The books of our lives

BY WAYNE WOOD

What books influenced your life? What have been your most meaningful experiences as a reader?

Since this is the Summer Reading Issue of House Organ, I thought it would be fun for some of us to compare notes. I’ll go first.

My parents still sometimes talk about what a pain I was to read to as a preschooler. I had a stack of storybooks, and I insisted that every one of them be read to me, every night.

Quite naturally, sometimes they would try to speed this along by hiding one or two of the books. I would immediately notice that some books were missing, would find them—funny how they would keep slipping into the couch cushions—and settle in to have the formerly missing books read to me.

As I say, I was a pain, but even early on, I was a kid who loved books and stories.

My fourth-grade teacher had an after-lunch storytime, in which she would read to us for a few minutes before getting to the afternoon’s lessons. I don’t remember most of the books and stories she read, but I sure remember this: she read “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer” and “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” out loud to us.

And I was captivated. Completely. Mark Twain named the books correctly—they are adventures. Boys, about my age then, with a secret island hideout, getting lost in a cave while chased by a murderer, and, of course, Huck and Jim and the freedom of that raft.

Most—who am I kidding—all of the subtlety, social commentary, and satire Twain wrote into the stories was over my head, but the exuberance of life that he packed into those books was obvious to me, even then.

I read a lot of junk growing up, of course. People who value great

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The House Organ Writing Contest has been held since 1985, and has published poems, fiction and nonfiction by staff and faculty every July since then; the Summer Reading Issue is part of a Medical Center tradition. And, once again, the quality of the entries again presented ample evidence that Vanderbilt is full of writers walking around disguised as normal people.

The winner of the Poetry category is Mandy Haynes of the Pediatric Echo Lab for her poem “Searching,” an adult daughter’s remembrance of her father. Her name may be familiar to you as a past winner of the contest; her story “The Day I Threw the Rock” was the Fiction winner last year.

The Nonfiction category winner this year is “Dinosaur Rainbow Monarchs” by Nicole L. Baganz of Pharmacology, the author’s story of struggling to understand the death of a talented sister.

The Fiction winner is “The Perils of Small Mammals” by Dan Dorset of the Vanderbilt Institute of Chemical Biology, a story about a man whose life is going nowhere, but paradoxically somehow getting worse by the minute, until...well, just read the story.

The stories and poems don’t stop there, either: contest honorable mentions are on the House Organ website at http://www.mc.vanderbilt.edu/houseorgan. There you’ll find:

- Fiction honorable mention, “Pickin’ Up Puppies by the Side of the Road,” by Mandy Haynes (remember her?), the story of a waitress at a rural diner whose encounter with an extremely pregnant young woman changes both their lives.
- Nonfiction honorable mention, “The Landing at Shah-har-adin” by Michael Woodard of LifeFlight, whose experience as a helicopter pilot in combat in Afghanistan is brought to life in the story of one trip to retrieve a wounded soldier.
- Poetry honorable mention, “Bubbles,” by Jennifer Dix of the Center in Molecular Toxicology.

Thanks to everybody who entered the writing contest, to those who helped judge the entries, and, on behalf of those whose work is here and online, thanks for reading.
The frost is only just beginning to melt from the windshield of Brent’s Hyundai as he pulls out of his apartment complex and into the creeping line of traffic on the main road making its way to the interstate. Brent briefly considers forcing his way over to the right lane so he can stop at a drive-through and grab some breakfast, but there’s too much frost on the windows and the last thing he needs is to get in a wreck with one of the other time bombs on the road, especially after last night’s events. He and Trish had a particularly nasty fight, one that in its second hour had the college students next door banging on the paper-thin walls and screaming. “What’s your problem?” Brent had wanted to yell back at them. “It’s not like your degree will be worth anything.” Brent’s own in Business Communication sure wasn’t. Five years and a few tens of thousands of borrowed dollars later, and Brent is working forty excruciating hours a week at a call center twenty miles away. The game is over.

The drive-time DJs are talking about last night’s TV shows. Don’t these two chuckleheads realize that in this age of hundreds of channels, only a few of their listeners have any clue what they’re yapping about? The long chain of cars stutters forward.

