
SCENES FROM MY PLAYBOOK: SNAPSHOTS OF THE LITERATURE THAT CAPTURES MY SOUL

Alexis Bean

L.M. Smith Middle School, Birmingham, AL

I always hated the heat from my breath as I hid under the covers. The way the humidity held the air made me feel like I was suffocating. But it was the only way I could hide the beam of the flashlight. I had to keep going. I had to read every word. Every page. Every chapter. I was involved. I was so enraptured by the text that I didn't want to put it down. Sometimes she caught me.

Grandma would check on me before she and Papa sauntered up the stairs in the early hours of the morning. Most times I could hear her coming and quickly pretend I was asleep before she pushed my door open, looking through the darkness at my huddled figure hiding the novel under my pillow. After she had gone and I heard her footsteps retreating up the stairs, I pulled the book out, reopened its pages, and dived back in.

Most books held me this way. Addicted to every scene and dialogue. Captured in the castle walls and entranced in the sweet smell of the well-worn pages. This was when I found my love of reading. I got in trouble at school for reading when I shouldn't have been. I sneaked my book out of my wooden desk and read when we were supposed to be doing vocabulary. I read in music class. I read at lunch period. My teachers would snatch my new world away and glare at me, all the while never taking a breath away from their lessons. I spent all my extra time in the library, sprawled out on the musty Persian rug under the window, devouring any book that Mrs. Penner could give me. Soon I read all the interesting books in the small elementary school library. Mrs. Penner, the beautifully plump librarian at Earhart Environmental Magnet, would request other books from middle schools and high schools to help me keep reading. By Christmas of my 5th grade year I had read the entire series of the Harry Potter books that were available. I read *Black Beauty*. I read about a scrawny little red-headed girl who wanted to do chores. I read about princesses, kings, mistresses, monsters, dogs, fear, marriage, dragons. I read so many books, so many titles, got to know so many characters. They were a part of me.

* * * * *

“Always with that damn book,” Grandma chuckled when I asked her to tell me again. “It was always that one book.”

When I was newly introduced to literature, just barely toddling around with wide eyes and nothing but gibberish for words, I loved Dr. Seuss. My favorite book was *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*. My grandmother tells me that I would bring it to her, every night, sometimes two or three times, and crawl up in her lap, snuggle in, and listen. I would reach my little hand up and lay it in the crook of her neck. I would close my eyes and lay my head against her chest. I remember listening to her heartbeat on my ear and feeling her voice as it vibrated against my fingertips.

One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish.
Black fish, blue fish, old fish, new fish.
This one has a little star,
This one has a little car.
Say what a lot of fish there are.

I remembered every word. Grandma says by the summer after I turned two, I could read it.

“Not really read it,” she clarified, scrubbing at the dishes after dinner. “But you would tell me what it was supposed to say. You were repeating what you knew the pages were going to say.”

And so, I read to her, to my grandpa, to my mom (if she got home in time), to my cousins, to the wall, to myself. I got up on the small stool in my room and reach to the third shelf on the wobbly cupboard and grab the yellow bound book.

I still have it, you know. Most of the pages are wrinkled and creased in weird, strange folds. Some are ripped, with one page holding on by the tips of its fingers. The spine is tattered and shows the waterlogged brown cardboard underneath. I can barely make out the handwritten note from my grandma on the front page.

May you always wonder, she wrote. *Love grandma.*

* * * * *

It laughed at me. I swear it laughed at me. I look over the table and see the daunting textbook laughing at me. All its annotations, research, and footnotes. Mocking me with every academic dripped page. I used to love to do this. Coming into the library. Curling up in a chair, quietly pulling out a hardback book and smelling the sweet smell of musty pages. The room would be quiet. And I could feel the literature unfold as I opened the book and turned to begin my journey. But that didn't happen with textbooks. I grabbed at the cold binding and slid it across the table. It seemed to slither into my hands. Knowing I would have to sit there for 20, 30, 45 pages of research and statistics and blah, blah, blah.

Why was it so daunting? The thought of sitting down and reading what is assigned? Why do I hate it so much? Is it because I do not get to choose what content I digest? Or is it because they have made my hobby a chore?

