



The 3 Things you need to master in order to read like a writer are:

1. **Read Widely** :: Dive into all genres, not just the one you write in :: Read good books, bad books (sometimes you learn even more from these), new books, old books.



<https://heatherdemetrius.com/my-favorite-reads>

Go to my Goodreads lists to see my favorite books and some great writing / creativity ones, well.

2. **Read Mindfully** :: You're reading on many levels. First, you want to look at all the craft stuff: language, story, plot, character, structure, pacing, etc. But you also want to customize it for yourself. Read for the things you struggle with. Are you terrible at action scenes? Then pay special attention to the books you're reading on how authors manage them (and choose books that will feature them a lot). It's useful to take notes as you read or you can just flag or underline the following as you go (and anything else you're specifically reading for):

- When you really like something
- When you're taken out of story (breaking the fictive dream)
- When confused
- When bored
- When excited
- When you have to know more
- Delicious wording that gets your heart beating faster
- Clunky writing
- Remember to flag any trouble areas that you're studying

3. **Write An Annotated Bibliography ::** I've included an example of this below. It can be a long paragraph or several pages—up to you! When I was getting my MFA, my school had us do one of these for every book we read. It was a way to ensure that we were really learning how to articulate what was and wasn't working in the books we read. We were, essentially, teaching *ourselves*. In analyzing all elements of craft in a book, we were able to begin noticing how writers did what they did. So you go back and look at your notes and now you're going to figure out WHY that part was boring or great: was it the pacing, not feeling connected to character, clunky writing, etc?

Check out my 3 Things: Reading Like A Writer video for more @ <https://youtu.be/vyYxivLfBWI>

3 THINGS

READING LIKE A WRITER



:: Sample Annotated Bibliography ::

Rowell, Rainbow. *Eleanor and Park*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2013. Print.

All the hype around this novel is well-deserved. Not only is Rowell's writing mouth-wateringly brilliant, she has created two extremely unique YA characters. Eleanor's home life is devastating. Rowell keeps it authentic with details, such as when the girls at school cover her locker with maxi pads (because they've nicknamed her "Red") and her first thought is that she wishes she could save them, because the pads are expensive. That broke my heart. Rather than tell us Eleanor is poor, Rowell shows us in scenes such as this one. The way Eleanor and Park fall in love, slowly on the bus through comic books and music, is beautifully done. Rowell keeps the pace steady, allowing the reader to settle into this world and spend time with these characters. It takes time for these two

misfits to warm up to each other, but it never feels like it's being drawn out simply to create unwarranted suspense. What's brilliant about this is that Rowell's pacing allows *the reader* to feel as if they, too, are having this tentative romantic encounter. When Eleanor and Park finally touch each other, it's so much more intense than any of the over-the-top romantic scenes in other books. When Park touches her hair or she touches his hand, the reader feels that same emotional build-up and release. The ending is great, too. It's honest, yet hopeful. We know that Eleanor and Park love each other and are going to try to be together against the odds, but we also see that Eleanor needs to be on her own for awhile, coming to terms with all that's happened to her and learning to be her own best advocate. Similar to Sáenz's book, which I mention later, Park's parents are also great characters. Seeing Park interact with them adds energy and humor to the story. The way Park's mom begins to care for Eleanor after initially disliking her is incredibly poignant, since it's related to her past as a poor woman in South Korea. I also loved this example of a family taking in a kid from a bad home and trying to make her life a little easier. A truly remarkable novel!

Sáenz, Benjamin Alire. *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012. Print.

Sáenz does an excellent job of crafting sensitive, multilayered characters who make it easy for the reader to invest in them. I especially loved Ari's mixture of very teenage boy characteristics juxtaposed with a sweetness and sensitivity that most teen boys are not portrayed as having. The relationship between Ari and Dante reminded me of many of the things Tammy Subia spoke about this past residency in her "Bromance" lecture. Dante and Ari talk about the "secrets of the universe" and share intimate fears with one another, from concerns about masturbation to new discoveries about their sexuality. I especially like the ending. I really had no idea that Ari is gay. It's clear Dante loves him, but Sáenz does an excellent job of distracting the reader with Ari's obsession with his imprisoned brother and his burgeoning, flirtatious friendship with two girls. It seems like he'll end up with Gina, not Dante. That being said, it would have also been interesting if Ari were as he first appears: an open-minded friend.

