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1st Place Essay,ENGL 1000 Literacy Autobiography Contest 2020: Reading in Reverse

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Professor White

English 1000

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Reading in Reverse

What if you had to do something that you believed would save your life? A better question to ask, what would you do if you had to do something you didn't understand? Something that would save your soul, but you didn't know how or why?

I was born Muslim, I was raised on it. I went to the masjid every Friday for social prayer. I went to Islamic school. I tried to recite surahs to the best of my ability when it rang through the large prayer rooms. I'd whisper "bismillah" three times over and over before I went to bed to protect myself from the dark. I remember when I was little, still getting used to Islam, and I cried because my aunt got a tattoo. I remember sobbing out, "she's going to hell. I don't want her to go!" between tears, believing she would be doomed. It sounds foolish, but that's how devoted I was at the time.

But even with my devotion, I never understood the language. I am a native English speaker, and my father spoke Urdu, not Arabic. But I could read it, I just had no idea what it meant. I could pronounce the words well, almost sing them, but I could not comprehend the message behind them. The language barrier was even more impactful when I had to participate in a life changing passage most Muslims my age practiced.

Around 12 to 13 years old, Muslim students begin to read the Quran. Whether they learn in the masjid where they prayed, or at home under a teacher like I was taught. I remember the day my father bought my brother and me our Qurans, the loud thump hitting the table and the smell of bright new pages. I was excited, confused, and anxious for the journey I was about to embark upon. He hired a halfisahd, a teacher of the Quran, to come to our home every week to teach us the Quran for one hour. At first, I was ecstatic, finally I could possibly learn the book that mattered so much to my people, my family!

But there was a problem. Even though I was so eager to begin this journey of reading this text, I couldn't understand a single word of it. No line in Arabic was clear to me. I knew the pronunciations, what it was supposed to sound like, but I had no clue on what it meant. I was told these words were important, valuable, and sacred. But I was doomed in knowing what they meant, blank to the true meaning behind them. I wanted to know, I wanted to understand them, but it was impossible. Every week I would read a text that was beginning to feel pointless to me, lacking the luster it once shined to me. By the time I finished the entire text after almost six consistent months, I was tired. Islam felt like a weight to me now, and understanding it felt more difficult than ever. Apparently, I was "protected from hell" now, but I didn't know why. I never read the text to exactly go to heaven, I wanted to understand the word of my religion. But now that I had, I felt even more lost than I did before I started to read it.

After reading this text, I began to distance myself from religion more and more, as well distance myself away from reading. I felt annoyed by it, rebellious

against it. I almost found it tedious to read, despising reading and writing up until my 7th grade year. Every reading assignment I did, felt boring and impossible to commit to. I felt done. That was until I went to an annual book fair, one that the school I attended usually did in the middle of every semester. I was looking around, uninspired by everything, until I recognized a familiar author. Rick Riordan. I remembered in my 5th grade class reading the "*Lighting Thief*", and noticed he had started an extension series to the original "*Percy Jackson and the Olympians*". With the small cash I held in my pocket from my mom, I purchased the first book to the new series, "*Heroes of Olympus*". I won't lie, this was probably the best decision I made.

After just reading the first chapter, I was hooked. I began to read and read and finish book by book. I memorized the characters, the places, becoming ecstatic over it all. I waited each year for the exact day the next book would come out. And until it did, I would re-read and re-read the books of the "*Heroes of Olympus*" series over and over. Each time that book fair came, I would search and read the backs of new novels, glaze the first few pages, and purchase three to four books at a time. I remember holding all my books packed in a small cardboard box, trying hard as I might to prevent it with breaking. I fondly remember each time I added more, my mother would shake her head and wonder where this love of books suddenly came from. After finishing each book of the series, I was becoming in love with the lore of Greek mythology and the styles of writing within it. Immersing myself in the world and wondering what it would be like if I was in there. It felt freeing to understand and relate to characters whose words didn't feel like a jigsaw puzzle on steroids. I

admired the stories, and slowly but surely, I wanted to write myself. I remember starting to write about the ideas in my head. Cyborgs, demons, dystopian universes, ghosts, romance, horror, everything. I was captivated by it, and all throughout high school I wanted to make those stories a reality for myself. I started to share them with my friends, I drew my characters imagining the world they lived in. Those stories helped me get over my initial tiredness over reading and made me keener to what stories I could write. What I could tell to people. What I could have people understand regardless of the language it was in. Something that still is within me today.

I asked my mother a few nights ago, why exactly my parents made me read the Quran—the purpose behind the teachings of it. Her response was, “well, that’s the way your culture learned. Whether they understood it or not, they read it to go to heaven. If it was up to me, I would’ve learned it in a school setting in a study.” By her saying my culture, I knew she meant the people within it, not the culture itself. I was somewhat taken aback, the fact that even though some people could not understand the language, they would be forced to read the book to get some sort of eternal life. I agree with my mom in the sense that I wish I was taught more so in some sort of Quran study, so I could learn the meanings before the reading. What if we were saying something we weren’t agreeing with? I looked back into some of the surahs, to see if I remembered any of them, perhaps refresh my memories of reading these lines for days and days. I had forgotten so much, how to pronounce the words, how to read it. I remember I could only read one letter from a page, which was not

surprising. If I do not have a close relationship with the language, how will I remember it?

Regardless of what has occurred in my past, I do not despise any religion. I may have never understood Islam, but that doesn't make me hate the ones who follow it. I respect them just as they respect me, I've even spoken about my experience to people of many religions. I appreciate those who follow it, and I still find religion a beautiful thing as well as an inspiring thing. I just wish that perhaps in the past I could've understood the language better. Maybe one day I will learn Arabic, and maybe one day, I will learn what the Quran actually meant—finally learning what was so important to my culture, and actually finally learning the meaning behind it.