

The Book That Changed My Life: 71 Remarkable Writers Celebrate the Books That Matter Most to Them

edited by Roxanne J. Coady and Joy Johannessen
Gotham Books, 2006, 197 pages

Reviewed by:

Trish Watson (watsontri@mst.edu), Student Services Advisor, New Student Programs, Missouri University of Science and Technology

As I am finishing my second year in the orientation profession, my familiarity with some aspects is certainly still developing. For instance, none of the universities I attended (yes, there was more than one...actually four... by the time I received my diploma) had a “one book” program like that which was at Missouri University of Science and Technology when I arrived. The thought of finding a single book that intrigued and engaged every student on campus did not seem possible to me—let alone one each year. The idea of every first-year student reading one book and uniting his or her college experience seems almost poetic in itself, that there will always be that one connection between every student in that class. Yet, there’s a problem: What if curling up with a good book is not your students’ idea of a good time?

Originally created to raise funds and awareness for childhood literacy, *The Book That Changed My Life* provides an introduction to 71 remarkable books, from serious to silly, childhood classics to literary groundbreakers. The summaries within offer just enough to intrigue the students and encourage extra literary indulgence. The authors make the reader curious about the stories. They encourage students to go to the bookstores and take themselves on these adventures.

The Book That Changed my Life offers a variety of potential reads for discussion to appeal to varied audiences. There are the usual suspects: *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the works of Shakespeare. Then again, the readers are introduced to those not-so-prevalent literary “classics”: *The Little Engine That Could*, *The Snake Has All the Lines*, and even the *Sears Catalogue*. I am hard-pressed to think of any other work that could offer so much to so many. While *The Book That Changed my Life* itself does not delve into the great mysteries in life, the commentaries provided are excellent conversation starters that have the potential to allow students to explore multiple viewpoints in dynamic group discussions.

Reading this book inspired me to seek out 17 others. It has been tossed around multiple times that the technology of our era has hurt the printed word. In an age of instant gratification, many may not want to wait for the ending. One of the largest benefits of this book is that it is a quick read. The structure of the book enables the student to read a summary while walking between classes. The majority of the contributions are a brief two to three pages in length, with an occasional five-page essay. There is no lengthy plot with magical twists and turns; there are 197 pages of thoughtful explanation. When reading, one can hear the “nostalgia” which goes into each submission. As a reader, I began to wonder just what it is that

is so magical about these books. I found myself wondering if the book would impact my life in the same way if I were to read it. I even tried to remember which books made an impact on me.

Will every essay provoke deep thoughts about the book in question? No. In fact, some essays can be easily dismissed. Others are as entertaining as the story they describe. Though the works submitted by these authors may perhaps appeal to a larger demographic than the original novel, the summary alone cannot replace a classic. What each essay can do is ask the reader to view the novel or story, or even magazine, in a new light. Perhaps this will create a fan where there was once a skeptic. I see students who, like me, are drawn to the summaries of those books that already hold their interest.

This may be the book that leads someone into a career in writing; it may introduce students to classical literature that they had never before read; then again, it may gather dust under their bed until they leave their rooms. Yet, that is a risk taken with every reading program selection. A great benefit of this book is that it holds potential to develop both internal and external dialogues and to provide possibilities for activities for first-year students. The book can also provide students with the ability to explore diversity through common life experiences. Many of the commentators refer to their childhood struggles—dealing with challenges within their economic circumstances, meeting new people and adapting to social expectations, coping with the divorce of their parents, and multiple other life-changing events. Our first-year students are at a point in their life at which they are discovering themselves and allowing life experiences to shape their personalities; this book's potential to inspire reflection at this critical time makes it an appropriate choice.

These stories are the result of reflecting on the questions: What book changed you? Why? They tell of the impact that a single book had on someone's life. *The Book That Changed My Life* is thought-provoking. It is not biographical, nor the latest in pop fiction, nor a story of oppression and survival—it is all of these things condensed into one book.