

Gateway Books:
A Collection of My Childhood Favorites
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By the time I turned 13, I had moved seven times. As I ping ponged from California to Indonesia, the one constant in my life were my books. And when we settled into our current home, our house was quickly weighed down with over 700 of our favorites, but the ones that were the most precious to me were my gateway books. Every avid reader has gateway books: books that stole them away and introduced them to the joys of reading. My gateway books stayed with me through all of the moving and packing and donating until I graduated.

I moved across the country for college and my suitcase was, for the first time, bookless. Objectively I knew that it made sense to leave them behind, but their absence seemed louder than ever as I spent my first night alone in this strange new place.

So in my sophomore year of college I began to look to search for books that I could keep with me, books that would make me feel at home. The first find was the illustrated complete set of the *Chronicles of Narnia* books that stayed with my family in California. It was out of print, but I managed to find an edition secondhand to keep with me. Every night for four years my father would come into my bedroom before bed. He would open up that large illustrated copy of *Narnia* by tugging on the red book mark, and then he would begin to read. I can still feel the warmth of lying beside him, curled up between my two sisters. I can feel the determination to keep my eyes open so I could see the beautiful pictures, and so I would know what happened to the Pevensies and their friends. I can still hear his soothing intonation as he read out those classic children's stories, his pitch moderating with the characters. Just the memory relaxes my muscles and soothes over my mind. When I moved away, and homesickness churned in my guts for the first time, those illustrations brought my family back to me. The story dripped with my father's voice and my sister's warm breaths on my shoulder. Every page was soaked in my family, and therefore the book became my home.

After that my collection exploded with books by my favorite childhood authors, Margaret Peterson Haddix, Suzanne Collins, JK Rowling, and many others. I refused to buy first editions when I could thrift the original covers that I had treasured for so long, and so my Gateways Books Collection began.

My parents, both avid readers themselves, encouraged me to read classics as well, and so Jane Austen, Victor Hugo, and Ray Bradbury joined my club. My most treasured item however, was a gift from my sister. She knew how I'd loved *Little Women*, but couldn't keep my original book with me, and so she bought me an edition from 1890 to add to my collection.

Eventually I managed to track down a secondhand set of my favorite childhood series, *My Secret Unicorn*. When I lived overseas, I had eye appointments every four months in Singapore, which happened to also be the only place close by with a Barnes and Noble. For a young reader it was an exquisite treat to be able to sit in a space surrounded by books, and so every four months, my father and I would spend an extra day simply for book browsing. My favorite series was *My Secret Unicorn*, which released three new books a year. And so, ever the practical child, I realized that if I could read fast enough I could get through one book at the store and buy the next two in this series, allowing myself to return home with much more of the story in my possession. This became my pattern, reading at that blue carpeted section of Barnes and Noble while my father browsed, reading across from him as we drank our Starbucks (a rare treat), and basking in the fact that for once I had new books all around me, if I only wanted to reach out

and grab them. These books feel like wonder. They feel like the fear I felt when my little sister cracked her head open and my mom read her the first book on the way to the hospital. They feel like the days of drawing unicorns and rereading books and playing with my sisters and our dogs. They smell like my childhood.

Though I live so far away from all of them, my books help me feel as if they are right there beside me. And when I long for simpler times, or a peaceful home, all I have to do is pull down my illustrated Narnia from the shelf, and hear my father's deep voice reading out the stories that have long been etched into my memory. When I feel as if the world is spinning around me, I can return to the simple stories of a secret princess, a jumping pot, or a unicorn and rest easily.

Alcott, Louisa May. *Little Women*. Tauchnitz, 1876.

Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy have always charmed me with their courage, generosity and love, but what drew me back to the story again and again was their similarity to me and my sisters. So when my very own Meg bought me a copy from a hundred years ago, I was overjoyed. It is inscribed in century old letters from a father to his daughter, and when I hold it, I remember not only my sister, but all the families that have shared this beautiful story.

Austen, Jane. *The Complete Novels of Jane Austen*. Canterbury Classics, 2007.

Every time I open this book I can still feel the sunlight hitting me as I read it on my bed eleven years ago. The characters and stories have been with me for over half my life and they have become a sacred bond between me and all the peaceful Saturdays of my childhood, where there was nothing to do but read.

Bradbury, Ray. *Fahrenheit 451*. Perfection Learning Prebound, 2011.

As a child who loved books, Fahrenheit 451 was the first horror story I knew. I could not imagine a world where I did not have libraries and bookstores to lounge in, surrounded by the scent of paper, ink, and knowledge waiting to be discovered. It's place as a classic is certain, but it remains on my shelf as a fond memory of the first time I realized that reading gave me power as well as joy.

