

Untouchable

by Steven Payne



Editor's note: Every year, students in RBC's composition class write a literacy narrative, a piece that describes how reading or writing has had an impact on the writer's life. Here is a memorable one:

The first love I ever had wasn't for a girl I knew growing up or for a pet dog that followed me everywhere. It wasn't a best friend or even my mother. The first real love I felt was for stories on TV. Shows like *Quantum Leap* and *Family Matters* fed my escapism and helped me feel normal. In my unstable world, these television shows were always true and loyal when everything else wasn't. They gave me a sense of family and security that I lacked in my real life.

The love I had for these shows wasn't for their characters, or even for the comedy. It was for the storytelling. Moving a lot as a kid meant it was hard to keep track of personal effects or have any real sense of home. Having friends was a lost concept on me. My home life wasn't reliable, but these shows were, and I could catch them just about anywhere. The road and hotel room were more comfortable than a house with a bed and neighbors. I remember giving up on trying to keep personal stuff early on. If I couldn't fit whatever I had into a book bag, I didn't want it. If you were always on the move, if you packed light, it was hard to take anything from you. If you put down roots—well, you could be uprooted then, couldn't you? Everything can be taken. I found security not in my home or those who were given the burden of trying to raise me, or even the idea of having a “blankie,” but in the never-ending stories on TV.

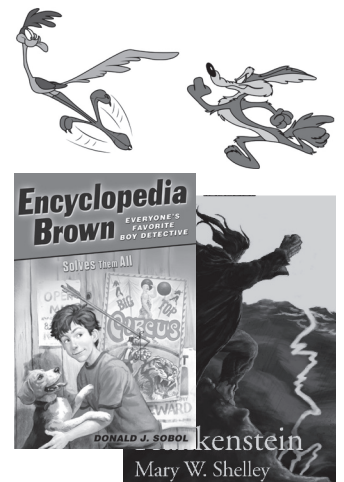
By the time I was twelve years old I was on the verge of being on the street, living out of a hotel with my father, who was avoiding the police. He had broken parole and was trying to avoid his arrest warrant, so I was to stay in the hotel room. Reason being that if anyone were to catch on to the fact that a twelve-year-old wasn't in school and attach that to my father, he would have been looked at with suspicion. Suddenly he wouldn't be so invisible anymore. So I watched TV from the time I woke up to the time I went to bed. I watched *Biography* on A&E and learned about presidents, rock stars and men

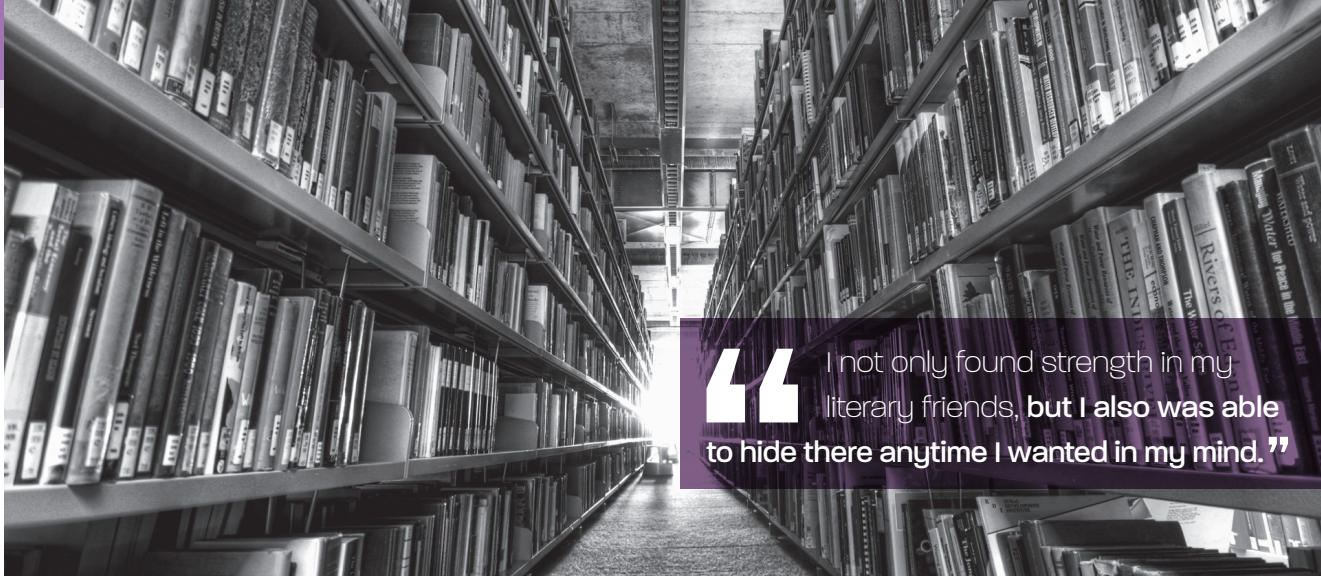
and women of science. I watched *Law and Order* when there was still only one *Law and Order* show on the airwaves. I watched every line of credits in cartoons and movies, trying to piece together who voiced what and discovering who Mel Blanc and Tex Avery were and all their genius. I was always entertained and whisked away, but the background noise was constant. I could never escape the peripheral vision.

