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### Confessions of an Amateur Librarian

Violet Cooper

*Washington University in St. Louis*

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## Confessions of an Amateur Librarian

Before I could read I was reading. As a child when I woke crying, scared by the dark corners of my room and the monsters under my bed, my parents would hold me up to gaze at a painting we had in our apartment. It was merely an abstract visual landscape, “Untitled” by Paul Bloodgood from 1996. Yet according to my parents, when I looked at the painting it seemed to calm my cries and soothe my fears almost immediately. When I looked at the broad green strokes on the canvas I was reading into them, just as one does with the black and white text of a book. For what is a painting but visual literature? Reading was an escape from my fears, even as a newborn. But as I would soon discover, fear takes many forms.

Every two weeks during elementary school, my father and I would take the train into New York City and go to Mount Sinai Hospital. I was enrolled in a study there which attempted to cure me of my anaphylaxis allergy to dairy. Every two weeks when I missed school and took the train into the city, I would bring a book with me, most notably the *Mysterious Benedict Society* series. While the nurses swirled around me with their IVs and test tubes, I could escape these fearful images by catapulting into the universe of the *Mysterious Benedict Society*. On the hard days when I reacted poorly to the treatment, I had Reynie, Kate, and George “Sticky” Washington to hold my hand and calm my breath. I was confined to a hospital bed, but by reading I could gallivant across seas and secret corridors with my newfound companions.

Middle school and the fraught teenage years brought new fears. I struggled to adapt to the shifting terrain of adolescence, to grasp the friendships that seemed to perpetually slip through my fingers. It turned out that fear was no longer just the monster under the bed or the nurses with their needles. That is when I discovered Kazuo Ishiguro. It was a substantial departure from the *Mysterious Benedict Society*, perhaps too mature for my adolescent mind. Regardless, I devoured *Never Let Me Go*. I carried it with me everywhere: on the bus, to class, and even to friends’ houses. I could not help gravitating toward Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth. In my own little way I understood the vulnerability and discomfort the three of them faced, the confusion and awkwardness of adolescent growing pains. *Never Let Me Go* was the first book I cried to. For I had been

a witness to the characters' whole lives in a span of a week, and yet I was left behind in the dust, still thirteen and vulnerable. Reading brought companionship, but could rip it away just as fast.

What I thought had been temporary growing pains deepened into a numbing, gnawing loneliness as I entered high school. My classes and my friends kept me shallowly occupied, but I sought more beyond the dreary walls of my high school. I was reaching blindly into the abyss, grasping the air for something that I was not sure even existed. It was then that I encountered Edith Wharton. I devoured *The Age of Innocence* and then *The House of Mirth*. The minutiae of high school made me feel small, confined by the very environment that I lived, breathed, and learned in; but I could escape it by delving into the Gilded Age drama of Lily Bart and Countess Ellen Olenska. My reality paled in comparison to the escapades at Bellomont and secret exchanges in the conservatory, yet I took comfort in Wharton's escapism. However, there was only so much that Wharton could do for me. Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska could not keep me company at the lunch table. Reading could not change my circumstances, but it brought temporary escape.

Soon after my rendez-vous with Wharton, my parents recommended *A Prayer For Owen Meany* to me. They would not tell me much about it; they would only rivet their glassy eyes toward me and say that it was "a very special book." So I started reading it. And the loneliness that had accumulated throughout middle and swelled in high school began to thaw. When I went on my solemn afternoon walks I was no longer alone. I could wish farewell to my present reality, and immerse myself into Owen Meany's world. Owen Meany's world was hide-and-go-seek in the trap door, the stuffed armadillo on the bedside table, winter vacations at Gravesend Academy, and summers at the quarry. It was a world unbeknownst to everyone but me, a place where I could confide in my secret ambitions without fear of them slipping out from under my nose. I could hide out in the trap door where my fears would not find me. It took me almost three weeks to finish *A Prayer For Owen Meany*, not because it bored me, but because I dreaded ending it. I longed to remain in Owen Meany's universe forever, because he was my friend, perhaps the closest friend I had ever known. The day eventually came when I had to finish it. I sat outside in the shining mid-April sun reading the last