What is especially beautiful about this book is the relationship the boys have with their parents. All four of the parents are great, well-developed characters. They are the major secondary characters in the novel, not shoved off to the sidelines or conveniently deceased. While this is an excellent aspect of the book, it's also where I had the most problems. The dialogue between the kids, especially between Ari and his mother—while highly entertaining with fantastic pacing—is unrealistic. I think this is part of the book's charm, but I find some of Ari's statements a little too clever such as, "Mom, I'm your son, not a suggestion box" (180). I also feel as though the novel is being narrated by a much older Ari, as if he is looking back on his childhood with fondness. He even uses the phrase "I

remember” to preface some of his memories. The only problem with this is that the novel, though in first-person past, has slang that an older adult wouldn’t necessarily use, such as “sucked.” It feels as though the narrator should still be a teen. Even if an older adult would use that language, the context is very much in a youth’s voice, with a mindset of someone who is currently a teen. This made me a bit aware of Sáenz as I read, especially with lines like, “Someday, I’m going to have to break some of your rules, Mom” (171). While this makes for great dialogue and adds depth to the story, it also renders Ari less believable as a character. Suddenly he is this wise old owl, too easily able to comment on the vast complexities of parent-child relationships. This is not to say that Ari or any teen wouldn’t be capable of this sentiment—many teens tell their parents they have to let them grow up. But it’s more the phrasing; Sáenz uses perfect pat phrases, little quotable morsels.

However, Sáenz more than makes up for this, with Ari’s complex concerns and the deep depression he lives with. The revelation at the end that his is gay—one his parents have to tell him—explains a lot of this. I even bought that he was in denial of his homosexuality (although I think we might have needed to see him ask himself the question, just once). This also makes me think of the lecture this residency on surprises and twists. Sáenz definitely lays the groundwork for his twist. When Dante first kisses Ari, Ari kisses him back before he pushes him away. When Dante strips and runs in the rain, Ari does the same, even though he knows Dante is gay and in love with him. And Ari’s reaction to Dante’s having been beaten is more that of an angry boyfriend than an angry best friend. All in all, a really great book and highly original (not least of which because it features two Mexican-American boys!).

Smith, Jennifer E. *This is What Happy Looks Like*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2013. Print.

The premise of this book is entertaining: accidental texting leads to an online anonymous flirtation between a hot, young movie star and a girl living in a small town. Then he winds up in her town (on purpose) to shoot a movie. What keeps it from being too predictable is Ellie’s secret that she is the illegitimate child of a rising political star (which kills me because that was one of my book ideas!!!). Ellie’s secret allows there to be unique tension in her relationship with Graham and a strong reason to avoid him—she’s camera shy because it could blow her and her mother’s cover. The book’s romantic, fun, and light—it will clearly have a happy ending, but Smith keeps stakes and tension high. All that being said, I found myself being a bit annoyed with Ellie—she kind of strings Graham along and he’s such a great guy. She already knows him so well from their online relationship that I find it hard to believe that she could write him off so quickly. Rather than have her fear be centered on her mother’s fear of discovery, it would have been more compelling if Ellie were afraid of being labeled a bastard, having a reputation that would overshadow who she really is. This could explain her pushing Graham and his fame away. Another aspect of the novel that I would have liked more of is the email exchanges between Ellie and Graham. There is so much chemistry and cleverness in

them, but when they are together, they're pretty boring. It would have been nice to infuse some of their online personalities into their real ones, since the novel's ending clearly wants us to assume that they are the people they seem to be in the emails. Overall, a fun read.

Wynne Jones, Diana. *Howl's Moving Castle*. 1986. New York: HarperCollins, 2008. Print.

