

CUL TURE BABY

ESSAYS BY NOA SHENKER

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This project was completed in the final semester of my undergraduate degree at RMIT University. It is a culmination of three years of creativity, and a representation of who I am (I think).

THE BEST THING ABOUT ME

Whenever anyone asked me what my favourite TV show was as a kid, my heart dropped. Not in an endearing way, because I was gushing with admiration over what I knew my answer would be. It dropped with fear, and coiled itself around reservations, because I was afraid to speak the dreaded four-letter-answer I couldn't bring myself to lie about – *Glee*.

You probably remember it. The six-season teenage-singing, misfit-empowering, coming-of-age Fox phenomenon that followed a bricolage of high school students from all walks of life finding solace and belonging between the cursed walls of their school's choir room, a room in which they met to sing in a misshapen, albeit impressive, glee club. And sing they did – they sung about their love lives, their families, religion, friendships, for competitions and for fun, covering Britney to Barbara and everyone in between. It followed cheerleaders, football players, paraplegics, nerds, theatre kids and more. They were black and white and Asian and straight and gay and Catholic and Jewish. It won Emmys and Golden Globes and sat atop the Billboard Hot 100 charts for months on end. It was a money-making machine and it was iconic. It was also my Achilles heel.

Why was I so afraid of speaking my truth? Back in 2010 it wasn't particularly cool to like the girly singing show on TV. But something within me felt magnetised to it, manifesting itself into an obsession I couldn't control. When the pilot episode ended, storylines colliding in the climactic performance of what would become the show's anthem (Journey's *Don't Stop Believin'*), a silver chain apparated alongside the veins running directly into my heart and lay down iron foundations inside of me.

Those chains injected themselves into my bloodstream, and bolstered the substratum upon which my identity lies today. Big call, I know. It's almost inexpressible the relationship I have with the show, and as I write this essay I'm consciously trying to ignore

the part of me that thinks I'll fail entirely at attempting to articulate why it's so special to me, and why I think it has played such a pivotal role in making me who I am today.

I will not pretend to think that *Glee* taught me how to be a good person. My mum would disown me if I ever robbed her of that glittering credit – also, it is just a TV show. But what I do think *Glee* taught me, unbeknownst to me at the time, is how to love myself even when I don't think I'm a good person. Years after the show ended, I'd go back and re-watch it multiple times, and through a matured lens and retrospect I'd discern just which parts of *it* had found itself residing in *me*. But at the time it was pure delight.

I'd sit down once a week and lose myself in the triumphs and woes of a high-school glee club. And in that seven-day break between episodes, I'd talk to my friends at school about them, I'd religiously repeat their euphonic soundtracks, sing them (horribly) in the shower – much to my brother's chagrin. But it all meant far more to me than just entertainment.

Early on they did a Madonna episode, that I watched lovingly on the couch in the crooks of my mother's arms, warmed by the joy we shared for her music, elation fused by her nostalgia and my fixation. They did an episode reproducing the outrageousness that is *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, elucidating to me an affection for the ludicrous musical that I did not know my father possessed, bridging between us two separate passions. The show gave me a means for escape but did not isolate that travel as a solo journey. I didn't know it at the time, but I remember feeling it; a feeling that my love for this silly little glee club was becoming a defining factor of my being.

But it was a joy shrouded in shame, slinking between the echoes of foul names and mean retorts. A joy I expressed, nonetheless, but that marred me with an unfamiliar emotion. Teasing and taunts would bring into question the validity of my – very youthful and fragile – masculinity. Along with the show's underdog attitude, I inherited its characters' embarrassments, and guilt followed me like a shadow as much the love did, particularly in the

presence of my male peers. It was like swimming with sharks, and glee was a pool of blood spurting from my every pore. I was definitely too self-aware at too young an age, and too conscious of the obsolete social notion that perhaps a young man shouldn't be quite so engrossed by a show about a glee club. Sometimes, against my strongest of wills, I hated that this could be something I loved, and something that weakened me. But I loved it nonetheless.