few words of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, my eyes and hands glued to the pages. It was only mid-day when I turned the last page, but I spent the rest of the afternoon crying, refusing to leave my bedroom. For days, I could not bear to sleep without the physical book by my side; I would not abandon Owen Meany. After a while, I decided that I would dedicate an entire day to Owen Meany. It is July 8th, and every year I read a few pages in remembrance and appreciation of my good friend. Reading gave me a friendship that, though fleeting, taught me what it meant to not feel so alone.

When I packed away my books for college, I packed my fears with them. I insisted on shipping my books all the way to St. Louis; I refused to leave them behind. On that afternoon in August I gingerly layered them into the cardboard box, knowing that I was sending my companions on a one way trip to my future. They were all there: *The Mysterious Benedict Society*, *Never Let Me Go*, *The House of Mirth*, and *A Prayer For Owen Meany*. I had one new addition to the collection too, *A Gentleman in Moscow*, which I had read almost entirely on a train to Boston one week before I left for school. On the train, as I counted the telephone poles and the switches in the tracks, I felt the gravity of my last week at home stretching out into the expansive terrain before me. My fears of the rapidly approaching future lay heavy in my heart, but I had Count Alexander Rostov there to comfort me and assuage my worries. He was sitting there right beside me after all, recalling memories of his revolutionary days and savoring a scoop (only one) of chocolate ice cream. Reading granted me the wisdom of a stranger's past, helping me to grow comfortable with the unknowns of my own future.

Fears, even the most childish ones, do not disappear when you turn eighteen. On the contrary, in the face of college and my burgeoning adult life, I was scared of everything. Perhaps most of all, I was scared I would not have time to read here; that the safety blanket that had buoyed me for much of my life would be ripped from underneath me. But fortunately, I have found that the opposite is true. And something even more miraculous has occurred: my reading at college is no longer a desperate distraction as it had always been. Instead of allowing me to escape my reality, it now only enriches it. I seem to be embarking on almost

weekly trips to Subterranean Books, so much so that I think I have made myself a regular. While buying books does drain a significant amount of my meager summer savings, I insist on purchasing new copies of my books so I can cultivate my own personal library. I am an amateur librarian, frequently loaning books out to my friends in a revolving door fashion. I tailor my recommendations to my friends' tastes, trading *The Secret History* for *Sweet Days of Discipline* and supplying my most recently acquired obsession, Haruki Murakami, to my friend who does not own his books. My book collection is neither decor nor trophies. It is a growing, living organism: a literary garden that I tend to and water carefully. For they are my old companions after all, and I intend on treating them kindly.

Slowly, I will discover new literary acquaintances and add them to my personal library. Already this year, I have revisited my old haunts. As I write this, I am in the midst of rereading *The House of Mirth* which continues to endear me to Edith Wharton. I also challenged myself to read Kazuo Ishiguro's most enigmatic and twisted novel, *The Unconsoled*. It struck me while I was reading it that it was not so long ago, four years in fact, that I found solace in the world that Ishiguro constructed for Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth. Despite my voracious reading habits, I have a seemingly never-ending list of books to read, and soon I will have to pile my books on the floor as I will have no more room for them. But I will carry on in this way, befriending and collecting literary companions, for I know that in my mind they are with me all the time. I've invited George "Sticky" Washington, Kathy, Lily Bart, Owen Meany, and Count Rostov to accompany me, and we are all sitting together round a little table, conversing over warm cups of tea. They may be fictional, nothing but pages bound together, but they brought companionship in the most isolated of moments, and thawed my seemingly perpetual loneliness. My books did not always quell my fears, but they gave me the strength to face them. I carry this strange, eclectic traveling circus of a library with me everywhere I go, because I am indebted to them. They have cared for me, and I care for them now in return by making a home for them in my budding personal library. We look after one another, and we always will.

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