Trish left last night, but Brent has no idea where she could have gone. Trish doesn’t have the kind of friend that would open her door at one in the morning and take her in. She is a leopard, a solitary creature that trusts nothing except her appetite. She overpowers and mauls and when her prey is sufficiently disoriented and incapacitated, she plays with it, tossing it up in the air and pinning it when it tries with the last bit of hope and strength it has to rescue itself.

He knew this from the start, but he had no choice except to play his role. Brent starts down the on-ramp towards the interstate, where traffic is heavy but moving at a steady clip. He wedges his tiny car in front of a semi that flashes its lights in protest. Brent knows that Trish came back at some point in the early hours to get some things she left behind. It’s the second time she has left like this.

Part of Brent hopes that she won’t come back, but at the same time he can already feel that void opening up, and out of it emanates a plume of despair, noxious and leaden. How is a guy like him going to find someone new? He has no money, no motivation, a dump of an apartment, and he’s already in his late twenties. The young and ambitious are behind him, the successful and moneyed are ahead. And then there is Brent, another anonymous, hopeless loser in this ceaseless stream of traffic. When Trish berates him, or attacks him, or simply walks out the door, he gets that same feeling he got the night he met her at a friend’s Halloween party. He was on a couch in a straw hat and overalls watching Jason Voorhees chop through another gaggle of libidinous teens when she came out of some dark corner—all black leather and silver metal—and gave him a long, angry kiss that tasted of tequila and mild salsa. He followed her desperately for the rest of the night, ignoring her grimaces of annoyance and her snide revelation that she did it on a dare. He begged, he flattered and pawed, and finally, out of inti-
minated impatience, Trish relented and gave her number. The truck pulls closer to Brent’s bumper and its grille, a red maw with long silver teeth, fills the Hyundai’s rear view mirror.

The radio clowns are talking NBA now, trashing the Bucks and Clippers. How does someone get to be one of those guys? Twobums who spend a few seconds between commercial breaks yukking it up. Most of what comes out of their mouths is them laughing at their own obvious jokes. Brent can keep his friends roaring for hours at the bar on a good night with his rants about how terrible Trish is and how miserable and absurd it can be to live with her. Why can’t he be the one behind the microphone, earning the easy money?

But now the truck has gotten closer still. The driver starts jake-braking, and Brent can feel the growl vibrating through the thin padding of his seat. In his frustration, Brent rolls down his window and makes an obscene gesture in the icy morning air. The truck driver pulls the horn. Brent smacks the steering wheel and yellows out more obscenities in frustration. The obnoxious horn sounds again. He feels a sudden lightness in his body. The frustrations of last night evanesce and heavy. But the pain gives Brent some bearing and clarity, and he thinks of how the trucker’s protruding stomach. The driver fumbles with something out of his pocket and trashes the Bucks and Clippers. Brent catches a hint of something familiar. It’s musky and dank, and in his mind’s eye he sees for an ephemeral moment the silhouette of a grandfather he barely remembers. Brent is still furiously kicking at the trucker’s legs and he finally gets his toe up to just under the man’s knee. His opponent’s leg buckles and Brent suddenly finds that his right arm is free. He quickly rears back and hits the trucker just above the ear. The solid hit is exhilarating, and all the pain Brent is feeling becomes a dull hum over the rush he feels coursing through his veins.

In the periphery of his awareness Brent realizes that traffic is slowing so that the racing rats can take in just a few more fractions of a second of this sudden circus. Brent imagines for a moment that the man in the traffic helicopter will mention this in his next half-hourly update. That will give those morning guys something to chuckle about.

Brent completely ignores the cars rushing by only a few yards away and kicks open his driver’s side door. He stands up and holds his hands in the air. The passing spectators, enjoying what small sliver of the unfolding drama they can, honk their horns in equal measures of appreciation and derision.

over. He doesn’t take advantage of his car’s small size to evade the belligerent predator stuck to his rear. Rather, Brent glides onto the shoulder and lets his car decelerate on its own. Sure enough, the Peterbilt logo is still right there in its new home at the top of the Hyundai’s rear view. The car finally stops and Brent shoves the gearshift into park. Behind him he can hear the truck groan and shudder as the driver parks it.