Chapman, Linda, and Biz Hull. *My Secret Unicorn Box Set: The Magic Spell, Dreams Come True, Flying High, Starlight Surprise, Stronger Than Magic, A Special Friend, A Touch of Magic, Twilight Magic, Friends Forever*. Puffin, 2002.

This set contains the ten main books in the series, leaving out the Christmas specials and the spinoffs. The covers haven't changed in almost twenty years and so I can still feel the rush of wonder when I hold the first book. I can still recite the magic spell that supposedly turned this normal pony into a unicorn, and I still hold these books close when the world is chaotic and I long for something simple.

Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. Scholastic Inc., 2008.

I can still feel the rush of adrenaline as I walked up in front of the class, *the Hunger Games* clenched in my hand. I had never given an oral book report before, but even an introverted reader like myself could give an impassioned speech, explaining the world of the Hunger Games long before the movies made it common knowledge. The books terrified and thrilled me, grabbing hold of my hand the instant that Katniss volunteered to protect her little sister. I could still feel my older sister's hand in mine when she sacrificed winning a race to help me when I cried. I could still feel the rage that filled me when I defended my little sister from bullies. The Hunger Games latched onto those feelings and demanded that I imagine a horrible world, where I would do the same for my family without a thought. It was striking and terrifying and necessary.

Haddix, Margaret Peterson. *Palace of Mirrors*. Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2008.

Margaret Peterson Haddix became the favorite author of my youth with her *Among the Hidden* series, but she stayed at my favorite author with her *Palace* series. This is the second one, following a retelling of *Cinderella* where she leaves her prince after deciding that they weren't right for each other. This, though it is not based on a classic tale, continues to subvert tropes and was the first feminist story that I fell in love with. These princesses, while they are supposed to all fight each other, come together to save and then rule the kingdom. There is no "chosen one," because all of them have unique talents and flaws. As a child who adored tales of princesses and castles and knights in shining armor, it was revolutionary to see a group of women band together to defeat the villains.

Hugo, Victor. *Les Miserables*. Penguin Classics, 2011.

By the time I was twelve, I was well accustomed to my parents handing me old boring book and "encouraging" me to read them. I loved some of them, and hated others, but *Les Miserables* was the first one that I fell in love with, chapter by chapter. The tragedy of each story stole me away, and the hope and love in spite of all of their suffering made me cry more times than I can count. The story is beautiful, but what caught me was the overpowering feeling of grief. As a child who had just lost her best friend, the ability to find hope in your own mourning steadied me. It suddenly felt as though Victor Hugo was speaking directly to me, showing me that I wasn't alone in my pain, and that hope could still shine through it.

L'Engle, Madeleine. *A Wrinkle in Time: Time Quintet Bk. 1*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1962.

My sister and I read *A Wrinkle in Time* together. And then we read it again. And when we could buy the next book, we added it to our joint obsession. Meg was fierce and determined and there was nothing that made her special. Her brother was more gifted with mathematics and magic, but she was brave. Her family is what made this book so vital to us, and her courage is what made her ours.

Lewis, C. S. (Clive Staples), and Pauline Baynes. *The Complete Chronicles of Narnia: the Magician's Nephew -- The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe -- The Horse and His Boy -- Prince Caspian -- The Voyage of the Dawn Treader -- The Silver Chair -- The Last Battle*. HarperCollins, 2000.

Though it is not the most expensive, oldest, or rarest of my collection, this is by far my favorite book. The stories of *Narnia* are dear to my heart, and the old illustrations, maps, and glossy pages drip with memories from my childhood. Though my father hasn't read them to me in years, the watercolor illustrations and happy endings always bring me joy and peace.

Rowling, J. K. *The Tales of Beedle the Bard: a Harry Potter Series Book*. Children's High Level Group in Association with Arthur A. Levine Books, 2008.

When I was younger, I made a point to reread all seven Harry Potter books once a year. As I got older and started to have more reading and homework this became impossible. Instead I settled for rereading these fairy tales each night before bed. My father didn't read us all bedtimes stories anymore, but I could still breathe in the familiar scent of stories with the night air. This book, filled with that familiar voice and the world that I had grown to love so much, gave me a taste of childhood simplicity every time I opened its cover.

Tolkien, John R. R. *The Lord of the Rings: One Volume Edition*. HarperCollins, 1995.

When I began *Lord of the Rings*, it seemed less of a companion to Harry Potter, and more like a classical book in disguise. There were long description of the trees and flowers. The characters were all named so similarly and there were too many to keep track, and the plot was unhurried and meandering. But then the book introduced Samwise Gamgee and I was sold. He was not chosen, not smart, not a powerful wizard or a wise elf. But he was loyal and brave and he instantly became my favorite character, not just in this book, but in any book. He was everything I aspired to be and he still is.