

Narrative Hues

On Reading for Nuance

The plane idles on the tarmac. Edges of books press against the canvas of the carry-on bag at my feet. I think of the stack before they were in the bag. Back when they sat on a shelf in my 8ft by 11ft apartment in Manhattan. I liked those books on that shelf. Far away from the city where I was raised. Where I was taught I was either wrong or right. Saved or condemned. Where the only in-between was the slate of the Midwest sky in winter.

As a kid, I read in the woods behind my house. Or on the grass where it met the dirt of the forest floor. I also read on the bus. Or walking at recess. And even in my closet even, when it was past my bedtime, so my parents couldn't see light glowing on white pages in the dark.

I still consume literature as if it's breath. Reading everywhere. Reading everything. Reading constantly. As if books are a life force.

I'm from the suburbs of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Just two hours down I-96 from Ann Arbor. But that stretch of highway led me to a whole new Midwest than the one I'd always known. Left-leaning, rooted in academia and research, more religiously diverse. When I got to the University of Michigan, living away from my family and hometown, I abandoned my performance of roles I'd been taught and expected. I began trying to etch my own narrative.

This new me went across oceans, working in Pondicherry, India and studying in London, England. I met new friends and built new routines and lifestyles. I now have people I love scattered across the map. They are both people who knew the girl I was growing up and people who know the me I'd become after shedding the skin of childhood. And then I have myself. The girl who has lived all the lives and has trouble understanding which one is really her.

And now, it's my senior year of college. It feels like a bookend, whether it is or isn't. As if graduation is a forced reconciling of past and present. A culmination of those two selves meeting and deciding where to go next. It feels like I have to choose which self I'm going to stand by at the end of it all. The person I was or the

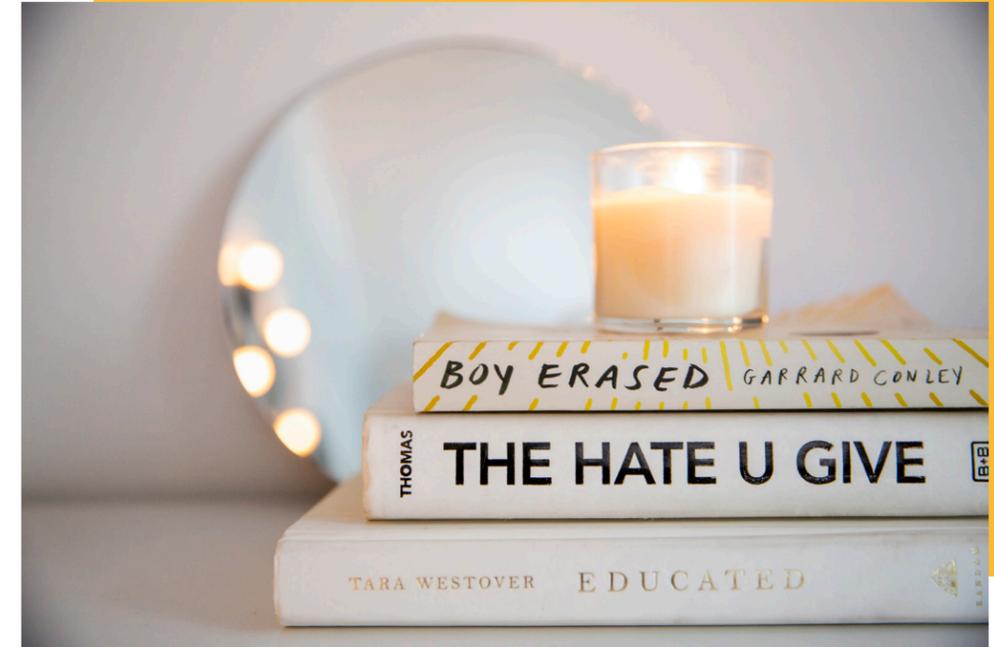
person I am now. And so, when the summer comes and goes, I decide to pack up my books and read them in another new place.

I go to New York, that really cliché thing that slightly-broken and searching twenty somethings do. I work out the credits to spend the fall semester of this final year away from school. I tell people it's for an internship. But I let the real reason stay under the surface. Which is that I want to go there to find myself or whatever the hell that means.

What my bohemian image of the city doesn't include, is the amplified irony of being lonely and in a city filled with people. Without homework and my circle of established friends, I have more free time on my hands than I'm used to at school. When I leave my desk at the literary agency, when the handful of people I know are busy, when the museums close and shows are over—it's just me. I spend a lot of time with myself. When the noise in my own head gets to be too much, I turn to the stack of books on the wooden shelf above me.

On one of those days when I don't want to be alone in the city anymore, I crack open *Educated* by Tara Westover. Deep in my senior-year existential crisis, I pick this memoir about how education empowers.

