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# Coleccionista de Recuerdos: Memories of a Collector

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Misael de la Rosa

*Coleccionista de recuerdos* : memories of Collector

I would like say that I was born with a book on my left hand and a pen on my right. I would like to say that my first words were neither “*mamá*” or “*papá*” but rather “Gabo”. I would like to say that I learned how to read before I learned how to walk; that I recited poetry before I had the capability to understand the magnitude of the words I was saying. I cannot. I am not a character created by Garcia Marquez in the fantastical world of Macondo. I am neither Don Quixote nor the prodigal surgeon Black Jack. I am not the books I have read, the pages I have flipped, the deaths that made me cry, nor the ones that I will someday read. Although I am not those carefully crafted characters, those characters have become me, for through their lives I have been able to make sense of mine.

Maybe I am only able to find myself through books because from a young age, I have been surrounded by them. Ever since I can remember, my mother – the most avid reader I have met in my entire life – inculcated in me a love of literature. Today, on those rare occasions when my brother, mother and I can sit down and just talk, my brother and I make sure that we joke about how our mother never played with us when we were little — Of course we both know that she did a lot since she was a single mother. She would get annoyed and would grudgingly say: “well at least I made sure I read to y’all every single night”; she was not wrong. Every night before bedtime she would sit us down and read us a story from a two volume Spanish-language collection of fairytales. Before learning how to read I would hate listening to the stories. The words on the pages were hieroglyphs of worlds that were out of my reach.

But when she began teaching us how to read, I suddenly fell in love. As a beginner I was bound to read the Clifford books and other children’s stories, but I did not care. I was in love

with the idea of books. I could not understand how someone was able to invoke images in my head with mere words; I was enchanted. I picked up every book I could read no matter what it was and no matter if I could not understand half of the words in it. Of course, my mother would stop me from going into her own personal library because it was filled with books that were far beyond my capacity. The sight of those unreachable books broke my heart. Those books became my goal and when I moved to the United States from Mexico, those same books kept me studying Spanish.

The first book I read from that shelf was *Cien años de soledad* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez; my mother's and my favorite book. From that book I graduated to *El otoño del patriarca*, which to this day I have yet to be able to fully read. It now stands atop my tan Ikea eight-cube bookshelf; a first edition falling to pieces and desperately rescued by an improvised cover I made out of white printer paper. It stands as a reminder of the level I need to reach. It reminds me that I, a college educated comparative literature and Hispanic literature major, have not been able to reach a level that my mother reached without any sort of formal education. The words "El otoño del patriarca" badly written by high school me on the improvised cover remind me of the one person who I owe my love for literature to; my mother.

Bellow it, on the next level, is Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations* which symbolizes the beginning of my research career. Inside it is the essay "The Task of the Translator", which opened up my eyes to the field of translation studies. Every once in a while, I (re)read the essay, not to analyze or find something new in it, but to invoke the countless meetings and discussions I have had with my academic peers and mentors. I remember a young, pre-med me that knew that med-school was not something that I wanted to do but that kept going anyway. This essay fought

arduously with my stubborn self and won, thus redirecting me to the path of literature; the path I love.

Appropriately adjacent are the 12 volumes of *Black Jack*, by Osamu Tezuka, that I have been able to find thus far with my favorite being Volume 2. The anime adaptation is something my brother and I used to watch when we were young. Every Friday and Saturday night we would sit down with some Mexican candy and a soda to watch the newest episodes. We were saddened once the adaptation ended because it did not cover the full story that Tezuka had written. Years later I have undertaken the task of finding and buying every single volume so that one day I would be able to finish that story with my brother.

To the left is my favorite little world: poetry. My works range from classics such as *Ode to Common Things* (a bilingual edition) to lesser known works like *Un fotógrafo ciego*. This latter work was given to me by the sister of one of my dear friends. One day I overheard my friend speaking on the phone with her sister about a homework assignment that she had to do extremely well on in order to pass her high school Spanish class. As I love reading and writing I offered to workshop her paper — she ended up doing well in the assignment. A gesture that I had considered minute was something that impacted her greatly. She was so grateful that months later, upon visiting Spain, she decided to get me a poetry book and a notebook. I was moved to tears. I keep the two together, centered among the various works of poetry I have collected, sticking out just enough to highlight the special place that those two hold in my bookshelf.

Finally, moving one cube down, is the section that began everything: *Mexicanidad*. It is in this section where I find the most comfort and hold my saddest and happiest memories. In the pages of *La historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* I find my roots as a *Mexicano*. This book written in the 16<sup>th</sup> century narrates the Spanish conquest of the territory

that three hundred years later would become *México*. Within the slightly yellow pages, underneath the wood cover lies a once undecipherable language, for 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish, like old English, varies greatly from the contemporary statuses of the languages. Regardless, after much studying and going through various, smaller works like *El abencerraje* I was able to finally understand a world that had once felt unreachable.

Sadly, I am not one of the characters in the books that dearly fill my bookshelf. I am not Don Quixote fighting windmills or a blind poet theorizing about love. I am not the best neurosurgeon in the world nor the Patriarch of a magical reality. I cannot cross the boundary between that which is literature and that which is real: books can. Within the pages, those that have yellowed and accumulated the enigmatically comfortable old book smell or those that are pristine and full of innocence, lies my whole life. Like a photograph they show me a snapshot of the moment when I was binging their pages. The eight cubical sections that make up my bookshelf might be rigid and bland, but within each one lies a part of my life, acting like my keeper of memories.

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