



Literary Love **Affair**

I read to escape and to understand my world.

Amy Mercer

I blame my mother for my passion for books. We didn't have much money growing up, but I always knew I could mark an X next to as many books as I wanted in the Scholastic catalogue. I felt rich on the day they arrived, a heavy stack plunked on my desk at school. I pulled the books to my chest and packed them carefully into my backpack. I'd hurry off the bus, my back heavy, my feet light, and anxiously walk the mile-long dirt road home where I could escape the boredom of country life. I knew my desire would go unchecked at the bookstore and library. Mom, my sister Erin and I would come home with our arms full of books, and I would close my door and escape into the fantasy world of Narnia or the adventures of Laura Ingalls Wilder and her sisters. In family photos, I was often sitting in a chair, knees to my chest, cradling a book in both hands. The rest of the world was ignored.

I read to escape and to understand my world. I stumbled through major life events clutching a book in front of me like a map. Judy Blume helped me feel connected in my adolescence. I felt closer to Margaret in *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* than I did to Tiffany or Lisa at school. In college, I read *The Awakening* and suddenly saw my mother as a woman. Kate Chopin allowed me to make room in my heart for forgiveness of my parent's divorce. As a new mother, I read Anne Lamott's *Operating Instructions* and cried with relief as she chronicled her struggle to find her way in the uncharted waters of motherhood.

To make room for a nursery, my husband and I dismantled our "office." My husband suggested I "get rid of my books" to clear up needed space. I have to stop typing even now, years later, to visualize that moment. "But you've read them already," he said. I was suddenly sure that after all this time, he didn't know me at all. In the end, to make the nursery pretty, I boxed up years worth of paperback books. I took my time with the project, I sat on the floor sur-

rounded by my books and made organized piles, running my hands over the covers, flipping through the pages and re-reading paragraphs of some favorites. It was an all-day affair. As we put the boxes in the shed, I felt like I was boxing up a part of myself.

As a mother of two young boys, the real world is no longer easy to ignore and my time for reading is strictly limited. My nightstand is filled with books and when my children wake in the middle of the night, as they often do, and I am left wide awake, I reach for a book. Even with my books in boxes and money spent on diapers instead of hardbacks, my passion has not diminished. I can't *not* read. I read in bed with my reading light under the covers, my toddler spooning me from behind, unaware of the time. I read at the doctor's office, hoping they won't call my name. The stack of books by my bed never diminishes. Once I finish a book, a new one takes its place at the bottom of the pile. My Wish List at Amazon.com is three pages long. I am humbled by my books.

Our son brought home his first Scholastic catalog the other day and I gleefully grabbed it from his backpack. Like my mother did for me, I will make sure my children's bookcases are always overflowing. We read every night cuddled in the bottom bunk, and I channel my mother's voice as I chant the familiar words of *Where the Wild Things Are*. No matter how tired and frustrated I am at the end of the day, my voice straining with the tension and fatigue, when I open a book to read, everything changes. Will may be bouncing next to me, Miles may be turning the pages preemptively, but they are listening. They are in my arms, against my chest, they are listening to the rhythm of my voice, and they are living in the dreams of the storytellers.

My husband recently suggested a trip to the local bookstore and I tried to conceal my joy as I watched him choose new books for our boys. "We might need to get a bigger bookcase for the playroom," he said on the drive home. I knew then that my passion for books could never be taken away or boxed up. I had given birth to readers. My passion for books is a part of my nature, their nature, and it is steady, and unchanging, like the pull of the tide.

Amy Mercer is a freelance writer in Charleston. Between wiping noses and changing diapers, she can be found with her nose in a book.