Westover recounts her experience growing up in rural Idaho with isolationist parents who pull their kids out of school. Having taught herself everything from algebra and grammar, Tara takes the ACT and leaves home for the first time to attend Brigham Young University. But the longer Tara is at school, the more she feels caught between the subservient and "righteous" girl she is within her father's walls and the girl ab-



sorbed in her books and education who's curious and inquisitive—everything she's been taught is unholy. Trying to make sense of navigating between these extremes, Tara journals. She writes, "There was a boldness in not editing [the journal] for consistency, in not ripping out either the one page or the other." Tara realizes that the inconsistencies in herself, the nuance of her two worlds are what give her power.

After I finish the book, I stand and look out the window. It's late and only a few of the windows in the apartments across the way are lit. I think of all the lives in that building. Of all the stories of the people in the cars rushing below. I too, understand what it's like to be one person at home and what feels like an entirely different person each time I walk away. Suddenly, I wonder if I'm not really as dual as I've been letting myself believe for all these years. Maybe I'm not either my past or present. Just right or wrong. The girl I am in the home of my parents or the girl my friends know when I'm at college or traveling. Maybe I am just me.

All those selves in one self.

I'm curious about my theory. So, on my break from work I go to the bookstore around the corner and grab the book I'm scared to buy: *Boy Erased*. Because I

know that buying it is me finally admitting a truth I've never accepted about myself.

I, like Tara, keep journals to stay in touch with my story years down the road when it becomes easier to rewrite the past. So, thanks to the journals, I can trace the feelings back to a Wednesday night in seventh grade. But the word shame doesn't appear until an entry the following year. When I write about walking through the chapel of my church with the purple walls and the light brown pews. About hearing a boy say to another that god doesn't love gay people. If God doesn't love gay people and my parents love God, I wonder if they'll love me. When I tell them about the feelings.

Boy Erased is a Memoir by Garrard Conley about his experience undergoing conversion therapy after he's outed as gay to his father, a strict baptist minister. Offered an ultimatum — rid himself of his "sin" or leave his parent's home, Garrard spends two weeks in a program called Love in Action. During his time there, those in charge try to get him to express anger, but Garrard writes, "I feel lucky to be alive in this moment...with this family who...despite the fact that they've handled me as they would an unwanted piece of family china, are still a part of me, still share the same warm blood that's pulsing through my veins... and I swear it's all too beautiful for one life, that I

should be able to split into multiple versions of myself to savor the many flavors of this moment.”

I Skype my parents and tell them the next day before I lose confidence. I tell them that I love them, and that I still believe in their God, but that I’m also bisexual and growing up in a conservative place made me feel less than and wrong. That it was hard. They say they love me too, but that they need time to come to terms with everything. So, I give them time. I don’t call them every few days as I’m used to. I wait to talk to them until I go home for the holidays. And even after the time, the rift of my words still runs jagged between us. My mom tells me through tears that knowing about my bisexuality is the first time she’s ever been ashamed of me. Really ashamed. And I don’t know what to say so I don’t say anything more. Except for “I love you” when I hug her that night.

Boy Erased introduced me to the concept of love as a force that binds and recognizes nuance even when people around us can’t or choose not to. It gave me space to embrace my sexuality, my faith, and my love for my parents without conflict. To understand that our love for one another isn’t black and white — and it isn’t conditional.

After my parents reaction, I’m nervous to tell my friends back home. More people who’ve never known *this* side of me. More people who I worry won’t understand.

As I’m thinking of where to begin, I pull another book off the shelf in my room. *The Hate U Give*, a young adult novel by Angie Thomas. And it happens again, that all-consuming act of reading. This book is sharp and invigorating. It feels too real and too important to put down.

The novel tells the story of Starr, a teenage girl who watches her unarmed friend Khalil get shot by police during what begins as a traffic stop and ends as a brutal murder. Both teens are black, and the police officer is white. Before the killing, Starr already feels caught between two worlds. She is the only black girl

at her private high school in the suburbs and she feels like she has to put on a front in order to be accepted. Then when she returns to her neighborhood forty minutes away, she feels like she has to leave that girl behind so people don’t think her education makes her pretentious.

As a white woman from an upper middle class neighborhood, I can’t pretend to know Starr’s pain or her specific struggle. But that’s the magic of books. As exercises in empathy, authors ask readers to live as the characters. Existing with Starr for those 444 pages, she realizes that though differences exist between her neighborhood and school, she doesn’t have to choose sides or selves. She notes, “I can’t change where I come from or what I’ve been through, so why should I be ashamed of what makes me, me?”

In practicing empathy towards Starr, I begin to show it to myself. In reading these books, I learn how to read my own narrative — with compassion and nuance.

When the plane lands in Michigan. I think about the books at my feet. About all the moments over the past four months when I wondered how to explain myself to people. When the past felt like a noose and the present felt like the hand tightening the rope. When I wondered which girl to be as I walk across the stage, diploma in hand.

Reading these books, and so many others, have given me space to discover myself — to discover *one* self. Made up of each experience, person, and place. They taught me I can live many lives, contradict myself, and still love people who might not love all of me. I no longer feel the need to answer for change. To choose sides in my life.

Reading gives me the confidence to see myself beyond my black and white extremes — in color. ■

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