

Dog Ears and Broken Spines

keanerreader.home.blog

Author's Note

Never let me roam free in a bookstore. Or a library. You'll have a hard time convincing me to leave.

I'm pretty sure that I come close to being overwhelmed with all of the choices available to me, especially within those first few moments of entering an establishment. And, I'd venture so far as to say that anyone who spends more than thirty minutes in a book store probably experiences something similar.

You know who you folks are: maybe you drove down to your preferred chain store; maybe there's a little hole-in-the-wall specialty store, or maybe there's a cavernous warehouse of

used books just waiting for another person to pick them up and fox the edges of their pages.

Perhaps you prefer to peruse things on line, read the reviews, and then head over to Amazon where you get a good price, and several recommendations associated with your pick. Maybe you choose hardcover, or maybe you prefer the Kindle edition. Whatever turns your page (or scrolls it!) you've landed here because you like at least one aspect of books, whether they be in the physical format, or the digital.

I'll let you know right now that while I will occasionally offer my feedback on books I'm currently reading or have recently

read, what I'm really after with this blog is the story of people in relation to books, and how we experience them as individuals. How do you choose what to read? What is your preferred format? How do you make time to read? Do you keep your books in pristine condition? Do you lend them out, or hoard them like a dragon?

The list of questions surrounding books and our love affair (or standoff) with them is almost limitless. So, if you're inclined, mark your place in your preferred method, set the book aside, and let's take a look at what makes up a bookworm. 



A sampling of this blogger's favourite books

Photo by Keane Straub

Worth a thousand words, and then some

Books have more or less always inspired me in some way, but most of all in terms of my writing. At least that's how it's always been before. As a writer, I get excited when I walk into bookstores - faced with tens of thousands of stories all waiting for me to consume, it's a heady feeling wrapped in the warm wisp of a dream that someday I'll see my name among those on the shelves.

I get a thrill out of the stories, and out of the subject matter. Sometimes I'll leave a bookstore empty handed, but more fulfilled than if I'd actually purchased something. In those cases I've just spent the better part of two hours picking books up, turning them over, flipping through pages, carrying them around, setting them down, walking away, walking back, sighing wistfully...It's like some sort of unhealthy relationship, I'm certain.

And then there are times where I pick up a book for no particular reason and I know right away that it's coming home with me.

I was sitting in my first

year photography class the other morning, watching as our instructor guided us through the process of setting up our editing program, and our hard drives, with work-flow templates; and I started thinking, "Come on, Greg, can't we just take pictures?"

When it comes right down to it, as photography students who will be released into the industry most likely as freelancers (or 'stringers'; I'm digging that term), we need to understand the importance of

work-flow and how we file our images if we ever hope

C'mon, Greg, can't we just take pictures?

to have them published or sold. And I also get that teaching someone how to take a photograph is nigh



Tools of the trade: *Behind the Camera*, and a Canon EOS 77D

Photo by Keane Straub

impossible - you can't really teach creativity. You can give it a push in a general direction, give some guidance in terms of lighting, balance, composition, perspective, framing, and subject, but at the end of the day, a photographer is gonna do what a photographer is gonna do: take pictures.

I've been using my camera a lot since I got in July, and I'm just starting to play with some of the settings to see how they affect the picture, but I'm dying to apply it to something more significant than Fish Creek Provincial Park which runs through the south end of the city. Don't get me wrong; I love the park, and I love being able to go to this park and see the changes throughout the seasons. However as Greg told us on our first day of his class, the most important element of a picture is people. People doing things are even better.

So, after a day of not taking any pictures but lugging this camera and the two lenses around, I was feeling a little uninspired. Maybe a lot uninspired. After all, even the park wasn't giving me anything good to work with - the weather has been dull, and grey, and damp, and the light has been flat. Not very inspiring.

As I sat at my desk and watched more leaves fall off the trees in the backyard,

my attention soon waned and I started scanning my bookshelves for my next blog topic when *Behind the Camera: The Greatest Photographers of Our Time* (text by Laura Magni) caught my eye. It's rather hard to miss, actually: it's a large book, hardcover, with a yellow spine and black Couri-

Can I tell
a
better
story from
behind the
lens?

er New typeface.

I immediately grabbed it, and opened it up, and was taken back to when I bought the book this past May. I remember it quite well - my mom had recently arrived from Regina to stay with me for the summer, and we'd already spent a lot of time talking enthusiastically about my upcoming foray into school, and the journalism program. My mom is a novice photographer, which I think was a big inspiration for me picking up a camera. The sec-

ond one was this book.

