

Sipping Applejack with Steinbeck

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep, especially in New England in the fall. Bundled in my L. L. Bean jacket, I sit on a rock; stare up at the midnight sky; pull out my secret bottle of applejack; sip this cheap brandy, and dream.

Falling leaves in the night forest add an eerie touch as the soundtrack of my adolescence plays continually in my head. “Counting the cars/On the New Jersey Turnpike./ They’ve all come/ To look for America.” Simon and Garfunkel fade out and folksinger Tom Rush sings, “And I’ve got the urge for going.” Steinbeck’s favorite drink warms me as I sip and dream. I am fifteen.

Long before S. E. Hinton could hold a pencil, teenagers found books that grabbed their hearts and souls and taught them lessons about the power books can have in a person’s life. For 25 years I’ve taught graduate classes in young adult literature, and before that earned my paycheck as a high school English teacher. Those decades of working with young adult books, teens, and their teachers have taught me one true thing: You cannot predict the one book that will make the biggest difference in someone’s life. I learned about applejack and got my urge for going by reading again and again John Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charley*.

As a lover of literature and a lifetime reader, I’ve always been interested in why we read what we read. Clearly, English teacher Jim Burke felt the same way when he wrote a letter to the editor of the *San Francisco Chronicle* asking readers to share stories with his high school students—remembrances of favorite books and stories of how a person’s life was changed by the reading of a book. Burke put those

responses in his fine collection *I Hear America Reading*.

Two decades before Burke’s book, Bee Cullinan and Jerry Weiss spearheaded an NCTE project in which a sampling of young adults were asked to name their living heroes. Each of these role models was then asked to name two or three books or authors that had influenced his or her life. The responses of people as varied as Jackie Kennedy, Charles Schultz, and Paul Zindel became the collection *Books I Read When I Was Young: The Favorite Books of Famous People*. Still, my choice for best book on this subject is Gordon and Patricia Sabine’s *Books That Made a Difference: What People Told Us*. The Sabines asked people two questions: What book made the biggest difference in your life? What was that difference?

For years I have subjected my doctoral students to these two questions. Sometime during a seminar, I ask each of them to write an essay answering the two Sabine questions. Inevitably, the night we share our responses, the classroom crackles with emotion. Of course, what I want these students to see is the power of books and the impossibility of trying to predict what book will make a profound effect on a person, but I want something more. I want what Chris Crutcher writes about in his September column in *Voices from the Middle* entitled “The Me Factor.” Chris argues that as teachers, we need to factor ourselves and our biases into the classroom and into our interaction with teens. He writes, “So I guess, in my opinion, who we are in that classroom, or in that anger management group, or with that basketball team, and our ability to *say* who we are, is as important as anything else we do” (p. 7).

Not every student we teach will be a lifetime reader or find a book that will point a path for life. That doesn’t change the fact that I want students to

know my biases: I am a lover of books. I believe books help us examine and make sense of our own lives. And one book did have a profound effect on my life. On that wonderful night in the seminar when we share our stories of what book made a difference in each of our lives, I tell them this.

The book that most shaped my life is John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley*. I read it during the summer of my fifteenth year. Steinbeck had spent his life in literary pursuits and felt he had lost touch with America. So in his sixties, he set off in his pick-up truck camper with Charley the poodle to rediscover the United States from coast to coast. Steinbeck's book is the chronicle of a romantic road trip filled with the smells of evening campfires, the voices of a cross-section of Americans sharing their life stories, the fears of being alone on the open road, and the pure joy of traveling across this country and marveling at its beauty and grandeur. At fifteen, I hadn't really experienced life yet, and at sixty, Steinbeck felt that desire to experience it yet again. We shared the same dream.

Travels with Charley tapped in me that *carpe diem*, eat a peach, disturb the universe feeling. The book helped shape my choice to leave New England and do my undergraduate work in Virginia at the College of William and Mary. And while there, the book had much to do with my foolish decision to leave classes for weeks at a time to hitchhike around the country following Pete Seeger or Joan Baez or Judy Collins or Peter, Paul and Mary. Those road trips did teach me a good deal about America, but not much about Spanish or physics.

Certainly *Travels with Charley* was behind my decision to join the Peace Corps and go to Afghanistan. Being in the Peace Corps was jumping into life with both feet. *Charley* is the only book I took with me, and it sustained me through some very low times.

I got back from the Peace Corps in very poor physical shape. I can't forget trying to deal with home, being sick, being in love, and getting my draft notice at the height of the Vietnam War. The book

that got me through basic training was *Travels with Charley*. With Steinbeck, I could escape the Army post for a while, travel with him and his dog, and convince myself that this too shall pass.

The week before I left for basic training, I applied to graduate school at the University of Maine. It had to be Maine because it was remote, filled with forests, and Steinbeck had driven through the area and marveled at its purity and wildness. And what did I write my M.A. thesis on? Steinbeck. *Travels with Charley* is the book that made the biggest difference in my life.

So, I ask you to think about those two questions: What book made the biggest difference in your life? What was that difference? I encourage you to share your stories with the students you teach. As Crutcher says, perhaps if we share ourselves with our students, they might just realize, "This teacher is telling me who she is; maybe she thinks I'm worth it."

On this day as I watch, yet again, the video of the planes smashing into the World Trade Center, I pick up my tattered copy of *Travels with Charley*. I marvel at the power books have to sustain and inspire us. Now I find myself close to Steinbeck's age when he and Charley took off to look for America. Once again I've got the urge for going. I want to see the Statue of Liberty—not on television but in person. I want to experience the pure joy of traveling across this country and marveling at its beauty and grandeur. I want to hear America singing.

References

- Burke, J. (1999). *I hear America reading: Why we read—what we read*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Crutcher, Chris. (2001). The *me* factor. *Voices from the Middle*, 9(1), 6–7.
- Cullinan, B., & Weiss, M. J. (1980). *Books I read when I was young: The favorite books of famous people*. New York: Avon.
- Sabine, G., & Sabine, P. (1983). *Books that made a difference: What people told us*. Hamden, CT: Library Professional Publications.

Richard F. Abrahamson is professor of literature for children and young adults at the University of Houston. He can be reached at rabrahamson@uh.edu.