Then the day came when we had to leave. It was instant and fast. I had nothing but the clothes on my back and a toothbrush shoved in my pocket, and just like that we were ghosts. We wandered a lot, finding refuge in the in-between places in town. I learned to be silent and stick to the shadows. To be forgettable and soon, I was forgotten. Just another face you passed by on the street.

We ended up taking shelter during the days in the public library because restrooms were at our disposal, as were the water fountains, and there was a temperature-controlled environment. Not too awful if you don't think about it too much. But the reality was that I was often alone as my father was somewhere else. To this day I'm not sure where he'd go, but he would go and I would stay behind. The problem with the library at this time was that my comforts and escapism were gone. The magic of Wile E. Coyote dropping an anvil on Road Runner's head doesn't translate well to books. Something is just lost in translation. Like I was.

But the day came, like all things do, when it all changed. I happened to be wandering around the children's section of the library to the stacks where Encyclopedia Brown was located and began reading the mysteries suitable for my age. I devoured three





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of those books that evening, and when the time came for us to leave the library, I realized I hadn't moved the whole time I had been reading. My legs were pin cushions and I experienced the first real hobble of my life.

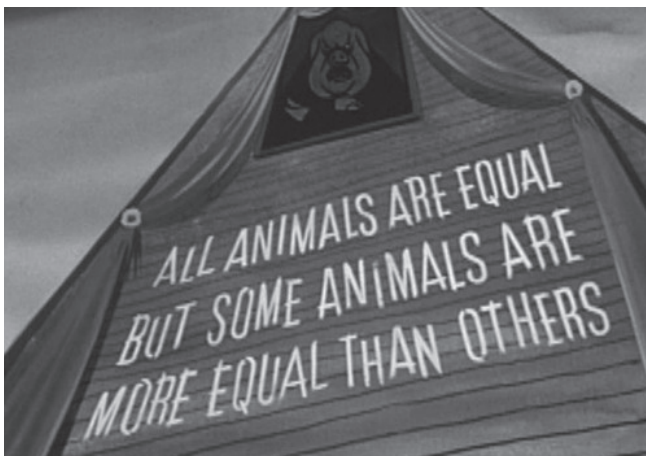
In the coming weeks I found myself with Victor Frankenstein wandering the Arctic looking for his monster. I found myself sitting with pigs in the house while the rest of the animals starved outside and was given a good taste of the literary interpretation of the rich and the poor in *Animal Farm*. I lost myself in the endless combination of letters and words that, like magic, transported me somewhere I could escape the tragedy that my life had become. I found myself hiding in the blank spaces between the letters and words instead of the buildings and people. I became entranced by the infinite endings to the infinite stories of new friends that were always there.

We spent our nights here and there. Sometimes warm, sometimes cold, and sometimes exposed to the elements. Where I used to look at the people passing by and the worry of what tomorrow was, I found myself consumed with wondering what certain characters would do in my situation. How would Leroy "Encyclopedia" Brown handle himself? I discovered the great Calvin and Hobbes during this time as

well and would try to imagine what a sidekick like Hobbes would make of these long nights. After some time, I began creating my own stories. My own characters, my own sidekicks and my own worlds. When worse things of the world found themselves in my story, I was able to combat them. I was able to stand tall against them with my own forethought and was able to create multiple endings so that these worse things could never define me. I not only found strength in my literary friends, but I also was able to hide there anytime I wanted in my mind. These stories, though scripted, were alive inside of me.

This story is not a story of my woe but my triumph. If I were to continue you might be tempted to say, "What an awful thing to endure." But I say to you, "Yay, for the life I've lived. Yay! For the struggle that did not overtake me. Yay! For the ability to find myself between the lines and not be defined by the black and white." So I'll end with this . . .

The escapism that I desperately needed and found in storytelling led me to the place of being untouchable. I found myself strengthened by the love I first found in storytelling. That entire worlds existed and still do exist around me, this is something that keeps me motivated to move forward. The possibilities of my ending are endless.



Steven is 33 and has finally made his way to college to study theology. Active in ministry for 15 years, he has worked with youth and is currently teaching two adult bible studies in his church, Columbia Heights United Methodist. Steven lives in Columbus with his wife and five children and is excited about earning his associate's degree at RBC in 2018. After that, he wants to attend Asbury University to complete a bachelor's degree, and has set his sights on graduate school at Talbot University in California.