I had high expectations for this fantasy classic, but found that, overall, I was a bit bored. The story seemed to move quite slowly, perhaps because Sophie's attempts to break the contract between Howl and Calcifer feel a bit bumbling. She's easily distracted by Howl's crazymaking and seems absurdly intent on cleaning his castle rather than lifting the curse placed on her by the Witch of the Waste. It's difficult to suspend one's disbelief; Sophie almost seems content to be an old woman, rather than the teenager she's supposed to be. Her passive acceptance of her fate makes it difficult to connect to. However, I appreciate Wynne Jones's humor—there are very few comedic fantasies and this makes her unique in the genre. Howl's vanity and self-indulgent antics are very funny and he's a great anti-hero (and, simultaneously, an anti-villain). Sophie's curse is also very unique; instead of being a beautiful heroine, she's turned into a meddling old woman with rheumatism and a bad heart. In this way, Wynne Jones defies fantasy stereotypes for both characters and love stories. The concept of the moving castle is very interesting because it allows for several settings to exist at once. The magic for it is never clear, though, and it's ultimately a somewhat silly device in that the townspeople can actually *see* the castle moving. It works best when it's disguised as different locations. Where Wynne Jones loses me is in her shallow characterization and the way she presents magic. There is nothing mystical or beautiful about the magic in Howl and Sophie's world. It's goofy and the laws of it are unclear. Because Wynne Jones is also known for her parodies of fantasy, I wonder if this novel represents a rejection of the usual rules for magic found in fantasies. She seems to be blazing her own trail here and while it is at times entertaining, it lessens the power the novel could have. By relying on archetypes and antics, *Castle* loses the opportunity to explore some of the deeper issues of identity and desire inherent in the story.

Yovanoff, Breena. *The Replacement*. New York: Penguin, 2010. Print.

There is much to like in this creepy, dark young adult fantasy. Yovanoff's take on the myth of the changeling and the fair folk is intriguing. Her characterization of Mackie is what makes the story shine. His desire to be normal, his health problems related to his changeling status, and his relationship to his "foster" family all work toward making him a compelling protagonist. The novel also has great secondary characters who are flushed out and show different facets of Mackie's character. The writing is very good, with lush descriptions of the decaying faerie world. However, Yovanoff's voice comes through Mackie's a bit too often—it's difficult to believe that a teenage boy would be able to describe the specific kind of pattern on a girl's shoes (or notice them at all). There are times when Mackie's voice gets lost in Yovanoff's lyrical style. There are also major problems

with believability in terms of the plot. Time and again, characters skirt around the elephant in the room (that the town is plagued by angry faeries who steal their children and sacrifice them). This would be interesting except that they say so much about the situation that it seems hard to believe people have difficulty coming out and naming the terror, since they go so far as to hang charms over babies' cribs. What's happening is no secret. There's no answer as to why people don't move out of the town of Gentry when the population seems to live in abject fear, nor is there any explanation for why Mackie's family accepts him into their home and pretend he's their dead son, even though they know very well that he's a changeling. (This could be believable if the family wasn't intent on saying how evil and disgusting they think the fey are). The lack of believability extends to Mackie's relationship with his best friend, Roswell. Ros never seems to question his friend's weirdness and seems unfazed when Mackie confesses his true identity after a lifetime of friendship. He's a bit too willing to rob graves and go down into the fey's world—this is a missed opportunity for conflict and raised stakes. Overall, I enjoyed the book. The writing and the take on old myths was enough to keep me turning the pages.

Long Annotation

Oliver, Lauren. *Requiem*. New York: HarperCollins, 2013. Print.

Lauren Oliver's *Requiem*, the third book in her *Delirium* trilogy, has a number of problems that cause the book to feel like light reading fare rather than the triumphant conclusion to an epic story. The first problem is characterization. As I was reading, it took me a while to figure out why I wasn't connecting to the protagonist, Lena (though this is a dual narrative, Lena has been the trilogy's protagonist). I finally realized that she's an Everygirl. There is nothing particular about her. She could be any teenage girl, a carbon copy of the slightly tough-because-she-has-to-be protagonist who is pretty and loved by two gorgeous boys. There is nothing that is quintessentially *Lena*, no special lens through which she views the world. She doesn't even have an endowed object. I realized this at about page 150, after I'd read a few of the "Hana" chapters in this dual narrative. Oliver reminds us that Hana used to enjoy running before she received the cure (a kind of lobotomy that reduces emotional responses) and I suddenly realized I had no idea what Lena enjoys. Later in the novel, there is one reference to how Lena used to run with Hana, but we see no evidence of a desire for it or for it being replaced with a new interest other than survival (which gets boring after a while, no matter how much action there is). Clearly, running was only a metaphor Oliver was using in Book One.

By contrast, Hana is a more interesting character, though her setting feels a bit boring (as I'll point out later). It's interesting to see her true self war with her new, somewhat lobotomized, self.