Brent completely ignores the cars rushing by only a few yards away and kicks open his driver’s side door. He stands up and holds his hands in the air. The passing spectators, enjoying what small sliver of the unfolding drama they can, honk their horns in equal measures of appreciation and derision. After a few seconds during which Brent can see the driver fumbling with something out of view, the door of the truck’s cab opens and a portly, unkempt man clad in jeans and a denim vest stumbles down. He’s shorter than Brent imagined, but the thickness of him is nevertheless imposing and he’s screaming something—Brent can’t quite make out what over the din of the ceaseless river of engines—and speeds up his pace as he approaches Brent. Brent starts screaming back—not words, just a steady stream of syllables, and now the driver is so close that Brent can make out the stains on his shirt.

Before Brent’s brain can process the situation, the driver lands a straight right to Brent’s face. Brent doesn’t feel any pain as the knuckles press into his cheek, but he can hear the structure of his tissue giving way. Brent stumbles backwards a half-step and brings his left hand up to where the punch just landed, and his right arm uselessly dangles out towards the highway. He tries to get his bearings so he can protect himself and fight back, but the next thing he feels is his adversary’s fist driving into his ribcage. He hears a furtive string of words but doesn’t comprehend them. Now the pain comes, sharp and heavy. But the pain gives Brent some bearing and clarity, and he thinks of how Brent delivers short kicks to the trucker’s shins as they grapple.

The trucker is much heavier than Brent and begins to push him backwards. As Brent struggles to maintain his balance, he takes in gulps of air tainted by the odor of his foe’s rancid breath. Amongst the smell of sausage, potatoes and truck-stop coffee, Brent catches a hint of something familiar. It’s musky and dank, and in his mind’s eye he sees for an ephemeral moment the silhouette of a grandfather he barely remembers. Brent is still furiously kicking at the trucker’s legs and he finally gets his toe up to just under the man’s knee. His opponent’s leg buckles and Brent suddenly finds that his right arm is free. He quickly rears back and hits the trucker just above the ear. The solid hit is exhilarating, and all the pain Brent is feeling becomes a dull hum over the rush he feels coursing through his veins.

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Rivulets of pink saliva run from his lips, and he falls over onto his side, clutching both hands to his chest. With one open eye he looks at Brent wildly.

The last elective Brent took in college was First Aid and Safety. The class had a reputation as the easiest three-hour credit, and Brent certainly didn’t take it seriously. Now he wishes he had attended more lectures. The trucker groans loudly and struggles to let out a few muffled coughs. It takes a few more seconds for Brent to realize that this man is having a heart attack. He looks at the open door of his car and contemplates making a run for it. Would any of these passing people be able to piece together what happened? Would any of them bother taking down his license plate? But then Brent remembers his cell phone, sitting there in the cup holder. He runs and falls into the front seat of his car. He fumbles with the phone and sees that its battery indicator is flashing. Last night after Trish left he had gotten up every few minutes to check for a missed call or a text—some sign that Trish was sorry, that she wanted to talk and come back home to him.

With trembling fingers, Brent mashes out 9-1-1 on the phone’s keypad. He tells the dispatcher as best he can that there’s a man having a heart attack. His phone beeps a low-battery warning signal. Brent tries to remain calm, reminding himself that he has a very similar job answering phones. This is a conversation between two professionals. He mentions that they’re just a few hundred yards away from the mall exit. There is only silence on the other end. “Can you tell me how to perform CPR?” Brent asks. He waits a few seconds for a reply before holding the phone out in front of his face to see a screen as dead and dark as a winter night.

“You okay, dude?” asks Brent.

The trucker lets out a series of low, short huffs. He grimaces and rubs his thighs together. Brent looks imploringly at the passing cars. He waves his arms frantically and points to the suffering man. Before him proceeds a parade of open-mouthed, staring faces. Some drivers are pointing their phones and snapping photos. But there’s no indication that anyone is going to stop and help. Brent gestures to the procession of gawkers to call for help. The trucker is quiet now and his slow throes have ceased. Brent curses to himself in panic. “CPR, CPR,” he mutters over and over, trying to conjure the few sessions of class he had bothered to attend. It comes back to him in tiny, incongruous fragments. But out of that discordant milieu he seizes a single treasure of memory.

Pulse, gotta check the pulse.