Whilst I didn't quite understand the breadth of Glee's power at the ripe old age of twelve, I did understand at that point that I could not cower from the parts of myself I did not like, or the parts of me that made me different. I could not hide from the truth of who I was. I could not lie to myself, a sentiment I would pledge myself to later in life, a dogma I would learn to live by. I saw myself reflected in the misfits of the New Directions, and it scared me, and it inspired me.

Near the end of the first season, the glee club's notorious leader William Schuester (played by Matthew Morrison) implores his students to utilize the music of Lady Gaga to express their innermost eccentricities. Finn Hudson, the loveable quarterback (played by the late Cory Monteith, who tragically passed away halfway through the show's run), felt a deep conflict by this assignment. He was unsure if the bravery it would take to don a Lady Gaga-esque costume would be worth the popularity he would be sacrificing. This coming after a tense scene between him and his new stepbrother, proudly gay Kurt Hummel (in a Golden Globe winning performance by Chris Colfer), in which the former slings a homophobic slur at the latter.

The banality of Finn's struggle is completely indicative of the year the episode aired – early 2010 – but nonetheless sheltered an ageless nugget of wisdom. Despite my own age at the time, I understood what was happening, and I understood, intrinsically, what the right decision would be. I'll never forget the image of Finn wearing a red rubber dress made out of a shower curtain at the end of the episode, intentionally comically, to save Kurt from his bullies. I'll never forget Kurt claiming to his offenders that he'll never be like them, because being different is the best thing about him. And I'll never forget the lesson Finn learned about

unconditional support of those unlike him, a lesson I would grittily embrace myself years on.

It was puerile and nonsensical, and now moderately obsolete, but a child's mind is as fragile as cellophane, and at the time the lesson cut through me like a serrated knife.

And so whenever someone asked me what my favourite TV show was, despite my heart dropping, I would still mutter that word freely, because the show itself taught me I had to. If I moved at the wrong time, I'd feel those chains inside of me tense with embarrassment, and I'd quiver with anxiety. But if I just let myself relax, and accept the truth of my affection, I felt empowered by them, and convict in the belief that they were bettering me.

Glee just made me feel happy. And I won't try here to put into words that kind of joy. There's something enigmatic about a thing that can invoke such pure ecstasy in a person. I won't pretend to know what it is, but I will acknowledge how lucky I am to have it. It has not faded over time.

I walked through my teenage years with an eccentric, idiosyncratic swagger, purely because I liked something I felt a part of me – and the world – told me I shouldn't. I would later identify this feeling as pride; I was proud of who I was! A foreign, adult kind of thing I couldn't understand but couldn't not be thankful for. And Glee gave that to me.

Mostly, though, Glee was about acceptance. When it premiered, I was ten, and planted within me was a seed of that value that was nourished weekly by my viewing of the show. Twelve years later, I continue to sustain myself with the show's episodes, its music and its values, and that seed has burgeoned into a web that cocoons my heart.

FIRST HANDSHAKE

I've always loved stories. It's why I like to read and write so avidly, and why My List on Netflix is so long. I hope that by the end of all this you understand those parts of me. But every love starts with a small crush, and for me that crush came with Christopher Nolan's 2014 film *Interstellar*.

Interstellar turned a hobby into a passion; stories grew from an unessential part of my life into the limbs I relied on for movement, and the very air I breathed.

As is the way of all desperately masculine teenage boys, my best friends and I were all huge fans of Nolan's Batman trilogy, particularly *The Dark Knight*. Quoting Heath Ledger's Joker is pretty much a rite of passage for every thirteen-year-old boy at a sweat-filled, testosterone fuelled sleepover – a necessary prelude to our Bar Mitzvahs. The impending release of his new film permeated lunchtime conversations and exam revision times and hung over our heads like a storm of anticipation.

We ventured to our local cinema on a warm November night. There's something sacred about the darkness of a cinema. Much like the inner realm of a long, hot shower, a cinema allows you the opportunity to completely dissociate from yourself, and let yourself believe you're someone else, even if it's just for a little bit of time. There is something special about the smell of popcorn and stick of spilt drinks on comfy red plush chairs, the dimming of lights and the presence of friends, that transports you. It's a journey I've now long accustomed myself to, and every time I sit down in a dark cinema, the familiar feeling of excitement and otherworldliness inevitably seizes me.

