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### A Newlywed Soundtrack

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## A Newlywed Soundtrack

The anticipated phone call came at 9 am: “Your bloodwork came back and it looks like you may have preeclampsia. Don’t drive 90 miles an hour to get here or anything, but come to the Women’s Assessment Center as soon as you can. You’ll want to bring your hospital bag.” The nurse hadn’t said it explicitly, but I knew that the next time I came home, I’d be coming home with my baby. In a daze, I threw snacks, chargers, extra clothes for myself and my husband, and a copy of *Moby Dick* into my hospital bag and left.

My husband John and I got married April 18th, 2020—one month and 150 guests shy of our original plan. In those early weeks of the pandemic everyone had a different method of occupying themselves, although the majority seemed to bake sourdough. John and I discovered reading out loud to each other. We didn’t set this as an intentional goal: we were simply bored. Since then, we have been continuously reading books out loud together; and whether or not a book became our favorite, each is forever linked to the specific season in our new life together during which we read it.

Shortly after our wedding, I was diagnosed with a rare bone disorder and eventually became wheelchair bound until I received a hip replacement in September. This was not the way we thought our life would begin, but a silver lining appeared in the form of an Amtrak promotional discount and we decided to take the California Zephyr from Chicago to Sacramento, CA. I’ll never forget the awe I felt gliding through narrow passes in the Rockies in Colorado and through red rock river gorges in Utah, all from the comfort of our train bed. And I’ll never remember these images without hearing *My Ántonia*. Willa Cather’s landscapes are inseparably intertwined with the natures of her characters and the joys and hardships of their

lives. In *My Ántonia*, the richness of the Nebraskan plains and of Antonia's life were all the more poignant to us as we moved to the midwest, a part of the country completely new to us, and as we experienced our own highs and lows with the elation of being married, coupled with the isolation of the pandemic and my sudden disability. But each of Cather's words and every scene we beheld from our window affirmed life's beauty and the inability of these difficulties to defeat our joy.

Autumn came, soon followed by winter. The increasingly early setting sun found us curled up in our living room reading aloud from John C.H. Wu's *Beyond East and West*. We were immediately drawn in by his distinctively warm and humble voice as he took us through his life in turn-of-the-century China; his academic adventures as he rose to prominence as one of China's most eminent legal scholars, his harrowing experiences during World War II, and his spiritual journey culminating in his conversion to Catholicism. Wu expertly described the treasures of Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism and how he found their fulfillment in Catholicism—weaving a "Chinese garment for Christ." As an Asian Catholic, this struck me deeply. He helped me recognize the Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian influences in my own upbringing and gave me the words to communicate what I so deeply valued about each. My husband doesn't share my cultural upbringing, but he does share my faith, so reading *Beyond East and West* together organically facilitated conversations about our similarities and differences and how these cultural and religious influences would shape our new family.

We picked up *Moby-Dick* while looking for a different book at Half-Price Books on the morning of my baby shower earlier this winter. It seems that the only thing one ever hears about *Moby-Dick* is that it is long and hard to get through, which is somewhat disheartening.

We began reading apprehensively, but were both quickly surprised by just how funny *Moby-Dick* is! By that point in my pregnancy, all I wanted to do was soak in a hot bath—so that’s what I did while John read aloud to me. I felt like a child, but he had so much fun acting out each of the character’s voices that he hogged most of the reading for himself. We couldn’t stop laughing over Ishmael’s argumentative explications of everything from whale phrenology to ship’s rope and the heavy-handedness of the symbolism. We kept track of the absurd length of Melville’s sentences (20 lines was the longest we found) and how many random chapters Ishmael interjected between chapters that actually furthered the plot. The end months of pregnancy were hard and achey, but hot baths, *Moby-Dick*, and John carried me through it.

In the delivery room, I kept my eyes closed while white whales swam before me and my body clenched in waves every few minutes. Our birthing class recommended creating a soundtrack to instill calmness during labor, but John’s voice was all I needed. We passed the hours laughing over Stubbs’ Shakespearean soliloquies, while tortured Ahab and the violent accounts of harpooning whales distracted me from my own discomfort. Soon enough night fell, and our son James was born just after midnight.

It’s been three weeks since then, and we’re still reading *Moby Dick*. But now, Ahab’s ravings are punctuated by James’ gurgles and cries. I doubt that any book we read aloud will ever have the significance that *Moby Dick* has for us, but I do not doubt that we will ever stop reading.

## **Bibliography**

These are all the books we've read out loud together over the past two years. I organized them in the order in which we read them, rather than alphabetically—my apologies for any inconvenience this causes, but I believe this will facilitate understanding.

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