Brent jabs a flaccid index finger into the man’s Adam’s Apple. The man doesn’t respond. Brent prods around the man’s throat and quickly becomes exasperated. He places the back of his hand just in front of the trucker’s mouth, but doesn’t feel any air movement. He picks up the man’s limp arm and mashes his fingers into the underside of the wrist. He waits for a moment but feels nothing. Brent looks at his hands, trying to remember what to do next. He looks at the trucker’s stoic face. The moustache and lips are caked in foam, and one side of the trucker’s flabby chest sink in. Brent loses count, but his arms are starting to get tired and so he goes to give the man two more breaths.

Brent is now wholly dedicated to keeping this man alive. He gives 15 thrusts and 2 breaths in steady succession. His shoulders burn and his mouth hangs open in a struggle to take in enough of the icy air to sustain them both. The glacier of cars carrying the crowd of anonymous, silent spectators crawls towards downtown. Somewhere in a detached partition of Brent’s consciousness, he realizes he wants to save people’s lives. He wants to be an EMT, or go back to school and become a nurse, maybe even a doctor. He can’t take another day as an on-demand sycophant, apologizing profusely for hours on end to people who claim to be rent irreparable by a new 25 cent charge on their bill. He knows that regardless of what fate befalls this unfortunate fellow, this is the beginning of a new life, imbued with purpose and focus and importance. Trish and her unpredictable, roiling spasms of temper and venom are but a figment now, one of the transient and inconsequential wisps of cloud tens of thousands of feet above in the pale winter morning sky.

Brent is out of breath. The freezing air and effort of the chest compressions has forced him to pause. But he looks up to see, in the distance, an ambulance. Its pulsing red and white lights move through the mess of cars like an alligator in a tired pond on a tired day. Brent holds the trucker’s hand and gives it a squeeze.

“It’s okay, bro. Here they come,” he whispers, before filling his lungs once again with life to lend.

“Can you tell me how to perform CPR?” Brent asks.

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Searching

BY MANDY HAYNES
Pediatric Echo Lab

I was raised by an alcoholic father
An atheist, an artist. A hard worker.
At the tender age of nine
I would sit with him at the kitchen table
A bottle of Johnny Walker Red between us
I would watch him drink
While he explained to me why there was no God.
Once I asked, “If you don’t believe in God,
then why are you afraid of the dark?
I mean, if there is no God then there is no devil, right?”
I was just a little kid then and I didn’t understand.

Not all demons are that obvious, running around in red suits,
Carrying pitch forks.
Some (my grandfather) hid behind alcohol and suicide.

Years later my daddy divorced my mother.
He remarried.
Found religion.
Is even a deacon at his church
(whatever the hell that means)
Now he ends all our calls with, “Come to church on Sunday—God loves you!”
It’s all I can do to keep from screaming.
I’m mean to my step-mother.
Call her “cow-pie face” behind her back.
Stare directly into her eyes until she turns away.

I left home before I turned sixteen.
I’m forty years old now
I have a wonderful son and many reasons to be thankful
I remind myself every day.
But when I see the old man my daddy has become
I’m overcome with a sadness so heavy
It’s almost too much to carry.
We are so much alike—this Bible thumping stranger and me.
It has nothing to do with our brown eyes or high cheekbones
Our artistic abilities or the need to make something with our hands.
We are both just two lost children searching for our fathers.
March 25, 2000: Sometimes an experience throws us off balance, and we are forced to view life from a new perspective—upside down, or from the ground. I got the phone call late at work. Somehow, I knew what I was about to hear. My parents had been divorced for two years, and the fact that they were both on the line when I answered supported my fears. My parents died. Hypothesis confirmed. After receiving the news, I hung up the receiver and diligently cleaned the tables at Mike’s Smokehouse (Eau Claire, Wisconsin) until they gleamed. I had anticipated this day, but I wasn’t ready for it; I needed more time to prepare for this. I collected myself, closed the restaurant, and went back to my efficiency college apartment to wait for my brother to arrive. I drove home with my brother, “the Kid,” to be with my mourning family and plan the funeral. The Kid is my best friend, and when we are together, we engage in epic conversations, but this three-hour drive home was unusually silent. As I gazed out of the passenger window, I noticed how dark it was that night—and then I saw a shooting star blaze across the skyline.