I'd never been so entranced with a film before *Interstellar*. Everything about it enraptured me. To put it simply, I didn't know movies could inspire me, but this one did, and my world had changed. It was like I'd been let in on a well-kept secret; movies are more than just entertainment, they're actually capable of

moving you quite deeply – and there I was, moved (shoved) by *Interstellar* across the barrier between casual moviegoer and cinephile. I was only fifteen, but it felt as if I were falling in love for the first time (as if I knew anything about love). I was mesmerized, tantalized, and praying for the end to stay far out of sight. When it came, the movie pulled up a chair in my mind and sat down comfortably, settling in for the long haul.

From that night sprouted a crush of cinema that bloomed into a fully-fledged love of all forms of storytelling. *Interstellar* made me feel like stories – and art – could change the world. Primarily, the film inspired me to start making art and stories of my own. I wanted to move people, too. The bookshelf scene in the film's finale had sparked an unimaginable level of awe in me. It begged the question; could I spark that for someone else?

Early in the film Matthew McConaughey's character Cooper jets off into space to save his dying planet. The first time his crew travels through a black hole, he comes into contact with something; an incorporeal being. He reaches out for it and their hands meet, unbeknownst to the viewer at the time, foreshadowing the film's final act. Anne Hathaway's character Brand smiles at him and proclaims, 'first handshake'. The inaugural meeting of two different worlds, far beyond what humanity knew of.

Sitting in that dark theatre on a hot Spring night, popcorn in hand and heart in throat, I shook hands with cinema. Its grip remains firm still today.



WHAT WE REMEMBER

Our bedrooms are emblematic of who we are. One of my best friends has a collection of wrestling DVDs displayed proudly in his room. Another adorns her fortress with comfy furniture. One of them has beautiful artwork filling up the blank pages of her walls. One has simply his bed and a desk. To me, all of their rooms are unequivocally and undeniably them.

A piece of us is always reflected in the pool of belongings we choose to display between the walls of our private abode, whispering to us about what we wish to see and feel the moments we wake and again before we fall asleep.

Since the age of twelve, front and centre in my room has sat a flatpack Ikea bookshelf (there are now multiple). Atop the highest shelf, harbouring a great honour, has always rested my special edition set of *The Hunger Games* trilogy. As my reading habits grew, so did the shrine on my uppermost shelf, upon which I'd place only books that I considered worthy. That shelf, in the heart of my room, has always been an emblem of who I am.

The years between twelve and eighteen were full of journeys amongst pages that would eventually grace the top shelf. I tore through *The Hunger Games* first, which led me down a pipeline of Young Adult fiction, the nerdy-teen's equivalent of a heroin addiction. I was never short of friends growing up, but I did find myself often longing for adventure. Books were how I got my fix.

From District 12, I roamed through the worlds of *Percy Jackson*, *Divergent* and *Harry Potter*. I grew a love for Patrick Ness, nestling myself in the crooks of his stories. I devoured the Celtic adventures of Blue and her friends and family in Maggie Stiefvater's *Raven Cycle*. I immersed myself deeply in the universe of Cassandra Clare's *Mortal Instruments* and *Infernal Devices* series, cavorting along pages with her Shadowhunters, as lost as a toddler in a maze, and just as helplessly amazed.

As my life grew more untamed, as they inevitably and dramatically do for all teenagers, I found solace and guidance in the stories of *Me and Earl and The Dying Girl*, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, and *Forgive Me, Leonard Peacock*. I came of age only as quickly as the growing stack of books on my uppermost shelf did.

Whilst *Glee* taught me just how individual I was, every piece of pop culture that proceeded it taught me just how common that individuality seemed to be. On its surface, the discovery discouraged me, but below that, beneath the grime and grit of good reason, I found comfort in my universality. Lots of people were like me.

