

Know rhymes—know  
reasons



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

My parents are nerds. I don't mean they were nerds as kids and grew out of it; I mean my parents were nerds from the moment each was born, though their adolescence, and right into adulthood. Today, my parents remain true to their heritage: they are full-fledged, adult nerds.

As most people are aware, nerd hood requires a few supplies and traits: along with the requisite pocket protectors, the over-exuberance for all things academic, and thick glasses, both of my parents are bookworms. Luckily, certain genetic traits skip a generation, and I can honestly say that I am not a nerd; however, I am a bookworm, and I am not ashamed to admit it because much of my life has been influenced by the things I have read.

I grew up with Dr. Seuss. My father used to spend time every week reading the latest Dr. Seuss book with me. He'd tuck me into bed, and then I read to him aloud as the story unfolded one rhyme and one intriguing illustration at a time. My goal was not so much to get to the end, but to learn new words, and each new word I learned was marked by my father with a bright, yellow highlighter.

In this way, the progress I made became more tangible, and for all I know, that habit of my father's allowed me the freedom to read all of my books with a dictionary and a highlighter by my side and never to feel as if doing so was a waste of time or a burden: new word were an adventure, and I loved learning them. I don't recall developing a particular favorite Dr. Seuss book as a child, but as I got older, I began to get the urge to unpack the box of my highlighted books and relive a little of my youth.

The box of Dr. Seuss books had been stored in the family shed, and the years had taken

their toll. The change in temperature had caused the books to warp and mold, but they had not

gone completely to waste: at least one family of rodents had nested in the box,

shredding the pages of my early education for their own progeny's needs.

One lone book

remained untouched: *Horton Hears a Who*, and as I opened this last book of my childhood

and began to read, I was struck by the power of the story. Hidden in the text was one of the most

important lessons I've ever learned: a single voice of the tiniest girl was strong enough to make a

difference. As hokey as it may sound, I learned the degree to which an individual can impact the

world that day as I read that book. Perhaps I am a nerd.

I won't waste time by detailing the degree to which I read during grade school, junior high school, and high school; I will only clarify that while I admit to being bookish, I was also an athlete, participated in student body, and had a social life. I was, however, not done with Dr. Seuss.

I hit a wall with Shakespeare, and I felt the burden of reading for the first time in my life. While many students had grown accustomed to that wall, I had never dealt with it, so by the time it happened to me, the stakes were high: I was in college, and I wasn't getting it. I had never skipped a reading—never worried about my English or literature courses.

Suddenly, I was ready for a slug of the stuff Romeo had taken. I did the only thing I could think of: looking for commiseration, I complained to my parents about how stupid Shakespeare was, pointed out that no one could really be sure he'd written his plays, and wondered out loud why anyone needed to read stuff that's written like that anyway.

My father would have none of it, but he suggested to me that anyone who had grown up on Dr. Seuss and Shel Silverstein had no business complaining about or being confused by Shakespeare. Like many messages delivered when one isn't ready to receive them, the point my father had tried to make was lost on me for awhile—buried by the frustration of not having been appeased. Several days later, I tried to give in to the notion that there might be something familiar in the rhythm and rhyme of Shakespeare if only I'd do what my father had suggested: read it out loud and listen—really listen.

I struggled at first trying to work through the colloquial terms. I fought to remember that the ends of a line of text didn't necessarily equal the end of a sentence. I battled with Shakespeare's sentence structure trying to remember that it was rarely subject-verb-object. It was like running through sand that was waist deep. Until it wasn't. Suddenly, everything fell into place: it was like I had learned a foreign language. The words made sense;

the story began to unfold around me; I got it; I liked it. The only thing I can compare it to is sitting in a theater watching a sub-titled movie: there is a point at which the reading becomes so automatic that it is no longer a conscious effort but automatic. It was just like that.

Later, I met the wall that was Henry James. I was reading *Portrait of a Lady*, and I had spent far too much time trying to decipher the first scene of the text. When I realized that James had spent over a page beating around the bush to say that three men were at tea, I wanted to scream. I wanted to ask the guy why he'd wasted so much ink and so many words simply to point out to the audience that it was tea time, but instead of there being women there, there were men—but I had a book to wade through, and Mr. James was long dead, so I moved on.

Having figured out the context of the opening of the book, I went back and started anew, and I realized that I wanted to sit and talk to the man who had chosen such wonderfully descriptive words—a man who had taken such great care to spend the time to so completely describe the fact that three men were at tea. I remember thinking to myself that if he were a painter, and he painted the way he wrote, that I would love his work like I loved Claude Monet's *Impression Sunrise*. Years later, when I began to read everything I could by and about Henry James, I had a private laugh over his affinity for painters—Monet in particular.

Having cracked Shakespeare and James, I was never again afraid of a book's language or length. I picked up *Middlemarch* and *Tom Jones* and *Vanity Fair* and loved each of them for different reasons, but one day, I picked up

Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, and like *Horton Hears a Who*, I found a story that changed the way I viewed the world. "The Book of the Grotesque" made me think about truth, and the way in which each individual forms his or her own truth and twists it to suite personal needs. It made me consider that each person's quest for and claiming of truth can send ripples into the world, and these ideas changed me.

Recently, I have discovered Flannery O'Connor, and while I struggle with the racial issues that threaten to ruin her works for me, I feel the now-familiar tingle beginning that I have grown to recognize as the discovery and excitement that only a well-written book can bring me. I may have to break down and buy a pocket protector just to use as a book mark.

What about writing? Well, if one day all of the things I have jotted down in hopes of emulating the people previously mentioned ever manages to make its way to a publisher, I will blame that on the books I have read and the people who wrote them. I will speak of the fact that when I walk into a bookstore, I marvel at all of the people who have managed to get published and allow myself an instant to believe it might someday happen for me as well.

As I pick my words and paint my own pictures, I wonder if I have it in me to write the thing that for the right person will make a difference—the thing that might one day be highlighted in bright yellow—the page marked with a sticky note. Maybe this year I'll try my hand at NaNoWriMo.