
Discovering My Niche: How I Found Inspiration in My Literacy Sponsors

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The first reading I ever did wasn't even in the English language. Rather, it was Hebrew. Growing up in a Jewish lifestyle, my parents thought it'd be best for me to begin my involvement in literacy by reading a book of the Hebrew alphabet. According to my father, I could recite the entire Hebrew alphabet after only reading the book a few times.

I soon moved on to "real" children's books, where my interest in reading began to blossom. When I was about 5 or 6, my parents introduced me to the late, great Dr. Seuss. My favorite book of his was *Oh, The Places You'll Go!* As a child, I enjoyed the pictures, as well as the fact that each line in the story rhymed. The following phrase in the book really struck a chord with me: "You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose."

To this day, *Oh, The Places You'll Go!* remains an irreplaceable and inextricable part of my life due to the messages it conveys, messages which not only inspire me as a reader, but as a person. Dr. Seuss tackles all aspects of life in *Oh, The Places You'll Go!*, from choices that define us to disappointments that discourage us. Seuss encourages everyone to embrace all aspects of life, from the highs to the lows. But the main purpose of Seuss's story can be summed up in the following adage: "When life hands you lemons, make lemonade." *Oh, The Places You'll Go!* is a coming-of-age book for any age, a brilliant and hopeful look at how anyone can conquer the trials and tribulations of life.

As I grew older, I became interested in creative writing. In eighth grade, my English teacher assigned our class to write a children's story. Inspired by Dr. Seuss, I set out to write one—but with each line rhyming, just like Seuss. With a rhyming dictionary in hand and several hours of difficult creative brainstorming, I composed a children's novel titled *Barry The Big Brag Dog and the Baseball Game*. The story was about a dog named Barry who learns a lesson in humility through playing a game of baseball. My teacher was thoroughly impressed with the story and gave me an A on the paper. I realized then that I had a talent for writing, and I looked forward to the challenges I would face from my high school English teachers.

But enduring high school was no easy task. My teachers assigned books that I had no interest in reading, and, as a result, my literary ambitions stagnated. I recall having to read Homer's *Odyssey*, Shakespeare's *Othello*, and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Each of these stories was not only uninteresting to me, but the dense and complex writing of the authors was difficult to comprehend. I frequently had to rely on *Sparknotes.com* to decode the plots, motifs, and symbols that the authors used in their stories. I found nearly all high school reading to be arduous and tedious, and to this day I am still bitter about my high school literacy experience.

However, one book I read in high school really stood out in a positive way, and that book was J.D.

Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. Like many teenagers, I could relate to the novel's protagonist, the rebellious anti-hero Holden Caulfield. As anyone who's read *Catcher* would know, Holden was far from a perfect person. He was dishonest, judgmental, bitter and lazy. But his flaws were his greatest assets, and his insights into the hardships of being a confused teenager resonated with me.

Like Holden Caulfield, I had my share of growing pains as an adolescent. As Holden wore a red hunting hat to express his individuality, I played a guitar. As Holden despised "phony" people, I had a low tolerance for superficiality and shallowness. As Holden Caulfield viewed maturation with anger and resentment, I had my own anxieties about getting older. J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* was a brilliant book because it effectively portrayed a poignant and heartfelt view of adolescence in only a couple hundred pages. It is one of the definitive stories of the medium that many writers have tried to emulate but never surpassed. In my teenage years, there was no other person—real or fictional—who I could identify with better than Holden Caulfield.

At my present age of 20, I am a sophomore in college, and my literary tastes have changed since my high school days. During my freshman year at college, a new type of literacy sponsor enamored me: hip-hop lyrics.

Up until I turned 19, I detested rap and hip-hop altogether. I thought all the songs sounded the same, plus I found most popular rap acts to be talentless and overhyped. As if that wasn't enough, my father was a rock and roll critic in the 1970s and 1980s, so most of the music I was exposed to didn't even come from this decade.

But I wanted to grow as a music listener. So, out of curiosity, I decided to look into finding the great hip-hop album. I did some research from the most renowned musical publications, from reading archives of the long-running *Rolling Stone* to browsing "best of" lists by the popular hip-hop publication *XXL*.

Eventually I found a few albums that critics regarded as "classics": albums like *Paul's Boutique* by the Beastie Boys and *Enter The Wu-Tang Clan (36 Chambers)* by the Wu-Tang Clan. Listening to these records blew my mind; from the lyrical flow of the rappers to the tasteful samples (rappers often sample other musical acts in their songs) to the slick production, I was hooked. An entire universe of music appeared at my fingertips, and it was mine for the exploring.