I found communities online to discuss these books and their characters. I found myself on GoodReads just as much as I was on Facebook. I even dipped my toes into online fan accounts through Instagram (a story too long and embarrassing to share).

None of my friends were reading what I was reading, but it didn't really matter. I suddenly had people to talk to about these stories anyway. I naively navigated the internet for connections, and through a common love for YA, I found it. Reading had failed to make me feel like the misfit or loser pop culture had so often convinced me it might; really it made me feel like I belonged more than less – and it all bloomed from Katniss' rebellion.

And whilst Katniss didn't teach me so much about myself, she did open me up to a world of people around me. Not the ones in my direct orbit, but those in other solar systems – the ones I'd never properly know, not really, but whose pools of belongings in their little bedrooms, strewn across the globe, were similar enough to mine to make me feel known.

It would be hard to pinpoint each and every lesson the characters I loved taught me on the journey of my adolescence. It's easy to identify the found family I discovered between the pages of their stories, though, and to recognise the comfort I felt visiting those pages again and again to make me feel warm on the coldest of days.

It is easiest, however, for me to ascertain why I so cherished the warmth and affection exuded from Blue's Mum, or the loyalty of the Shadowhunters, and the protection Katniss shared over her younger sibling – it was my Mum, my Dad, and my older brother. The family I chose and the family I had.

I was too wise for my own good doing all that reading back then. I thought it made me smarter but ignored the fact that it was making me happier, which is inarguably far more important. Cassandra Clare wrote in the final book of her Mortal Instruments series that 'we are all the pieces of what we remember.' I'd like to think that I am a mosaic of all the literature I've ever read. Those pieces coming together would make quite a pretty picture.



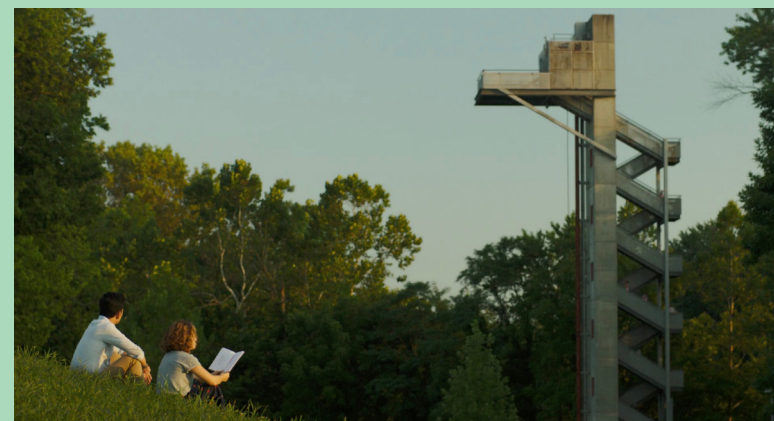
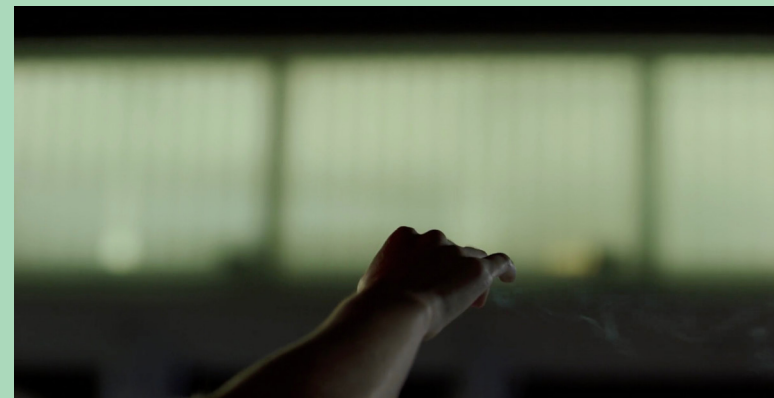
METH & MODERNISM

Columbus is a quiet film, and it came to me at a very loud time in my life. It is the debut directorial feature from Asian-American Kogonada (a pseudonym), and a beautiful mediation on humanity's strangest connections. The connection in this film comes from strangers, Casey (Haley Lu Richardson) and Jin (John Cho), colliding quietly in the film's titular town.