In the years that followed, March 25th became an annual day of reflection for me. As a way to cope with my pain, I started a ritual in honor of the Anniversary. Every March 25th, I pulled out her pictures, letters, and drawings. I composed a soundtrack to my grief as I replayed memories of her in my mind. The evening would begin after work. I set the scene: I lit candles, retrieved photo albums, and played “her” music—the Cure, Soundtracks from “City of Angels” and “The Crow,” Pretenders, Jars of Clay. I made sure my computer was online so that I could easily access any video that might remind me of her. Then I settled in for a ride on my emotional roller coaster. For several years after Britt died, March 25th became a personal commemorative “holiday” for me in honor of my sister. It was one day on which I allowed myself to let my guard down and release all of my pain. In the privacy and safety of my little apartment, I cried, yelled, laughed, and sobbed as much as I needed to without having to apologize. March 25th—a yearly purging of emotional vomit. After several years, I thought it would be helpful to begin to journal my annual healing lessons to document my therapeutic process.

One drawing, one creation made my sister a famous artist, and my heart ached at the thought that she never knew how she had enriched the lives of others with her color.
March 25, 2007: I listened to “Radios in Heaven” by Plain White T’s. The lyrics:  
“Your time has already come, and I don’t know why! Seems like just yesterday I was laughing with you! Do they have radios in heaven? I hope they do! ‘Cause they’re playing my song on the radio, and I’m singing it to you.” I dedicated this to my sister as I allowed myself to sink into the remembrance ritual for her.

I listened to and watched the video for “Untitled (How Could This Happen to Me)” by Simple Plan. The video depicted a family of five that was affected by the death of the youngest girl. She died in a car accident, and the “butterfly effect” (how one event can create ripples a world away) is what struck me while I watched this. In the video, it was raining, and a drunk driver collided with the youngest girl’s car. At home, her family was physically thrown against the wall at the moment of the collision—even though they did not yet know about her death. Figuratively, my sister’s death threw me against the wall and smashed me into the ground, and I reeled from the fallout in the rain of my tears.

March 25, 2008: I marked the 8th year without my sister. I listened to and watched the video “I Will Follow You into the Dark” by Death Cab for Cutie. The lyrics, “If there’s no one beside you when your soul embarks/Then I’ll follow you into the dark…” resonated. I plugged her name into Google and stumbled upon the transcript from The Middlewesterner—“The ABCs of Poetry: an Interview with Karl Elder.” Karl Elder is a professor and award-winning poet. What I read shook me:

Among the stimulating works of art I’ve known in my life is a multi-colored, crayon drawing that won a poster contest for an exhibition called Dinamation at the Milwaukee County Museum, a five-year-old’s rendition of ‘dinosaur’ [Brittany Baganz, 1987]. It’s obvious that the child strayed outside of her lines; it has that look. But by God, Marc Chagall never made a creature more beautiful than that child’s.

Time stopped. Dr. Elder was speaking of my sister... and comparing her to Marc Chagall (whom I hold in the artistic ranks of Picasso)! I remember how the Kid and I laughed at her creature with rainbow-colored flesh that bore no resemblance to Diplodocus. Brittany won the contest, and her Rainbo-dragosaurus was printed on thousands of posters and t-shirts to promote the new Dinamation exhibit (robotic, life-sized dinosaurs) at the Milwaukee Public Museum. In child terms, my sister had become famous, and won the ultimate jackpot (a cornucopia of dinosaur egg jawbreakers, gummies, and chocolates). It seemed her winnings continued into her afterlife; she had captured the respect of an esteemed poet and been compared to one of the most renowned painters of the 20th Century. One drawing, one creation made my sister a famous artist, and my heart ached at the thought that she never knew how she had enriched the lives of others with her color.

In the five years that followed the birth of the magical Technicolor beast in 1987, Brittany’s color slowly faded. She spiraled into despair and sickness. She dressed only in black, became addicted to drugs and alcohol, and carved scars into her skin. She was given a myriad of diagnoses by psychiatrists, including Borderline Personality Disorder, Major Depressive Disorder, Bipolar Disorder, and Addiction. Throughout my high school and college years, my family and I visited her in numerous institutions where we hoped she would be provided with help for her mental illnesses. My whole family traveled with her along her corkscrew path, and those years were excruciatingly painful because it seemed there was nothing we could do to help her escape her daily misery. My sister descended into darkness, and I wanted to follow her, and bring her back.

