

I am a Reader, I am a Writer

By Alexandria Smythe

WHEN I was younger I was deathly afraid of *Harry Potter*, particularly the scene in which Voldemort is discovered in the act of drinking a unicorn's blood. The details of exactly how J.K. Rowling presented this scene in terms of language and imagery are long forgotten, but the feeling of pure terror that it inspired in me lingered for years after the initial reading. Moving quickly through the pages, devouring each word, this section struck me. I could picture the gruesome sight clearly, and I, at the time being a young, impressionable reader, decided that this passage utterly ruined the reading experience of this book for me. I put the book back on the highest shelf of my collection and did not pick it up again until well after I started to watch the films. Ultimately, the purpose of this story is not to convey how much I, as a particularly easily frightened child, did not appreciate J.K. Rowling's plot devices, but rather to express how infinitely malleable and emotionally connected to reading I was as a child. I still feel that tug of the heartstrings when I read and have a shared experience with another person in the author's fantasy world. It makes me wonder how I became so invested in someone else's imagined world, sometimes even more so than the infinitely more tangible world around me.

This emotional connection with the written word, I believe, derives from the very social nature of reading I experienced when I was a child. I was one of those children who was constantly exposed to literature from a young age. My mother, who had experimented with writing children's books, had a deep appreciation of reading and was eager to share with me this respect (idolization?) of literature even before I could decipher the black markings on these pristine white pages for myself. Teachers, too, who read in inflected tones for each new character made these imagined

converse with his neighbors. This idea, too, is true of writing. The two are combined. With this view of the social nature of reading, perhaps I have come to realize that writing, which is inherently connected to reading, shares the same obligation to be an interactive and communal act.

In this way, I have always had a very social relationship with books and other readers, all of us sharing a very personal connection with literature—much like that first encounter I shared vicariously in *Harry Potter's* Forbidden Forest. However, as a young writer, I was never taught that writing could have the same impact. I was never a bad writer in school (this distinction was how we were categorized in school—either good or bad writer with no in-between or explanation), but I did feel restricted by the limitations in academic high school writing. I always got high marks on writing assignments, but I was still hesitant to share anything I had written. Afraid that my peers would find what I had written to be uninspired or flawed, I was convinced that they would no longer believe that I was talented or interesting. My insecure high school mind believed that if I was open with my transcribed thoughts, my written opinions, my peers would brand me with negative labels. Teachers, too, often suppressed the notion of creativity in writing. It was impersonal, and a good essay was expected to be unoriginal, rehashing the words of others to form the same arguments that had been turned in year after year. Given the rigid guidelines of the five-paragraph essay, I felt trapped and confined, feeling both unchallenged and frightened of stepping outside the norm. Just as Birkerts believes in the closeted life of readers, I retreated into the closeted life of an unchallenged writer, only putting pen to paper when it was required of me.

However, unlike Birkerts, I believe that reading is rarely done alone and acknowledge that perhaps my view of writing was flawed. In reading, we pick up books in the bookstore that are recommended by the staffers, reading their comments underneath the shelves and keeping them in mind as we plunge into them with fresh eyes. We search out the newest book on the best sellers list and read the reviews online or in print. We talk about what we are reading with others or slip in a quote or idea from something we have read into conversation. Even if we are not actively having a discussion in a book group or in class, the ideas we read on the page shape the ideas and thoughts that we carry around with us and share with others. Reading is rarely completely solitary, so why do I carry the idea that writing is? Birkerts insists that “in writing the writer reads and that in reading the reader writes”

(110). The two are indelibly interconnected, woven together with the same fabric. To return to my childhood trauma with *Harry Potter* and the dead unicorn (if the book had been titled as such to begin with, perhaps I would never have picked it up and I would have been spared the nightmares), I recall vividly the emotional connection I have with words. Words molded with my thoughts and crafted by my hands seem deeply more personal than those I read on the page, but this way of thinking is simply not true. To borrow from Birkerts again, “we read ourselves, and then we report on the reading. We call it writing” (111). In reading and in writing we carry on a conversation with the words on the page. Reading does not occur in a vacuum, and neither should writing.

In this way, I have come to understand that thoughts are meant to be shared with the world. Birkerts believes that the relationship between the reader and the written word is incredibly private. In a way, he is right. It is not necessarily vital that everyone be informed of what is happening to all their “friends” at each and every moment of the day, but the issue is more complex than this notion suggests. Thoughts on reading, thoughts on life are complex as well. Some may point to writing as a highly self-serving action, especially in relation to personal subject matter. These objectors would perhaps want for writing of at least some subjects to remain a private act. In the time of digital messaging, status updates, and the self-indulgent celebrity memoir, it is true that oversharing and self-absorption lie in some forms of writing. However, it is not true to say that all personal writing is without purpose. The “I” of essay writing, that intangible, first-person form that is meant to signify individuality and personality of thought, has been excluded for too long. It leads to the alienation I have felt with the writing process, confined to expressing the ideas of teachers in their own cookie-cutter format. Writing is not meant to be confined within the dusty, peeling walls of the classroom, within the strict limits designated by stricter teachers. Unfettered thoughts lie beyond these borders and it is impossible not to be influenced by even the most subtle passing blow of literature. Even those who are most uninterested in books cannot say that they have never been affected by something they have read, be it a school assignment, an advertisement, or a letter. Written language shapes the consciousness of man, and this consciousness affects those with whom it comes into contact. My thoughts are not only mine. They are shared with the people I meet. Writing and reading are extensions of my interaction with the world.

Books and reading have always been sacred to me, held dear to my heart and shared with others in the hopes that they would find comfort from them too, much like how others cook or knit or buy gifts for the ones they care about. I realize that writing is no different. Books take on a unique meaning for each person, but that is not to say that they are personal. Writing originates from one person, but that is not to say that it should not be shared with many. I feel a connection to the worlds I create in my head while both reading and writing, but these are not mine to keep hidden away. Reading and writing, although often done in private, rarely fail to evolve and move beyond the walls and constraints of the reader/writer's mind.