Most of the images are in black and white, but the photojournalists therein span a century of history, and there are some famous pictures, and infamous faces on the pages. What really struck me, however, was something that hadn't been so obvious to me before, even though I'd been scanning National Geographic since I was about ten.

That 'something' is this: a picture can do just as good a job telling a story as words can. Remember the old saying? 'A picture is worth a thousand words'; I'd never really considered it until that moment when I was standing in the bookstore flipping the pages, my mom standing beside me just as enthralled with the images as I was.

I know there is power in words; I've been writing since a very early age and I love it dearly - I rarely go a day without writing something, be it a blog post, an article for school, or some fiction for my online posts. But pictures are perhaps even more powerful, or can be a catalyst; a main course, or a garnish. A photograph of that calibre is a challenge to me - can I tell a better story from behind the lens? How will it change my perception of the world, and of humanity? Will it change those things for the viewer? 

SOMETHING TO SINK YOUR TEETH INTO

From romance to horror to humour, the fanged blood-sucker that first made its debut in Bram Stoker's classic *Dracula* has been revamped in more than a hundred different ways.

They've been heroes and villains, anti-heroes, rock stars, tragic romantics, shiny 'vegetarians', and over-the-top drama queens, but each and every re-imagining has been worthy of Stoker's original creature of the night.

The other day my friend Stanzie pointed out that I have an unexpected knowledge of vampires, and the lore surrounding them. I couldn't argue that fact - I've read a lot of novels revolving around vampires.

I blame her for initiating me into *Vassalord*, by Nanae Chrono.

When Stanzie sent me a link for the little-known anime movie I was skeptical. I'd seen a few anime films in the past, and was scarred for life, I'm certain, by *Akira* and *Fist of the North Star*. Thanks, big bro. Naturally, I was hesitant, but after a

little coaxing, and plenty of tagging me in Tumblr posts associated with the animated short, I caved, and gave it my time. (Note: the above link takes you to the nearly 30 min anime short of *Vassalord*. Its rating is roughly PG13. Even though it's anime, there's still a lot of blood.)

I was instantly hooked, and completely heart-broken when I discovered that these thirty minutes only made up about one-quarter of the first volume of the whole story.

record scratch

The first volume?

OF THE WHOLE STORY?

So, being the kind of friend that likes to see me suffer and become absolutely absorbed by a story's characters and setting and plot, Stanzie then sent me a link to the entire series of *Vassalord* online - all seven volumes of the manga painstakingly translated from Japanese to English by a group of students who also love the story.

Thus began my high-velocity spiraling into the tale

of Johnny Rayflo, one of the oldest vampires in existence, and Charles J Christhunds, the boy he found when he was just a child and then later turned into a vampire.

And just for extra angst, Charles, or 'Cherry', as Rayflo calls him, is also training to become a priest.

But wait, you ask: how does a vampire become a priest when vampires normally have aversion to all things holy?

Because he's also a cyborg.

A cyborg?

Yes. A cyborg.

And he's also a vampire hunter.

On the onset, that might be enough to turn some readers off - it feels like an awful lot of genre mixing, and contradictions of lore, but Chrono makes it work, and makes it work beautifully within each and every panel of black and white, sharp-contrast artwork that accompanies the story. The artwork, by the way, is also done by Chrono.