March 25, 2009: It was the 9th anniversary of my sister’s death. I was pulled back again and memories of my sister came rushing in. Among them was another drawing created by my sister the artist. A person’s face was depicted in pencil—gray. There were no rainbows. It reminded me of the character whose face melted off in “Raiders of the Lost Ark” (as a kid, I was too terrified to watch this scene). The sketch was tortured, gruesome. The artist’s signature at the bottom was familiar: “Brittany Baganz. Age
10... Today’s date is March twenty fifth, nineteen ninety two.” Again, time stopped. Exactly eight years after the melting face was sketched, the illness that shrouded my sister in gray and hid her color stole her entirely from the lives of those who love her. Brittany died on March 25, 2000—alone in a seedy hotel room in Orlando, Florida. She attempted to ease the pain of her illness with heroin, and it killed her. The “friends” that enabled her ran away when she showed signs of trouble. My sister died all alone. If only I had been there, she wouldn’t have been all alone, and maybe she would still be sharing her color with the world.

I listened to and watched the video for “Artist in the Ambulance” by Thrice. This reminded me how much I appreciate those whose career is to fight for the life of another. My sister died of an overdose, but dedicated medical personnel fought to revive her. The ambulance company that transported her on March 25th, 2000, contacted my mom a few months after that day and inquired about the bill for that service. Brittany had caused my family enough pain, and the thought that now we again had to pay for her poor choices left me seething with anger. I adamantly advised my mom against paying the balance, but she sent out a check. She said, “Nicole, her friends left her there alone to suffer; these strangers fought for her to live.” I immediately realized that I had much to learn. The lyrics “My world goes black before I feel/ An angel steal me from the greedy jaws of death and chance/ And pull me in with steady hands/ Giving me a second chance/ The artist in the ambulance/ I hope that I will never let you down/ I know that this could be more than just flashing lights and sound/ Can we pick you off the ground” echoed in my mind.

March 25, 2010: I had a long day at work in the lab. I finally made my way to my car and thought about my sister. Suddenly, an enormous, beautiful monarch butterfly narrowly missed colliding with my nose. It settled on a branch next to me. I stopped. My trek home was interrupted—and I was thankful. I thought of my favorite magnet on the refrigerator in my kitchen: “Just when the caterpillar thought the world was over, it became a butterfly.” My sister went from butterfly to caterpillar—her illness of despair crushed her brilliant wings and crashed her into the ground. But my sister provided the reverse metamorphosis in my own life, caterpillar to butterfly. Because of Brittany and the numerous others in my life afflicted by mental illnesses, I was motivated to become a scientist to try to uncover the fundamental causes of psychiatric disease and develop ways to alleviate the pain that so many bear. Having recently defended my Ph.D. in San Antonio, I was ready to take a new position as postdoctoral fellow at Vanderbilt, where I could expand on my current knowledge, continue my research, and find new treatments for mental illness. My sister remained a primary motivation for my career choice. As Dr. Elder said, Brittany strayed out of the lines, and he was right—in so many ways. For me, my sister threw me out of my line of balance. I will never be the same. If it had not been for her, my life path might have been drastically differ-
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ent. I trained in classical dance for more than 20 years, and when I started college, I had dreams of dancing professionally. Sometimes I imagine what my life would be like if I had become a dancer instead of a scientist. But then when the experiments work, and we find another potential target for treatments for mental illness, I am reminded why I chose the science road.

I kept the butterfly experience in my heart and traveled home. I listened to and watched the video for “Stand” by Rascal Flatts. The lyrics, “On your knees you look up and decide you’ve had enough/Then you stand” reminded me that every March 25th, I wanted to lie there in the ruin of my own self-pity and defeat. I realized that I could have stayed there in the rubble of my own selfishness and sorrow. But I chose to get up and fight for something bigger than me. As painful as it was, I got back up, and now I keep getting up. My work, doing my research, remembering Brittany and making peace with her life is exhausting, but there is a powerful strength in standing.