They tell me how to read. They tell me how to write. They tell me how to teach. They tell me how to do statistics. They tell me how to eat. They tell me how to breathe. They tell me how to be a good student.

But it makes it unfun. That's the word I am going to use. Unfun, because that is how over it I am. How tired I am of picking up a bound piece of my wallet. Looking at a white canvas littered with words from old white men. Looking at this book that cost me \$250 just to hold in my hands. A book I will never look at again. A book I do not even *want* to read.

But I will. I must. If I want to pass this class, if I want to graduate. I must open this book; whose laughter fills my ears and reminds me I have so many other things I could be doing.

Like washing my hair.

Or poking my eye with a sharp stick.

When's the last time I cleaned out my car?

Can I look this up on SparkNotes?

* * * * *

Your favorite children's book. That's what I requested for my baby shower. Instead of greeting cards and folded pieces of cardstock I will probably never look at again, bring my son a book.

From the moment I heard his heartbeat I knew I wanted to instill in him the beauty that reading has shown me. The beauty that learning has shown me. I wanted him to have it all, and in order to do that he would have to read. His father and I started early. Reading to him as his father rubbed my belly. Feeling his little kicks and knowing that he was listening to every word we read.

When he came out, he was perfect. Anything a mother could dream of. Ten fingers. Ten toes. Eyes as bright and blue as the first time I saw the Jamaican sea, sparkling with the morning sunrise and clear so I can see all the way into his soul. And when we brought him home, the first thing, we did was read him a book in his nursery. His grandfather held him, cuddled him in the glider and rocked back and forth reading the book that he had bought earlier that day. *God Gave Me a Grandpa*. The tears slowly fell down his cheeks as he read to his newborn grandson and you could see how happy and proud, he was.

He had seen four months when his father had to leave on a long deployment. In a week he would board a plane and fly across the sea to a desert wasteland that he would call home for months. Taylor sat in the nursery. In the same glider. Rocking back and forth. He read to him. Book after book, after book. Bonding in the only way he knew how. The only way you could with a child who didn't talk or walk or understand that you would be gone. Bedtime was one of the only times we shared as a family. With the phone propped up on the little stuffed dragon he was given in the hospital. Facetime can only bring you so close but being able to read your son a story before bed is priceless.

Now he searches for it. A young child so full of wonder and craving the words in his books. He has his favorites: *There's a Monster in Your Book*, *Mommy's Little Monster*, *Riley Wins The Race*. He will grab one and toddle over to you, putting it on your lap and hoisting one leg up, looking at you with excitement. You can pull him into your lap, snuggling him in and wrapping your arms around him to open the book on his knees. He does a little dance, wiggling his hips and clapping his hands knowing what's going to happen next. Sometimes he likes to watch me as I read. Watch my mouth as it moves over each word and sound out each character. Sometimes he reaches up and softly places his fingertips on my lips, wanting me to sound out every word against his little hand. Sometimes he decides it's his turn and he babbles repeatedly, turning pages in a book he doesn't understand until he reaches the hardback cover and he closes it, satisfied with himself. looking up at you for confirmation that what he accomplished was important.

I hope this never leaves him. This joy he finds from pieces of cardboard stapled together with pieces of paper. Illustrations of silly creatures doing silly things and animals who love their children, giving

them hugs and cuddles and teaching them lessons. I hope I find him years from now sitting in front of his bookshelf, pages strewn around him and him reading. Reading to me. Reading to his father. Reading to the wall. Reading to himself.

Author Biography

Born in Valley Center, Kansas, Alexis Bean graduated from Wichita State University in spring 2020 with a Bachelor of Arts in Education, Secondary English Language Arts 6-12. She completed her teaching internship in spring 2020 at Wichita Heights High School in USD 259. Alexis is a proud Air Force wife and a mother to a beautiful two-year-old boy. She has two rescue dogs and lives in Birmingham, AL, with her husband. She presented at the 2019 Kansas Association of Teachers of English (KATE) Conference on young adult literature and lesson implementation in the classroom. In fall 2020, Alexis will assume the head teaching position for eighth grade English language arts at L.M. Smith Middle School in Birmingham, AL. She can be reached at atbean@shockers.wichita.edu.