Casey is a high school graduate, working in her local library, harbouring an amorphous adoration of her hometown's renowned architecture whilst managing a conflicting home-life. Jin, a translator, is visiting Columbus to visit his dying father, an architectural scholar – one Casey happens to look up to. These two strangers ruminate on their own existential conundrums and find solace in one another in the foreground of an architectural mecca.

Whilst depictions of solitude are scarce in cinema, Kogonada builds a world out of silence and stillness. We never really get to see moments of seclusion in film. Of a character just bathing in their thoughts. But so much of life is made up of that stillness, and when life isn't still, it's all we long for. Scenes stretch out endlessly: physically, they gape over beautiful locations and buildings; emotionally, the conversations between Casey and Jin are poignant, subtle, and mercilessly natural.

Columbus is a film about what we owe one another, and what we owe ourselves. Casey considers herself the primary caretaker of her mother, a recovering drug addict, but yearns for a life outside the walls of her hometown. Jin intrepidly awaits his father's death, so that he may leave Columbus as swiftly as possible, and bypass the pressure of mourning a man he no longer loves – but guilt riddles him, as does the question of whether or not he is staying for his father or for himself. They're both stuck.





Eventually, he stays, and she leaves. It's what they believe they owe one another. When Casey leaves, she cries. Hard. She sobs for what feels like an eternity, but is really only a few seconds on screen. For a film so subtle, and so quiet, her tears ring out like a cacophony of emotions, orchestral in their magnitude. This is the end, the final battle, the big fight between the hero and the villain, the movie's anticipated climax; really, though, it's just a girl crying in a car. And it stings.

I went away, too. I drained my savings and travelled. I let go of who I was. I figured out who I was. Like Casey, I stepped through the fear. Like her, I grew up. She gave me the right push. I grabbed the outstretched hand, and I clung to it with dear life. It's what I believed I owed myself.

CALL ME BY MY NAME

After returning from my gap year, I started seeing a new therapist to help me unravel the many criss-crossed threads I had come to understand that made up my identity. There was a thick piece of string knotting itself around many of those threads, substantiating the mess life had made for me in the preceding nineteen years, and that string carried the weight of my sexuality.

In one of our earlier sessions, my therapist asked me if I watched many movies or read many books. I tried my hardest not to laugh. I answered yes, obviously, and persisted with the conversation. I was then asked if I'd encountered many gay characters in those movies or books, and if I saw myself reflected in any of them. The urge to laugh evaporated relatively quickly.

I struggled. There was *Glee*, of course, but I never really saw myself reflected in any of its gay characters, particularly the main gay glee club member Kurt. I had watched *Modern Family* with my family weekly growing up, but trying to find myself in Cam or Mitchell had slimmer odds than finding a needle in a haystack. I had sought out books specifically that might feature gay, male protagonists, but they were few and far between. All the movies with gay protagonists seemed to just be depressing. Overall, I struggled to think of any movies, books or shows that really reflected *me*, or depicted what it was like for a young man like me to question his sexuality. Realization dawned on me that I had sauntered through my teen years consuming stories that maybe weren't necessarily for me.

One film that did come to mind was Luca Guadagnino's *Call Me by Your Name*, the 2017 gay love story set in Northern Italy (Timothée Chalamet's breakout role). I saw it the summer after I finished high school; I was freshly 18 at the time and was sheltering my sexual confusion in the proverbial closet. I remember feeling awestruck when the film finished. It was one of the few times I'd seen love portrayed in film between two men, and the first time

I'd seen that love portrayed as something beautiful. Never before had gay love been a thing of beauty before, and more than a means for someone's trauma.

