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Asthmatic and Alone: How Books Became My World

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Asthmatic and Alone: How Books Became My World

By Lauren Henley

The hum of my nebulizer wraps me in lulling waves of comfort as the forest green elastic band holding the mask securely to my face leaves patterned indentations in my puffy six-year-old cheeks. I breathe in the wasps of smoky albuterol, expanding my lungs with audible sighs as the salty taste of relief soothes my greedy throat. Instantly, I feel a sense of calm take over my body and I crack the spine of my newest book, *Bud Not Buddy*, by Christopher Paul Curtis. The pale yellow walls of my frilly bedroom fade away as I am transported to another world in which it is 1936 in Flint Michigan. No longer am I resting in my squeaky wrought-iron daybed but instead I am unpacking my warped leather trunk, clutching close the tattered flyers which hold the secrets to my father's whereabouts. I sit on my mattress at the orphanage and begin to plot my escape, dreaming of the day when I will meet "Herman E. Calloway" and tell him that I am his ten-year-old son.

For as long as I can remember, I have relied on books to help me escape. As a child who stayed in and out of the hospital, whirling from doctors' offices to specialists and back again, I never truly enjoyed a normal childhood and was oftentimes prohibited from doing the very things which kids like to do. Almost every day in elementary school I had to leave class right after lunch to sit in the nurse's office for 30 minutes to have a breathing treatment. The roaring nebulizer was placed on a desk near the room's open door and a small plastic blue chair was perched on the other side. When Ms. Hoffner would hand me my droning mask and I'd sit in that lonely chair, I'd see my classmates and peers walk by and gawk, staring at the huge plastic contraption which engulfed my perpetually-swollen face. They'd slow down their steps and I'd

hear them whisper some of the most hurtful comments. On days like these, I found myself first wanting to cry, but then always wanting to become invisible and escape.

As soon as I learned how to read, I realized I had found my ticket to freedom. Not only could I ignore the painful reality that I was a sickly child and I was bound to my time-consuming medication, but I could also live a “normal” childhood through the characters in my books. I wanted to know what it felt like to be adventurous and silly, to be able to play outside for hours on end in the humid heat of summer. I wanted to feel the thrill of being able sample new foods from a neighborhood shop without the threat of an asthma attack or a severe allergic reaction. I wanted to be able to have sleepovers with my friends and go to holiday parties and eat a PB&J and run a mile nonstop and have a puppy for a pet and go to summer camp and...and be a kid. I wanted to be what I thought kids were supposed to be, and when I couldn't be that person, I used books to become somebody else entirely.

Compound all of my sickness with being one of typically two African American students in most of classes throughout elementary school, and you have a very lonely young girl. I felt like I couldn't turn to anybody who would understand exactly what I was going through, and so I hid myself in my books. There, I could read about people with my same skin color who were as “normal” and as smart and as pretty and as curious and as diligent as I wanted to be.

I could be like Tee in *The Lucky Stone*, sitting on the front porch getting swept up in the stories of my great grandmother. I could cry with Patsy in *I Thought My Soul Would Rise and Fly: The Diary of Patsy, a Freed Girl* as I imagined the courage it took to stand strong after slavery. I could struggle with understanding myself as a young black girl just like Maleeka in *The Skin I'm In*. For once, I could be black *and* proud, I could be healthy *and* not perpetually worried, I could be free from reality, if only temporarily.

Ever since I learned how to read and continued taking regular breathing treatments, I have been consciously collecting books. When I was bound to that life-saving machine hour after hour, I drifted into worlds which I never knew existed and I loved them. The consistency of my sickness allowed me to read voraciously, and by the time I was able to begin to wean myself off of the daily nebulizer usage, I started to broaden my collection. Now I could be more than just a “normal” black girl -- I could be anybody who would make the process of getting better just a little more bearable. I would read scary novels which would keep me up at night, just so I would be sure to finish the last drops of medication before nodding off. I would be stuck at the amusement park in *Full Tilt*, forced to grapple with the endless hall of mirrors which scared me to my very core. As I read, I would feel my body becoming contorted, my face deforming itself as I stepped through the mirrors just to try to escape. I would look down and see the inhuman bones, brittle and brand new, crunching beneath my monstrous feet. I would literally look over my shoulders to see if I was being followed as the sweat pooled on my forehead. But yet, when I was finally through the horrendous maze, I would magically be done with my medicine, though unable to sleep. And it was worth every minute.

As I got older, my book collection grew even more diverse. I dabbled in tales of witchcraft and sorcery through the *Stolarz Series*. I intentionally read books my mom had hidden in the house which she said were too mature, namely *Cane River*, *Stolen Lives: Twenty Years in a Desert Jail*, and *Eyes of a Child*. I even developed an odd obsession with reading a book by Stephen King simultaneously with one by Jodi Picoult. I would read a chapter of one and then read a chapter of the other and continue in this manner until I literally could not keep my eyes open any longer. I simply could not read enough or learn enough or travel enough or even escape enough.

Though my asthma has improved, my love for reading has grown exponentially and I find myself now never discrediting a genre of book just because of my preconceived notions. Because I have been able to be so open to reading new things, I have found the most unexpected opportunities to expand my collection. I have picked up books literally out of cardboard boxes with hand-written signs that say “Free” and they have ended up as some of my favorite novels (*White Oleander* is my most immediate example). I have gone to mom-and-pop bookshops in numerous states and purchased an armful of used rescues. I have even waited up anxiously at night for one university back home to have its annual basement book sale where I’ve stocked up on paper bag after paper bag of books with interesting titles and eye-catching covers. While I am not nearly as sick as I once was, I wouldn’t trade my frequent bouts of illness for anything in this world because I can truly say that my love of reading and book collecting stems from those formative years.

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