March 25, 2011: It was the 11th Anniversary. I reflected on my recent relocation to Nashville. On April 30, 2010, I moved to Nashville to start a new position as postdoctoral fellow at Vanderbilt. Historic flooding occurred the day after I moved in. I didn’t have internet or cable service yet, so I relied on my FM radio to keep me updated on what was going on in my new world. It sounded like the Apocalypse out there, and while I was afraid to venture outside of my 3rd floor apartment, I wanted to reach out and assist my new Bellevue neighbors who were suffering. Again, I found myself in a position of feeling helpless and useless to people who were in need of relief. I watched and was impressed by the city of Nashville as it banded together and recovered swiftly from the terrible disaster. Since that day, I’ve gotten to know Nashville and its residents. From what I witnessed in the wake of the flood, I now think of Nashville as a collective group of artists in ambulances. I saw strangers on street corners offering water and food, neighbors helping to rebuild houses, acquaintances consoling strangers who had lost their loved family members, friends, pets, and material possessions.

In July, as Nashville was recovering from the flood and I was leaving the lab, an Eastern Tiger Swallowtail butterfly narrowly missed colliding with my head. Déjà vu. But again, I was thankful. I paused, to take a snapshot this time. My thoughts returned to the butterfly effect and my sister. This reminded me of a Native American proverb: The soul would have no rainbow if the eyes had no tears. This idea projected me into scientist mode. An electron is a negatively charged particle that has the remarkable ability to “jump” to a higher energy orbital (“plane” or “line”) if it receives (and accepts) light energy. Light energy = color. I realized that Nashville and I had a lot in common. We decided not to drown in our own tears but to allow them to be a prism for the light inside. And then I listened to “Beautiful Day” by U2. The lyrics “After the flood all the colors came out...” lifted my spirit. My love for Brittany has been a light through my tears and has taught me to fly in search of redemption for her and all Dinosaur Rainbow Monarchs. My sister illuminated life for me, and the vision is painted with hues from an expansive palette. And I know that right now, from her perspective, she’d look at me on the ground and say the same.

“In our life there’s a single color, as on an artist’s palette, which provides the meaning of life and art. It is the color of love.”
~Marc Chagall
literature and wish to shape the minds of children have no use for the formula plots and cardboard adventure of assembly-line books that I loved, such as the Hardy Boys and Brains Benton series.

My basic feeling is that those people should devote themselves to shouting at children to get off their lawn, and leave kids who want to read peppy pulp fiction alone.

Writer Keith Robertson cast a spell on me, too. His books aimed at 12- to 15-year-olds about the character Henry Reed, a laconic kid who got tangled up in all kinds of adventures (that word again) while spending summers with his aunt and uncle in rural New Jersey struck a chord in me—I read them over and over. As an adult, I bought used copies, read and enjoyed them all again, and then bought and enjoyed long-out-of-print used copies of all the adult pulp mysteries that Keith Robertson wrote under the name Carlton Keith.

This may seem a little too black-turtleneck-and-Turkish-coffee, but as a senior in high school I read Albert Camus’ “The Stranger” and Franz Kafka’s “The Trial,” and, again, felt like I was having something of the world revealed in the words on the pages. Both were stories of people trapped in a world they didn’t understand and who were fighting hostile bureaucracies, and in my 17-year-old way, I could relate. Still can, especially when I’m trying to get an AT&T billing error corrected.

William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor and Eudora Welty wrote stories of my home region which people all over the world respond to. After I’d traveled a little in some underdeveloped parts of the world, the voice of Graham Greene illuminated some of what I’d seen and heard in his fiction, and to me he’s one of the giants.

And I still love the popular and the pulpy: Dave Barry, Carl Hiaasen, Bill Bryson. Baseball writer Bill James writes about life while pretending to be writing about baseball, and he summed up an experience that I have had over and over in my life and never seen properly put into words. In dismissing some viewpoint or another (I don’t even remember this issue under discussion), he said something like, “This is not an argument between people who have studied the issue and come to different conclusions. This is an argument between people on one side who have studied the issue, and people on the other side who have not.”

What books and writers have opened your eyes, made you laugh or cry or stay up all night to see how it comes out? Please join the discussion in the comment section at our website, http://www.vanderbilt.edu/houseorgan/