I had searched out other gay films. It is a prerequisite to coming out, really – finding indie gems that make you feel equally represented as well as a little horny. Even a few mainstream movies of late. But none of them made me feel seen. I had seen classics like *Brokeback Mountain* and *Maurice*, and modern movies like *Love, Simon* and *Moonlight*. Whilst those films portray gay love – even young gay love – none of them are happy. None of them are beautiful. None of them manage to thematically elide an overwhelming sense of shame. And for me, I could not escape the fatigue. It seemed as if Hollywood executives thought homosexuality and joy were mutually exclusive facets of the human experience. I wanted to be represented, but all I could find were reflections of the worst parts of who I was, and it didn't seem very fair.

I had been struggling with accepting myself, and in came a movie that illustrated perfectly what it meant for a young man to long for another, and it be seen as beautiful. I connected to Chalamet's character in *Elio*, a boy who simply wanted to be intimate with another guy, no questions asked. I'd never seen that before. It blew me away. That kind of intimacy always seemed to be stained by guilt, or fear, or danger. This one wasn't. It was the shamelessness of it all that made my heart ache the most.

Still, though, was this film really a depiction of *me*? My therapist's question, and my viewing of the film, spilled open a can of worms in my brain. We don't watch movies for escape, not really. We watch them to see ourselves mirrored on screen. We watch things that represent us to feel seen, and to feel inspired. If someone up there can get through something like this, then I can too. That's what I was looking for in these movies, to help bolster the comfort I was nurturing for the impending day I chose to come out. Despite also being gay, though, very few of these characters seemed to be going through what I was going through.



Yes, I connected to Elio. Yes, the film is beautiful – it makes me smile and cry with joy and with sadness. It holds a dear place in my heart that seems to have unwillingly concretized itself in place. But would I really let myself settle for a character whose only common traits with me were his sexuality and lanky body frame? Would that truly make me feel seen?

I still find immense beauty in the film, but I'm sad that that's the answer that came to mind when I was asked that question in the airy therapy room. As a young man, I should have had more characters and more movies to turn to in times of darkness. It shouldn't have been this film, this very adult love story, that made me feel seen. Because whilst I fell in love with the film's splendour – and whilst for a short time I thought it represented me – it was only ever a distant echo of who I was.

I should have had my *Breakfast Club*, my *Mean Girls*, my *Stand By Me*. I should have had my *Harry Potter* and *Hunger Games*. I should've had my *Titanic* or *The Notebook*. I should've even had my *High School Musical* and my *Camp Rock*. But I never did. So I had to wait for this love story to come around, and whilst it helped me feel like one part of my life was seen – the part that would unabashedly allow himself to love and be loved – there was so much more to me that felt overlooked. I was never going to fall into a steamy love affair with a mysterious man in the depths of the Italian countryside. The movie felt so dreamy – but that's just it, it was too much of a dream.

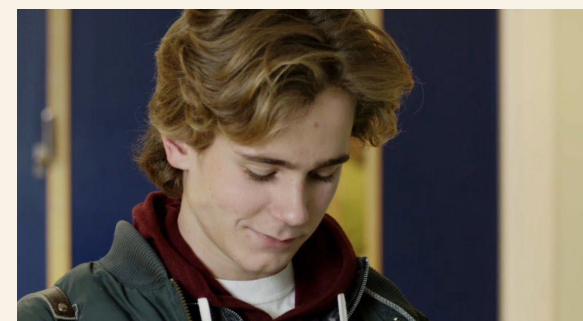
Whilst Elio and Oliver's summer fantasy romance could alleviate my anxieties for a short period of time, they would not ameliorate my loneliness, nor would they satiate my voracious hunger for a character on screen that looked a little bit more like me.

The same summer I saw and fell in love with Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird*. How could a straight American girl growing up in the early 2000s be more representative of my character than a (very niche) young gay Jewish boy? Because *Lady Bird* (played brilliantly by Saoirse Ronan), whilst also falling in love with Timothée Chalamet, had to deal with school, and her friends, and her family, and applying for colleges, and being conscious of her social status, and what clothes she wore, and staying true to her

own personal moral codes. All Elio had to worry about was hiding a cum-ridden peach. The circumstances just didn't stack up against one another. I was clearly far more like one than the other. And the odder choice, *Lady Bird*, made me feel incalculably happier than the other. It didn't seem fair. Where was my *Lady Bird*? Where was this version of a character who possessed all of these things, as well as a core part of the identity I was trying to uncover for myself?

