

INTRODUCTION

Learn the Question.

"My heart has followed, all my days, something I cannot name."

—Don Marquis

ONE OF MY TEACHERS LIED TO ME at an early age. I didn't know it back then, of course, but she lied nevertheless. I was in third grade in a private Jesuit school and my teacher explained the role books played in our lives: "They contain all the answers," she said. And I believed her.

Books surround me. They always have. Books have saved my life, my sanity, and my soul. I started collecting at age seven, and have never stopped. There was a time, a blissful time, when I would read a book a day, and I was able to sustain that rhythm for years. I read Borges or Rulfo or Quiroga in Spanish. Bradbury, Dickens, or Hawthorne in English and, occasionally, I even ventured into reading Marcel Schwob in French, forced to by the fact that most of his work remains untranslated.

Books have a power over me. A fine edition of a familiar book or a new, intriguing prologue or preface makes it impossible for me to resist. As a result of this compulsion, and over the course of many years, I have been forced to acquire a separate home to lodge my library across seven distinctive rooms and multiple closets and corridors.

What we read and why we do so defines us in a profound way. You are what you read, I suppose. Browsing through someone's library is like peeking into their DNA.

Not only do I enjoy reading the titles displayed, but I gain great insight by the way they are organized: alphabetically, chronologically, thematically or, in the most compelling cases, by some obscure code known only to the organizer. "Ah—Marcel Schwob now rests shoulder to shoulder with Lord Dunsany and a few volumes away from Gustav Meyrink—brilliant!"

I have a curious ritual I follow right before a new film project starts: I thoroughly reorganize my own shelves in what has become an act of psychomagic. This physical exercise mimics my thought process. I use it to rummage through the memories and ideas of all the authors I love and cherish. I draw inspiration from them and re-ignite their thoughts in my "here and now."

The result is a monologue with many voices—borrowed, usurped, or distorted by the project at hand. I gain insight into the books I love and into my reasons for loving them. And I gain solace in their company.

Books as objects have distinct personalities, and they speak to you through them: The humble paperback edition of *Oliver Twist* you read when you were fifteen may seem more inviting than your finely bound *Nonesuch Dickens*. The specific mass, weight, and binding of a book all become part of your memory of it. The fetish of it. Its words live in you; its gospel is forever. You own the pages, the cover, the spine, hold the temple, the idol, the object of worship.

As for so many other children, my first book had pictures. Many of them did. And I thus was initiated to the fact that words are as specific as images. And there's Twain's maxim: "The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—it's the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning." This is true for both words and images. Reading and writing words has disciplined the way I read and write images.

For most readers of my generation, words were often first accompanied by images, and we learned to discern between Dulac's *1001 Nights* and Segrelles' illustrations for the same. Between Tenniel's Alice and Rackham's Alice, and the all-powerful alchemy these com-

binations invoke. In an equally powerful way, we learned to distinguish Carl Bark's Donald Duck from everybody else's, or Curt Swan's Superman above all pale imitations.

Perhaps, to some, this marriage of images and words seems like an abomination, but in fact, it prefigures and evolves the role that words have in our everyday life. We read now more than ever. Many will argue that we mostly read and write in cryptic acronyms (LOL, OMG, IMO) or other, equally prosaic forms.

But I believe that language mutates and transforms through usage, and that many of the forms it takes are shocking in the short term—comic books, rock and roll songs, beat poetry—only to liberate us in the long term. Plus, I'm always curious about the future of words (and images, of course) and find great delight upon learning a new usage or a witty turn of phrase.

Books are objects of great power and reservoirs of magic, cherished and guarded by alchemists and conjurers throughout the ages. If magic is made of sounds and letters, signs and symbols, then the ciphering of one's knowledge or the sum of one's life experience can be transmitted through our words and their music.

To me, *Bleak House* or *Pedro Paramo* or *El Aleph* are grimoires, and every time one of these books is opened, a tacit ritual takes place. The book reads you back, it scrutinizes and probes the limits of your language, the cadence and music in your soul, seeking rhymes and rhythms that will mimic those within its pages. The grimoire searches for an initiate and, magically, even changes with him or her through the years. This is inevitable. Hermetic wisdom dictates that each book will, in time, find its perfect reader. And the memory of who you were before you read it and the revelation of who you became after you did so will be brandished upon your biography as forcefully as an actual trip somewhere or a physical encounter. Sometimes even more so.

All reading should be nonrequired. At least for the true reader—for reading is a natural function, much like breathing. If every book we encounter is a blind date, then love stories statistically will be outnumbered by the disappointments.

But for the true reader, curiosity becomes an essential spiritual function and mystery its ultimate goal. In our books, we seek not

answers, really, to that nebulous longing our heart feels eternally; we actually seek the great questions.

And this, I believe, is where my third grade teacher had it wrong: Answers can only aspire to be important. Questions remain forever relevant, forever eloquent. Answers are science, questions are poetry.

We can learn so much more from poetry than science.

GUILLERMO DEL TORO

Guillermo del Toro is an Academy Award–nominated writer, director, and producer. He is the creator of *Pan's Labyrinth*, *Hellboy*, *Cronos*, and *Devil's Backbone*, among others. *Cronos* garnered the Critics' Week Grand Prize at Cannes in 1991, as well as nine Mexican Academy Awards. *Pan's Labyrinth* earned prizes worldwide, including three Oscars. It went on to become the highest grossing Spanish language film ever in the United States, and the only Spanish language film so far to receive six Oscar nominations.