Chrono's take on the undead is more or less flaw-

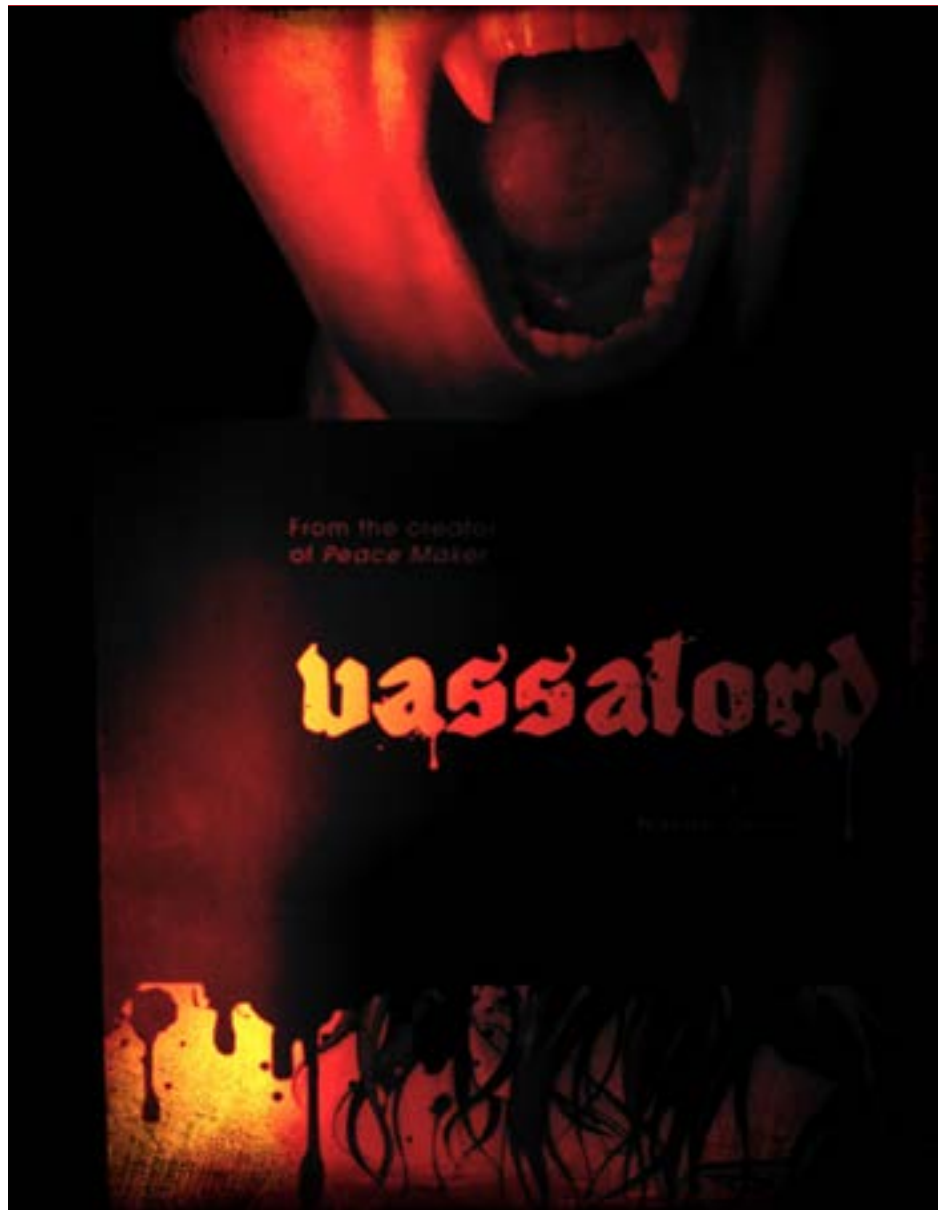


Photo by Keane Straub

a vampire and he hunts his own kind. He's hated by some vampires, feared by others, and the church doesn't quite know what to do with him.

He's made it a personal rule to only drink the blood of the one who has made him - in this case, Rayflo, and Rayflo likes to push Cherry's buttons any chance he gets. But if Rayflo really irked Cherry the way that he says he does, he'd put an end to Rayflo's life instead of merely toying him to the edge of death, only to suddenly relent, and perhaps repent.

Cherry's guilt over his feelings for Rayflo run deeper than the guilt he feels for being an abomination according to the church, and eventually he's going to have to make a decision about where his heart and his fealty lies.

The cast of supporting characters is off the charts. We're talking about a twin/doppelgänger/female version of Rayflo named Rayfell, as well as one of Cherry (Cheryl), a completely off-kilter and manic possible-clone of Rayflo called 86, shady priests, unfortunate victims of circumstance, a grizzled cop by the name of Detective Craig, Rayflo's past and would-be-future torturer Barry, and let's not forget Rayflo's loyal housekeeper, Minea, who can turn herself into a cat.

The digital age allows for vampires to be easily photographed.

less. She has her own lore, her own origins, and her own set of quirks that these vampires are capable of.

Rayflo can turn himself into a swarm of bats, and he can make his minions rise from a mere drop of his own blood. He acts cool, but he's the furthest thing from it, albeit he has a rather self-sacrificing attitude and could be guilty of playing the martyr from time to time, if only to get under Cherry's skin.

To top it off he's snarky, and sassy, a little bit broken, completely narcissistic, and one hundred per-

cent in love with Cherry.

Rayflo is a brat, but he's the stuff legends are made of, so the reader tends to cut him some slack. He's just so damn cool, it's almost annoying. His power is a mystery, his life before he became a vampire even more so, and behind the armour of his bravado there is tragedy and heartbreak.

As a master vampire, Rayflo has no vulnerabilities, save for one: Cherry.