I sought out more gay media. I watched and re-watched Norwegian teen series *SKAM*, revelling in the glorious reflection of modern-day youth; I fell in love with Pedro Almodóvar's *Pain and Glory*, touched by its pain and moved by its artistry; adored Francis Lee's *God's Own Country*; savoured every last page of Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*, arguably the most heart wrenching book I've ever read and still probably the best. Each of these stories mirrored a small fragment of who I was, but none of them made me feel whole. Pop culture was seemingly, for the first time, failing me.

Call Me by Your Name was the movie I wanted at the time I saw it, because it was a film that helped show me the love I craved was a love that was very real, very possible, and even something I deserved – a feeling capable of being unperturbed by shame. But it wasn't the film I had needed in all the months and years leading up to me seeing it, nor after it. And it won't be the film lots of young gay men around the world will need. That film – the one that feels a little more *real* – that one's still waiting to be made.



NOT A LOVE STORY

At some point around my twentieth birthday, I came to the conclusion that I was no longer a teenager. With this sudden change in age, and obvious maturity, I realized my consumption habits might need to grow with me. As such, I began searching out coming of age stories not necessarily set to the backdrop of high school or college – but stories of people finding themselves in real life, like when they have jobs and apartments and partners and not just homework to think about. I fell head-first into this pop culture rabbit hole and landed flat-footed on the phenomenon that is Phoebe Waller Bridge's TV show *Fleabag*.

Fleabag follows Waller-Bridge as the eponymous hero; witty, narcissistic, hilarious and unhinged. She runs her own small café, hates her family, and is mourning the loss of her best friend and mother. Her closest (and only) confidant is us, the viewer, of which we are perpetually reminded as she turns her head directly to the camera to include us in the hilarities and miseries of her life. The whole show, ultimately, is about Fleabag overcoming her grief.

For the sake of transparency, I will declare this now: whatever I took out of this show is probably not what I was supposed to. Firstly, I'm unsure if this show is primarily for me; a male uni student traversing the complications of his identity – decidedly not mourning anyone. Secondly, this show wonderfully explores the complex themes of shame, grief and love – three emotions that, whilst I was familiar with, were not ever-present in my life at the time of my viewing of the show. What I did take out of it, though, was a great deal of comfort.

Fleabag's life was fucked, and I loved that. Here was this beautiful, intelligent, witty, hilarious young woman, and her life looked like utter fucking shit. But she laughed her way through everything. And I laughed with her – at the most insane and ludicrous of things that one should most definitely not laugh at. I laughed at

death, grief, misery and heartbreak. I laughed alongside Fleabag, along the edges of her crumbling fourth wall, because laughter was the one thing that could override the pain.

She persists throughout the show that it is not a love story, and to the naked eye it isn't – but underneath her pain is a slow and beautiful journey of a person falling back in love with themselves. Beyond the grief she feels, and her own self-hatred and deprecations, Fleabag manages to find ways to grow from them. She doesn't leave those negative emotions behind; they're the foundation of the new parts of herself she tends to.

As much as we, as humans, try our best to make ourselves beautiful, we will inexorably fail. We will always be flawed, and the chances are – at least according to Fleabag – they will always make us better. Nothing good comes of anything pretty and everything interesting is just a little bit ugly.

The show solidified in me the notion that we're all a little bit fucked up. None of us have the ability to elude sadness, and shame seemed to be an enduring hurdle in the race of life. We don't necessarily come of age when we become adults; we only really do when we become broken. Whilst I could write pages on the complexities of Fleabag's tumultuous journey, and theses on her indignity, guilt and humour as a defence mechanism, I will settle for this one quote:

"Either everyone feels like this a little bit, and they're just not talking about it, or I am completely fucking alone."

Spoiler alert: she's not completely fucking alone.

