A Lifetime of Reading
By Jordan Vinson

I live in two worlds. The first is the physical world. It is dominated by an unbreakable routine that revolves around school, homework, eating and sleeping. The second world exists only in my mind and is the world of books. I love visiting this second world so much that, almost inevitably, if I'm not really careful, I drift seamlessly into it, even when I should be concentrating on the physical world. I love books. I immerse myself in novels. I thirst for them. They are water for my soul. Each novel is timeless and unique. I've spent summers in Atticus Finch’s yard with Jem, Dill and Scout. I've watched flames consume Atlanta and fled with Colonel Butler. I've stood on the deck of the Pequod with Captain Ahab and hunted the great white whale. I've sat beside Truman Capote as he questioned Perry Smith.

I learned to read with short, 16-page picture books, in which sentences like “Mat sat on Sam” would invariably be followed by a drawing of Mat sitting on Sam. Initially, I was an unwilling student. Reading did not come easily or early to me: I had the attention span of a gnat, and I found the whole process of learning to read utterly frustrating. But my mother persisted in our reading lessons. Each night I would crawl up on my parents’ bed, prop a soft pillow up behind my back and settle down for another lesson. My mom would always be waiting with the daunting stack of books resting precariously on the nightstand. The books formed a rainbow, each color representing a different level of reading. My search for reading skills was almost as elusive as the pot of gold at the end of that rainbow. Every night I tried, and every night I failed; progress was too slow to measure. I was even more disheartened to learn that the rainbow stack of books had been loaned to us by my best friend and certified child prodigy, Krissy. Her mom had her memorize her multiplication tables before she even entered the first grade, and the fact that she was also reading before me was embarrassing.

Despite my self-doubt, my mother did not give up on me. In many ways, she was my Annie Sullivan, and I was her Helen Keller. Every night we repeated the same process with the same result. And then it happened! I had my “aha” moment. Everything that had been clouding my mind was wiped away. Progress was almost effortless. I was reading. The most satisfying feeling washed over me. I was not going to be a kindergarten dropout. I was a reader. Of course, the reading lessons were not over. My mother still held “lessons” every night. Once I trudged my way through the rainbow of 16-page picture books, I graduated to much more mature books, like Arthur the Aardvark and the ever-amusing P.J. Funny Bunny. Then something even stranger happened. I began to realize that learning to read is a lifelong process; it never really ends. A whole new world opened up to me, and I had to open myself up to that world. My “aha” moment wasn’t the beginning of the end in learning to read; it was the end of the beginning.

My mother taught me how to read, but it was my father who nourished my love for books. As a little girl, all I wanted was to please my parents. I basked in their praise. I’ve always been something of a “daddy’s girl.” When I realized my father’s love of reading, I too wanted to share that love. I wanted to love what he loved. In the early morning I would walk into the kitchen and find my dad sitting at the kitchen table with a newspaper held a few inches away from his face, his
glasses propped precariously on top of his head. As my mother began preparing breakfast, I hoisted myself onto the wooden chair at the table. Even as a small child, I was able to comprehend my dad’s love for reading. The way his eyes shifted across the page, the crease that would form between his eyebrows when he was deep in thought, and the sound of his red ballpoint pen as it glided across the pages: these movements captured and mesmerized me. I wanted to sit at the kitchen table beside my father, with *The Washington Post* in one hand and a ballpoint pen balancing in the other.

One morning, before my “aha” moment, my mother ruffled through the pile of newspaper resting on the kitchen table. I could tell she was looking for something in particular, and I was curious as to what it was. Finally, she drew out a page covered in pictures and large text. It was the kids’ section of *The Washington Post*. I held the paper a few inches away from my face and studied the pictures as I created my own text to go along with the pictures. Then I moved on to pretending to read the actual text. I had no idea what the words meant and often did not even hold the paper right side up, but the feeling of accomplishment remained. This became a routine for me. Each morning my dad and I would read the paper, he with his “adult” paper and I with my children’s one. But it did not stop there. Throughout the course of the day, I would carry the paper around under my arm as I had seen my dad do and even take it into the bathroom with me. What can I say? I was a daddy’s girl.

