff.)

Emma Donoghue: *The Passion*, Jeanette Winterson

The book that made me want to write was *The Passion* by Jeanette Winterson. It made me feel that historical fiction didn't have to be fusty and all about bodices, that it could be a thrilling novel, which just happened to be set in 1800.

Sherman Alexie: The Snowy Day, Ezra Jack Keats

My life changed dramatically, and started to change dramatically, when I read *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats. I was 4 or 5 on the reservation, and it was the first book I ever read with a brown-skinned character—this, you know, inner-city black kid wandering the snow-blanketed city all by himself. And the book spoke to me in a way few books have ever spoken to me throughout my life. But in that instance, I had this recognition of another human being in the world, fictional as he was, but that there was another person in the world who was like me. ... This person was a total stranger to me—a black kid living in the city. You know, I didn't know any black kids living in the city, but I reached across the fictional and the real barriers and boundaries to connect my heart to him. And that's why I'm here now. That one book made me a writer. And I can point to other books throughout my life that did the same thing—that made me who I am. I am constructed of stories that have changed my life.

Tom Wolfe: Napoleon, Emil Ludwig

Regarding writing, was there any particular book that influenced you?

I was greatly struck by Emil Ludwig's biography of Napoleon, which is written in the historical present. It begins as the mother sits suckling her babe in a tent. ... It impressed me so enormously that I began to write the biography of Napoleon myself, though heavily cribbed from Emil Ludwig. I was eight at the time.

Dorothy Allison: The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison

Reading books that you fall into, the essential thing that happens is it gives you permission. If you are a baby writer, it gives you permission to write stories as brave and large and engaging as the people who's work you have fallen in love with or really touched your heart. If you're not a writer, if you're just a human being working dead hours and it seems to me that I was always reading on breaks when I was a waitress and reading underneath the desk when I was a receptionist and reading to not be in the world that I was in and being invited into worlds that were so rich. That's what I think novels do for you and that's what reading novels did for me. It's not that simple. They talk about us as if it's simple, but it's not that simple and that made me want to write novels in which the people were complicated. And it gives you permission. I don't think I would have ever written *Bastard* if I hadn't read *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. In fact, I know I wouldn't. It was like somebody cracked my world open when I read that book.

Carl Hiaasen: the Hardy Boys series

I remember being greatly affected by several books—*Catcher in the Rye*, *Catch-22* and Steinbeck's *Travels With Charley*, for starters. *Without Feathers*, a collection of Woody Allen's early short stories, was a prized possession. But long before that, what really made me want to be a writer was the Hardy Boys series, and also daily newspapers. My mom says I learned to read on the sports pages of *The Miami Herald*.

Roxane Gay: Beloved, Toni Morrison (and a lot of other books)

My writing ambition was sharpened by Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, an unapologetically political novel that reminds us of what it costs to be a woman in this world or the next. My ambition, that toward which I aspire to write, has long been guided by Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, and through her words, seeing how a novel can be mysterious and true, mythical and raw, how a novel can honor memory even when we want to look away or forget. My ambition has long been sharpened by Alice Walker, willing to tell the stories of black women without apology, willing to write politically without apology—*Possessing the Secret of Joy*, a haunting, gorgeous novel about female genital mutilation that keeps me transfixed and heartbroken and helpless each time I read it, because sometimes the only way to tell the truth is to tell a story.

Nadine Gordimer: Scoop, Evelyn Waugh

Perhaps the isolation of your childhood helped you to become a writer—because of all the time it left you for reading—lonely though it must have been.

Yes... perhaps I would have become a writer anyway. I was doing a bit of writing before I got “ill.” I wanted to be a journalist as well as a dancer. You know what made me want to become a journalist? Reading Evelyn Waugh’s *Scoop* when I was about eleven. Enough to make anybody want to be a journalist! I absolutely adored it. I was already reading a lot, obviously, but of course I was reading without any discrimination. I would go to the library and wander around, and one book led to another. But I think that’s the best way. An Oxford student who is doing a thesis on my writing came to visit me in Johannesburg the other day. I did something I’ve not done before. I told him, “Right, here are boxes of my papers, just do what you like.” I liked him so much—he was so very intelligent and lively. I would meet him at lunch. He would emerge, and so would I, from our separate labors. Suddenly he brought out a kid’s exercise book—a list, that I’d kept for about six months when I was twelve, of books that I’d read, and I’d written little book reviews. There was a review of *Gone with the Wind*. Do you know what was underneath it? My “review” of Pepys’s *Diary*. And I was still reading kids’ books at the time, devouring those, and I didn’t see that there was any difference between these and *Gone with the Wind* or *Pepys’s Diary*.