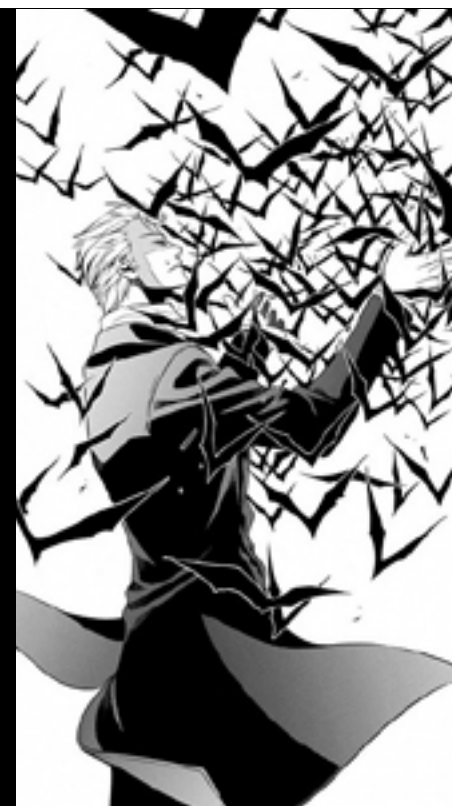
Cherry is the foil to Rayflo's picturesque vampire: not only is he a priest, but he's also pretty much torn apart by the fact that he's

The story is seamless, twisting and turning and flinging you over a precipice so that you cling, trying to hold on as the next chapter loads. I fell in love with Vassalord, and all aspects of it almost immediately.

Well, almost all of them. When I say Vassalord is an entire experience, I'm not kidding. This was my first trip into manga territory, and unbeknownst to me at the time there is a method to reading manga: one starts at what is viewed by western society as the back of the book, and reads the page starting from the upper right corner of the top panel, and to the left. After reading through the online manga once, and then again, I started reading Tumblr posts and gif sets in the same manner.

Clearly I wasn't deterred, because I managed to track down three of the seven volumes translated into English and printed. I ordered them immediately, and promptly read them as soon as they were delivered, once again reliving the experience, and finding it different from the previous read online.

To my knowledge the last four volumes have not been translated into English, so I either need to learn Japanese, or brush up on my German. But at least I've got the online to fall back



Artwork by Nanae Chrono

Charles J 'Cherry' Chrishunds

AS A MASTER
VAMPIRE,
RAYFLO HAS NO
VULNERABILITIES
SAVE FOR ONE:
CHERRY.

Johnny Rayflo



Artwork by Nanae Chrono

on.

There are so many themes present in Vassalord, and so many side stories and subplots that multiple reads are mandatory.

I will warn you, however: you may find that once you reach the end of the seventh volume that you aren't quite satisfied. You'll want more story, or you'll want the full anime series, because what Nanae Chrono does on the pages is just the tip of a very large iceberg that has yet to be explored.

Vassalord isn't for the faint of heart. There's plenty of blood and violence, gore, sex, revenge, and blackmail, but there is also humour, from the ridiculous to the dry wit of both Cherry and Rayflo. It's sexy, and sultry, badass and bawdy, but there's a sweetness to it, too.

Under everything else, Vassalord is a romance that spans over centuries, a true tale of undying and unyielding love, which is at the heart of every great vampire story. Vassalord touches on so many things all at once that if you're like me and you submerge yourself in this story, when you come back out you'll be a little breathless.

Then, of course, you'll want to sink in all over again. III\

Blowing doors open

One of my favourite things about being an avid reader is meeting another avid reader.

There's a secret language involved in the meeting, one that consists of lingering gazes, raised eyebrows, small smiles, and an exchange of words that usually consists of, "What are you reading?" And, "Is it any good?" Or perhaps,

"I've read that - it's a great book!"

A few weeks ago half of my cohort at journalism school was gathered in the common area of the Burns building on campus, and while several of my classmates were busy discussing things like the Olympic bid and the legalization of marijuana, I noticed one classmate, Luca, sitting nearby but rather engrossed with

the book in his hands.

A book is my chance to slip into the door and start conversations, so I sat across from Luca and craned my head to read the title of the book. I was surprised to find *Les Miserables* by Victor Hugo clutched in Luca's hands.