My relationship with reading was transformed in the summer of 2005. On the last day of school, my sister and I were in a car accident that changed my life. My sister’s small, green Toyota Camry collided with a black, monstrous SUV. In the process, my foot was broken. Not only would I have to wear a cast all summer, but I would have to stay off my feet to allow the bone to heal. In the beginning, I was heartbroken and angry. “What a waste of a summer,” I thought. But my dad, sensing my frustration, told me that the accident was one of the best things that had ever happened to me. I was now free to live inside books the entire summer. In a sense, a broken bone had limited my physical freedom and unleashed my mental freedom. I began to read, and I never stopped. Sometimes I would go through two books in a single day. Not a week went by that I did not find myself browsing the fiction section of Barnes & Noble. By the end of the summer, I had read a total of 30 books. And these weren’t just any books. They were books of substance and character. I learned to read on my mother’s bed; I became a reader on the living room couch.

My dad has a ritual in early June of every year. He announces it’s time to select the important work of literature that the children in our family will read that summer. He started it with my older sister. He continued it with me, and he now does it with my 14-year-old sister. This is a really big deal in my family. The discussions are endless. My dad wants to select just the right book. It has to be one we can understand, but one that’s just a bit more challenging and difficult than any we’ve read before. Where some kids might resent their father for this, I love the ritual.

This process introduced me to my first and everlasting love, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It was the summer after eighth grade, and in Scout I found a companion. We were similar in many respects. Scout is optimistic, thoughtful and confident. She wishes to only see the good in people and not let the world’s evil crowd out her optimism. Like Scout, I look for the good in people and believe that people act with the best intentions until proven otherwise. I often find that people are too quick to judge others. Boo Radley is Scout’s reclusive neighbor and is the epitome of goodness in the novel,
yet others consider him a monster simply because they do not understand his way of life. It is extraordinary when a novel like *To Kill a Mockingbird* is able to transcend the page and blur the fine line between reality and fiction. My dad and I talked endlessly about the novel’s symbolism, and it opened up a whole new world to me. The religious symbolism of Atticus sitting under the single light bulb outside the jail as he protects Jim from a building mob would have been lost on me if I hadn’t discussed it with my dad.

While my father has been an invaluable guide, what fun would it be if I only listened to the expert? My mother taught me to read, and my father taught me to love reading, but it was the summer before twelfth grade that taught me how really special my own journey of self-discovery could be. I’d gone down to the storage part of the basement to find something for my mother. Easily distracted, I started thumbing through the books we had stored in old bookcases in the corner. Something caught my eye: a mammoth paperback that looked weirdly old but strangely untouched. Who owned it? Why had it never been touched? How did an unread book make it downstairs and into the forgotten storage pile? I can still remember the bright red cover, the perfectly smooth back binding, the unwrinkled pages, and the number 1024 on the last page. I would later come to believe this book had been on a secret journey from publisher to my basement just as I had been on a journey through books. It had been in the basement patiently waiting while I learned to read, and learned to love to read. It had been waiting for me. And that’s how I discovered Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*.

I threw myself into the novel, as one would throw herself into the arms of a loved one. I spent many afternoons on the back porch simply reading, with my dog Austin resting lazily on my lap, panting in perfect rhythm. It was as if the book was glued to my hands. When I wasn’t reading, I was thinking about reading, and when I was reading, all I could think about was what was going to happen next. After each intense day of reading, my fingers would be covered in black ink from the novel’s pages. The story was going into my brain and the ink was going into my system. Both physically and mentally, it was becoming a part of my being.

“If you have a book, then you have a friend,” is my father’s beloved saying. I used to roll my eyes at him, but deep inside I knew it was true. You are never alone if you have a book in your hands. You may not be able to carry on a conversation with a book, but you can become so attached to the story it tells that it feels as if it is one of your closest friends. Books can provide an escape, a place in which nothing matters but you and the story. You are free to forget all your worries and simply be. I’ve attended the legendary parties at the Gatsby mansion on the arm of Nick Carraway. I’ve joined forces with Winston Smith in the opposition against Big Brother. I’ve been stranded on a tropical island during a raging war and watched alongside Ralph as my comrades resorted to savagery. I am a child of the novel.