Richard Ford: Absalom, Absalom!, William Faulkner

What book had the greatest impact on you? What book made you want to write?

Probably *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner’s masterpiece. I read it when I was 19. It embossed into my life the experience of literature’s great saving virtue. Reading is probably what leads most writers to writing.

Dag Solstad: the work of Knut Hamsun

What made you want to write?

Oh, reading Knut Hamsun at 16. I doubt I would have become a writer if I hadn’t. I think that has been my goal—to write books that could do what Knut Hamsun’s books did to me. I was introduced to Hamsun by a schoolmate, a boy from a working-class family who quit before graduation. I never saw him again, but I’ve remained thankful for his recommendation.

Once I started, I read everything in one go. I went to the library several times a week to borrow more books, and I cleverly wrapped them in the paper we used for schoolbooks so it would look like I was doing my homework, studying like hell!

Neil Gaiman: The Chronicles of Narnia, C.S. Lewis

C.S. Lewis was the first person to make me want to be a writer. He made me aware of the writer, that there was someone standing behind the words, that there was someone telling the story. I fell in love with the way he used parentheses—the auctorial asides that were both wise and chatty, and I rejoiced in using such brackets in my own essays and compositions through the rest of my childhood.

I think, perhaps, the genius of Lewis was that he made a world that was more real to me than the one I lived in; and if authors got to write the tales of Narnia, then I wanted to be an author.

David Foster Wallace: “The Balloon,” Donald Barthelme

Historically the stuff that’s sort of rung my cherries: Socrates’s funeral oration, the poetry of John Donne, the poetry of Richard Crashaw, every once in a while Shakespeare, although not all that often, Keats’ shorter stuff, Schopenhauer, Descartes’s *Meditations on First Philosophy* and *Discourse on Method*, Kant’s *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysic*, although the translations are all terrible, William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Hemingway—particularly the ital stuff in *In Our*

Time, where you just go oomph!, Flannery O'Connor, Cormac McCarthy, Don DeLillo, A. S. Byatt, Cynthia Ozick—the stories, especially one called “Levitations,” about 25 percent of the time Pynchon. Donald Barthelme, especially a story called “The Balloon,” which is the first story I ever read that made me want to be a writer, Tobias Wolff, Raymond Carver’s best stuff—the really famous stuff. Steinbeck when he’s not beating his drum, 35 percent of Stephen Crane, Moby-Dick, The Great Gatsby. And, my God, there’s poetry. Probably Phillip Larkin more than anyone else, Louise Glück, Auden.

Paula Fox: Robin Hood, Paul Creswick

What were your beginnings as a writer?

It struck me very early. My father brought me a box of books once when I was about three and a half or four. I remember the carton they were in and the covers with illustrations by Newell C. Wyeth. Do you remember him? He was a wonderful illustrator of Robert Louis Stevenson and other books. Robin Hood. I remember how struck I was by the ending when Robin is supported by the window and shoots his last arrow. I was very affected by it.

Ron Rash: Crime and Punishment, Fyodor Dostoevsky

Did you grow up thinking you’d be a writer?

I didn’t, but I think I showed all the symptoms. I was very comfortable being by myself. I spent a lot of time alone and particularly out in the natural world. I think I had a particular moment when I was 15 years old. I read Crime and Punishment, and that book just, I think, more than any other book made me want to be a writer, ’cause it was the first time that I hadn’t just entered a book, but a book had entered me. I can remember exactly where I was. I was in a biology class. I was supposed to be listening to the teacher but I was on the back row. And I can just remember so vividly just never having that kind of feeling, that kind of intensity from a book. And, obviously, at 15 I didn’t understand exactly what was going on with Raskolnikov. But there was a particular scene early in that book where the pawnbroker was murdered that I will never forget. It’s one of the most vivid memories in my life—not just my reading life.

