



The Book that Changed my Life

by Janelle Aslin

Not just one book, but so many books have and continue to shape who I am, what I know, how I perceive. There have been mighty anchors along the way that have somehow, by a teacher or a friend or really great placement on a prominent and colorful display in a bookstore, dropped down into my life and held me there as the currents just swept on by; books that made me pause, stand stock-still for a moment—granted me that rare and ever elusive miracle of time before I moved on again, different somehow: *Night* by Elie Wiesel, *Candide* by Voltaire, *'night*, *Mother* by Marsha Norman, *Hiroshima* by John Hersey, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Milan Kundera, *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini, *Broken Glass Floats: Growing Up Under the Khmer Rouge* by Charity Him, *Beyond Good and Evil* by Nietzsche, *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* by Jung Chang, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* by Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Slaughterhouse Five* by Kurt Vonnegut, *Faust* by Goethe.

Then there were those that left me breathless, whether it was by the nuance of the prose, the depth of the argument, the beautiful chaos of it's interior: *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Kafka on the Shore* by Haruki Murikami, *Fool's Crow* by James Welch, *The Almanac of the Dead* by Leslie Marmon Silko, *Geek Love* by Katherine Dunn, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* by Homer, *Tobacco Road* by Erskine Caldwell, *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner, *Paradise Lost* by John Milton, *Much Ado About Nothing* by William Shakespeare, *O, Pioneers!* by Willa Cather, *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson, *Bastard out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison, *Thomas and Beulah* by Rita Dove, *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk, *Slapstick* by Kurt Vonnegut, *Outer Dark* by Cormac McCarthy, *Paradise* by Toni Morrison, "The Death of Ivan Ilych" by Leo Tolstoy, *Native Speaker* by Chang Rae Lee, *Tender is the Night* by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

And then there were those I found solace in—safe havens to hide in, to escape to, to be comforted within the warm embrace of paper pages, to be entertained by: *James and the Giant Peach* by Roald Dahl, *Blubber* and *Are you there, God? It's me, Margaret* by Judy Blume, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis, *Harry Potter* by J.R.R. Tolkien, *Little Altars Everywhere* by Rachel Welch, *Gardens in the Dunes* by Leslie Marmon Silko, *The Incarnations of Immortality* series by Piers Anthony, *The Vampire Chronicles* by Anne Rice, *The King Must Die* by Mary Renault, *Cat's Cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut, *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd, *The Complete Book of Kong Poems* by William Trowbridge.

And of course there are those that fit all the categories above, and then again, move so beyond any contrived definition I could not easily articulate why they are important. For some, there's a character I wish to revisit again and again. For some, there's a singular line that dances off the page, its majestic beauty seared in my brain. These are the indefinable—the answers to “What books would you take on a deserted island?": *My Antonia* by Willa Cather, *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, *The Cossacks* by Leo Tolstoy, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the collected short stories of Flannery O'Connor, the collected poetry of Robert Frost, *Dubliners* by James Joyce.

And then there's that *one*. That book that drags a story along with it, pops up in your life in such awkward and coincidental ways you are heartily assured that it is fate. The book of children's poetry my mother set on my bunk when I was five: spring-green, thick as a dictionary, totally inappropriate for a 5-year old. I loved it. I let its 600 pages fall open where it may. I read the poem. Something popped, moved in the pit of my stomach. Heat in my bones. Heat in my heart. I looked at my mother. I pointed at the page. I knew somehow this shouldn't be in a book for children. “Mom,” I said. “I want to do that.” And I was held forever by the dark beauty of Robert Frost's “Stopping by a Woods on a Snowy Evening.” And I carried that book with me, through grade school and middle school, high school and college. I carried it through my father's death, my marriages, my divorce. I carried it through my two sons being born. I carried it from house to house, state to state, city to city. Until it was gone. Until one of those it-never-happens-to-you kind of accidents occurred: the pipes broke, water-drowned us out, everything ruined. All the books ruined! Have you ever experienced anything like that? And then me, two days later, stopping in at the used book shop, hoping to pick up a cheap trough of books for my kids. There it is. Far-left back shelf, wedged and stuffed and drowning there—my out of print, never seen before in any bookstore since the early 70s, book of children's poetry. I picked it out, pawed it in awe, and it seemed to whisper, *finally*. Now, won't we all interpret that as important?

But really, after all of this meandering through the vast maze of my mind, I think that the greatest book, the one that really and truly and most certainly changed my life in ways that I could never have imagined is...

the book I'll read tomorrow, or maybe, the one I'm reading right now.