THE HEAT OF THE SUN

I have only read half of Charles Dickens' classic novel *Great Expectations*. I wish I could give a valid reason as to why I never finished it, but the truth is, I just found it unbearably boring. I had trudged through *A Tale of Two Cities* at the ripe age of sixteen – mostly because I thought it would make me smarter, partly because it would just make me look smarter – and I hated it intensely and entirely. It's beyond me why I chose to pick up another of his books.

He's a very talented writer (obviously) (like I'm in any place to even judge the talents of someone like Dickens). But I just found his books so horribly dense. In fact, I found all classics horribly dense. Much to the vexation of my English and Literature teachers at school, they were irritatingly far more inclined to find my eyes glued to the pages of a high fantasy novel than anything published even remotely before I was born.

And then I met her. Clarissa. During the first lockdown of 2020 I studied *Mrs Dalloway*, the classic by Virginia Woolf, and I fell in love with her. Still, though, it took time. The first time I read the book through, as expected, I found it a loathsome experience. But the second time, and the third, I found myself more and more enveloped by the pages and their odd characters. I wrote my final essay that semester on Clarissa Dalloway, and I genuinely had a fantastic time doing it.

Reading *Mrs Dalloway* felt like curling up into a ball in my bed with a hot cup of tea, with the rain gently pattering against my windows, and the world slowing its rotation – just a fraction – to allow me to better enjoy the peace. Each page was a new piece of a puzzle manifesting itself in my mind, and sealing shut the final page was like taking a step back, drinking in the entire picture before me, and feeling immediately inebriated by its grandeur.

The final essay asked me to respond to something Woolf wrote in her essay *Modern Novels*, in which she argues that the 'essential thing' fiction should convey is 'life'. I stuck my nose in that book like a private school alum sticks their nose in a clump of white powder in a cramped bar bathroom on a Saturday night and I got to writing.

I discovered some of the most beautiful lessons I ever have in literature. Woolf cleverly binds life to death to show its significance; the essentiality of life is found in understanding that it is finite – that it cannot be wholly enjoyed or understood without first accepting death, and as such, that joy cannot truly be appreciated without accepting despair. Through a kaleidoscope of characters and stories, and this nifty little tether, Woolf allowed me to re-evaluate what I thought to be important. No author had ever done that for me before.

At a time when life felt its most mundane and despondent, when the tunnel I was driving through seemed to have no end and no source of light to ease the road ahead, Virginia Woolf picked up her feather-tipped pen and jabbed holes in the concrete exterior of that very tunnel, allowing the sun to pour in through the cracks and drown me in its light. For that I'll always be thankful.

Woolf often distinguishes the lives of her opposing characters through the arbiters of time by which they live. People either live externally, by other people's time, or internally, by their own. For the former, often their days are dictated by the chiming of Big Ben's bells, however once the clock rang, "it's leaden circles dissolved into the air." I loved that quote the most; time is ephemeral, regardless of its spectacle. We have to live on our own time, and by our own creeds, not by anyone or anything else's.

I thought I was losing the best years of my life to a pandemic. I still do believe that. It's hard to let go of something you never really get the chance to hold. But it's out of my control. I can't live my life dictated by the chiming bells of a vitriolic virus. I just have to live. Time is a transient, transcendent, intangible thing; Mrs

Dalloway taught me to distrust it, and all its chains that bound me

Writing about Virginia Woolf made me feel like a real writer. She made me feel like I understood a bit more about life than I did before, which made me feel immeasurably grateful for the one I was living. My world had imploded, and I suddenly grasped the privilege I had so often dismissed as entitlement; I felt it burning in my hands like hot coals, piercing me like the heat of the sun.

Because of Mrs Dalloway, the itchy part of my brain – the itch that everyone has – that demands answers to why I'm here and what I'm doing, aches a little less than it used to. Because of her, I get to look at the ugliest parts of life through a rose-tinted lens. Because of her, when I think of a world in ruin, I can let myself be at peace, if only for a moment.

Because of Mrs Dalloway, I know that one day I'll dissolve into the world like leaden circles, but that my words will remain.

CULTURE BABY
ESSAYS BY
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