But how can something as controversial as hip-hop act as an effective literacy sponsor, and why are rappers rarely given a proper analysis by literacy experts? Well, it's probably due to the fact that many of today's rappers are ridiculed because most of society views rap songs as "inappropriate." After all, many rappers—such as the Notorious B.I.G., 2pac, and Jay-Z--- draw from their own experiences of living in the ghettos. Drugs, poverty, crime and carnage are pervasive topics of most hip-hop songs. However, many rappers use their knowledge gained from these experiences to express themselves in an imaginative and thought-provoking way.

For example, one album that has influenced me is *Illmatic*, the debut from New York rapper Nas (born Nasir Jones). On *Illmatic*, Nas chronicles his life of dealing drugs, making hardly enough money to survive, and watching violence surround him. One verse from a track called "Life's a Bitch" on *Illmatic* in particular stands out to me:

I woke up early on my born day, I'm twenty years of blessing/The essence of adolescent leaves my body now I'm fresh in/My physical frame is celebrated cause I made it/One quarter through life some Godly like thing created.

In this song, Nas writes about turning 20 and feeling blessed to have lived through his

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adolescence. Nas is fortunate that his body is in tip-top shape despite his hardships, and is connected spiritually, believing that he is a “Godly” creation.

Another example would be the song “Juicy” by late rapper The Notorious B.I.G. In “Juicy,” he chronicles his rise from poverty to superstardom:

Super Nintendo, Sega Genesis/When I was dead broke, man I couldn't picture this/50 inch screen, money green leather sofa/Got two rides, a limousine with a chauffeur.

Hip-hop has had an enormous influence on me, not just as a listener, but also as a reader and writer. Rappers aren’t just musicians, but poets who express themselves through their own experiences. To me, a great hip-hop song isn’t just something fun to dance to; it is the ultimate form of literary self-expression.

My most recent literary influence is the controversial Tucker Max. I had heard of Tucker Max a couple years before I actually picked up his book, but it wasn’t until recently that I stumbled on his works at a South Florida Barnes and Noble. The phrase “You can’t judge a book by its cover” need not apply here, as it was the picture on the front of Max’s book that motivated me to purchase it. The cover was a photo of Tucker Max next to a beautiful model, except in the place of the model’s face was a black oval carrying the phrase, “Your Face Here.” The cover has since become one of my

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favorites because it implies that Max lives a busy life and makes lots of social connections. I could infer from the cover that Max didn’t just write about life, Max *lived* life—to its fullest.

Max’s book, aptly titled *I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell*, is a nonfiction collection of short stories involving Max’s reprehensible lifestyle. Max’s topics range from sexual escapades to drunken rampages to getting fired from a law firm. While most people (including Tucker Max himself) don’t consider Max to be a good person, he nevertheless upholds values that have influenced me as a reader and writer. For one, he understands how to form ideas, to construct and edit a story. He is also highly motivated, and for several years he posted advice people could read on his website’s forums, giving pointers on how to become a better reader, writer, and a more successful person in general.

For example, Max made a speech to Ohio State students a short while ago, and, in between the jokes and profanity, Max explained that he doesn’t write only for the sake of telling a story or being funny, but to encourage others to find their true self:

It's about living the life that you want to live, not the life others push onto you. It's about being the person you want to be, not the person other people want you to be, and it's about enjoying the time you have. I convey this message not by preaching it to you, but by showing you how I do it.

Max’s no-holds-barred approach to telling stories has been nearly unparalleled in today’s literary world. His approach is original, and as a result Max has become one of the founding fathers of a new literary genre called “fratire.” And even though I don’t agree with most of Max’s ideals, I can appreciate the novelty, fearlessness, and moxie that exist within his work.

When all is said and done, my literacy sponsors have defined who I am: an interested, passionate, and excited reader looking for the next book to connect with. My literacy sponsors have frustrated me, inspired me, and defined me as a reader and writer because they reflect my ideals of self-expression. My belief is that literacy can come from all kinds of sources, sometimes in even the

most unlikely places. My life wouldn't be the same without them. Over the years I hope to gain more from my literacy sponsors and become a better scholar—and always be ready for the next literacy sponsor to influence my ever-changing reality.