Donald Hall: the poetry of Edgar Allan Poe

Everything important always begins from something trivial. When I was about twelve I loved horror movies. I used to go down to New Haven from my suburb and watch films like Frankenstein, The Wolf Man, The Wolf Man Meets Abbott and Costello. So the boy next door said, Well, if you like that stuff, you’ve got to read Edgar Allan Poe. I had never heard of Edgar Allan Poe, but when I read him I fell in love. I wanted to grow up and be Edgar Allan Poe. The first poem that I wrote doesn’t really sound like Poe, but it’s morbid enough. Of course I have friends who say it’s the best thing I ever did: “Have you ever thought / Of the nearness of death to you? / It reeks through each corner, / It shrieks through the night, / It follows you through the day / Until that moment when, / In monotonous loud, / Death calls your name. / Then, then, comes the end of all.” The end of Hall, maybe. That started me writing poems and stories. For a couple of years I wrote them in a desultory fashion because I wasn’t sure whether I wanted to be a great actor or a great poet.

Then when I was fourteen I had a conversation at a Boy Scout meeting with a fellow who seemed ancient to me; he was sixteen. I was bragging and told him that I had written a poem during study hall at high school that day. He asked—I can see him standing there—You write poems? and I said, Yes, do you? and he said, in the most solemn voice imaginable, It is my profession. He had just quit high school to devote himself to writing poetry full time! I thought that was the coolest thing I’d ever heard. It was like that scene in Bonnie and Clyde where Clyde says, We rob banks. Poetry is like robbing banks. It turned out that my friend knew some eighteen-year-old Yale freshmen, sophisticated about literature, and so at the age of fourteen I hung around Yale students who talked about T. S. Eliot. I saved up my allowance and bought the little blue, cloth-covered collected Eliot

for two dollars and fifty cents and I was off. I decided that I would be a poet for the rest of my life and started by working at poems for an hour or two every day after school. I never stopped.

Julie Buntin: Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?, Lorrie Moore

I read it first as a teenager attending a boarding school I felt sure had made an egregious error in letting me in, let alone in granting me a scholarship. Mornings, at dawn, I'd sneak out of the dorms and down to a picnic table on the lakeshore to smoke and read—it was too early to get caught, and I liked reading in the blurry space between night and day. I finished *Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?* on one of those mornings and looked up to find the sun rising on a changed world, every tiny detail a little sharper for my brain having been dunked in Moore's sensibility. There was humor in the half-buried stick in the sand, in the way someone had carved NO into the table wood and then crossed it out. I wanted to see like her. I even wanted to sound like her. The book hit me on the level of music, as poetry so often did (the sentences!), but there was story, too. Berie and Sils were girls I knew, but they were drawn in language so bright and unfamiliar and precise that even their nonsense songs seemed important. As a teenage girl who, like Berie, felt "something deeply sad had been born buried in me, stirring occasionally inside like a creature moving in sleep," by extension, I felt important too. As if a girl sitting on a picnic table with a stolen pack of cigarettes could be the hero of a novel. Hell, maybe she could even write one.

Anne Lamott: Nine Stories, J.D. Salinger

What book made you want to become a writer?

You mean, besides Pippi Longstocking?

Nine Stories blew me away, I can still remember reading "For Esmé—With Love and Squalor" for the first time, and just weeping with the poignancy of the damaged soldier and the young girl. And "Teddy"—I still remember the moment when the little boy Teddy, who is actually a sadhu, tells the reporter on the ship that he first realized what God was all about when he saw his little sister drink a glass of milk—that it was God, pouring God, into God. Or something like that—maybe I don't remember it quite as well as I thought. But it changed me both spiritually and as a very young writer, because both the insight and the simplicity of the story were within my reach.

Oh, and "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," and "Down at the Dinghy," with the great Boo Boo Glass. And "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut"—don't even get me started...