However, it would have been more than interesting—it would have been *fascinating*—to see Hana’s internal conflict play out if Oliver had exhibited the writing chops to execute this delicate characterization. Unfortunately, Oliver goes for the big gestures and we miss the subtleties. This could also be my own personal bias—sometimes Oliver’s writing feels dumbed down even when she’s exploring something interesting. There are moments where her writing shines, but it feels like the words are purposefully blunted to keep the reader’s eyes moving across the page. Plot is given precedence and it takes away from some of the more unique elements at play in the story.

Possibly Oliver’s finest moment is at the end, when Hana and Lena meet again. Hana clearly struggles with her choice—should she save Lena or kill her? However, her behavior seems almost schizophrenic and rather than be a study in contrasts and unreliable narration, it reads as if Oliver is a puppeteer who is moving her characters in tune to a pre-determined plot. Most of the narrative would lead us to believe that Hana still feels strongly about Lena and that her guilt over turning Lena in is weighing her down. Yet in their interaction, she is removed, far more distant than we have seen her. If it were an act, that would be one thing, but it’s genuine emotional bankruptcy. Again, this would be fascinating if Oliver had set this up, but she hasn’t. The desire lines seem to suddenly crumble. What’s salvaged from this encounter is Hana’s decision to walk away from her life. We don’t know what’s going to happen to her and that in and of itself is a beautiful thing. She just follows the urge to go and starts walking away, a girl who thinks she might want to feel, but apparently doesn’t know how anymore.

By page 166, I had begun to scan some of the chapters. This started in one of the Hana chapters. Her sections were a bit boring because it’s just more of the same dystopia we saw in Book One. Book Two, at least, had several different kinds of locations that we hadn’t seen before, but in Hana’s chapters, we’re back in Portland, going to the same old sights and not discovering anything new. The problems are still the same. Though security measures are getting amped up, it feels hum-drum. We’ve been here before, we know the deal. Also, Hana’s engagement to a sadist, while slightly interesting, feels tacked on, as if Oliver knew those chapters were boring and had to create drama in them. I could be totally wrong, but I just kept not caring and I think that might be why. It calls into question whether or not this needed to be a dual narrative. In part, it needs to be because Lena’s story is also a bit boring (walking in the woods, coming across a few horrifying things, love triangle love triangle love triangle, some dangerous missions and fight scenes, then a big finish). I guess what I’m getting at is that this dystopia lacks the psychological complexity that makes the genre so moving. It feels more like a plodding action movie, where you know the ending as soon as the story begins.

Which leads me to the love triangle. I’m all for a well-executed love triangle; it’s the gift that keeps on giving. BUT, Alex should never have come back from the dead. First, because that’s a cheap trick (this is the big cliff-hanger at the end of book one), but also it makes Lena seem like a bitch. It’s hard

to like a protagonist who uses a boy who loves her (Julian) because she doesn't have the guts to be alone. I also didn't buy the whole "I never loved you" thing. Of course Alex would say this because he's deeply hurt, but the fact that Lena believes it seems cliché. It would be far more interesting to see Lena give Julian up and try to make things right with Alex, no matter how long it took, than to see her crawling into Julian's tent at night, feeling sorry for herself. We know Lena and Alex are going to be together in the end and so the triangle feels like a trick to keep the reader engaged. It got to the point where it was the only part I cared to read about, not because I didn't know what was going to happen, but because it was the only part of the book where I had an emotional investment (other than Lena's reunion with her mother, a slightly interesting reveal). A note on my emotional investment: it wasn't *real* emotional investment—I'm just a sucker for romance. Book Two is so good because we see Lena grieving, thinking Alex is dead, and then opening herself up to the possibility of new love. It's growth, in the best kind of way. Book Three could have been Lena and Julian trying to figure out what it means to love as burgeoning adults who have to live together in a crumbling world.

Finally, to the plot. I literally laughed out loud when, in the middle of a heated argument between Lena and Alex—an argument that is going nowhere and is pretty much at a standoff—a bear (A BEAR!) happens upon them in the forest. The dialogue is terrible, all "Don't move," etc. and suddenly they're working together to fend off this bear. Instead of living in the discomfort of the argument and going deeper into character, Oliver wants to remind us that we're in an action movie. I feel like this is the best way to describe why the plot is boring—it's not coming out of character. Everything that happens feels formulaic, super-imposed upon cardboard characters in order to kick ass. The ending, a long soliloquy directed to the reader, feels like Oliver has to ram home the message, a sort of one-love, anti-authoritarian diatribe, all telling and no showing.

So, basically, this book drove me nuts.



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