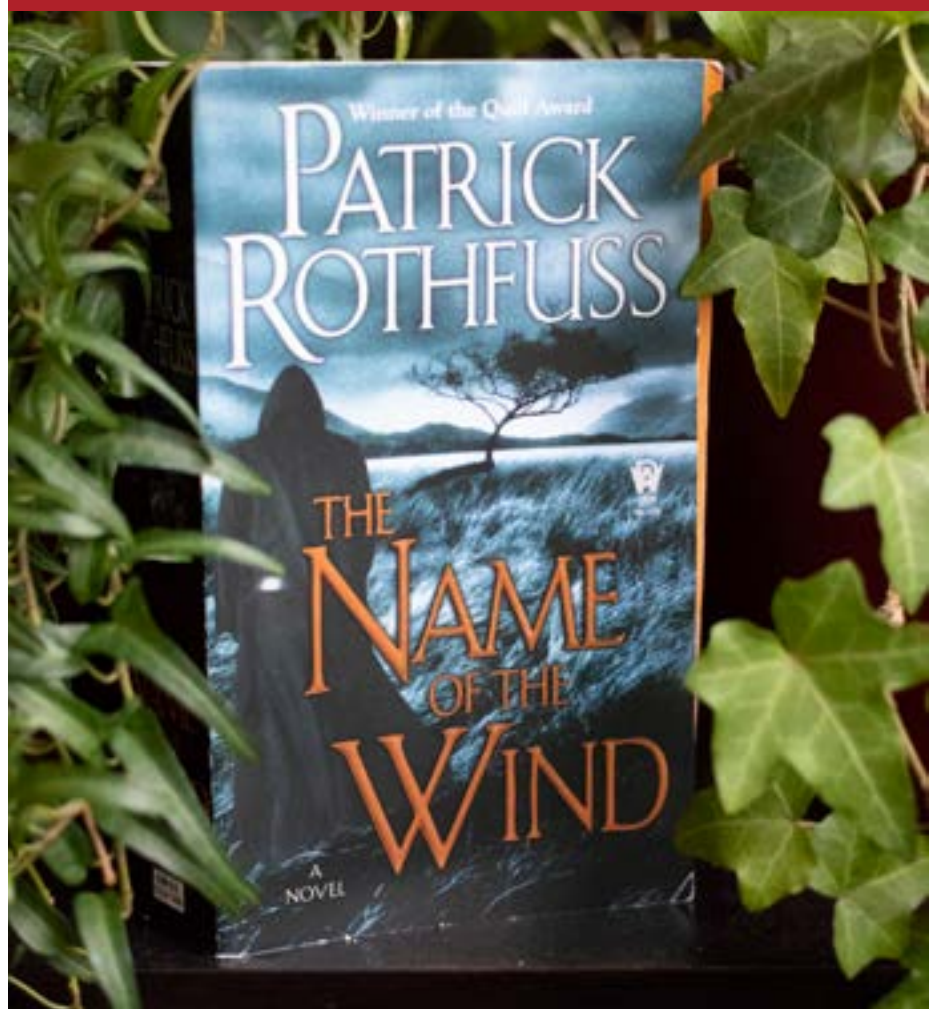
"That's quite the read!" I exclaimed. "I remember reading it in grade ten. What do you think of it?"

Thus began an in-depth conversation about Jean Valjean, the Hugh Jackman / Russel Crowe adaptation of the story, and more importantly, books in general. Soon enough, Luca and I were talking about our favourite books.

I feel as soon as I opened that door about books, I got to know Luca, who is rather quiet in most settings, and what books and storytelling means to him.

He was quick to tell me about *The Name of the Wind* by Patrick Rothfuss, enthusiastically trying to fit his synopsis into the one-minute walk to our next class. "It's like Harry Potter," he said, "but for adults."

And it's so much more than that, too, I discovered



"I have talked to Gods, love women, and written songs that make the minstrels weep. Perhaps you have heard of me." - Kvothe, Chapter 7

when Luca handed me a copy of *The Name of the Wind* the next day after class. To say I was excited was an understatement, but I managed to maintain my cool exterior and turned to the first page, which I had already read the night before on Amazon.

I'd like to say that *The Name of the Wind* doesn't quite fit into my favoured genres, but the more I read the more I come to realize that it in fact fits into *all* of them, and into some that I'd forgotten I loved.

For me, this book echoes some of my most-loved stories: *The Crystal Cave* by Mary Stuart, and *Uther* by Jack Whyte, both of which are centred around Arthurian Legend; and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy by J.R.R. Tolkien.

Rothfuss is the kind of storyteller that blends the logic of this world with the fantasy of his own creations. He's a world builder, and a descriptive writer, but it doesn't feel superfluous like Tolkien often can, or beyond the fantastic and bordering on the ridiculous as I find a lot of fantasy novels to be.

The story revolves around the main character, Kvothe. As I'm not that far into the book, I can't really comment on who Kvothe is save for this: he's mysterious, and he obviously possesses great knowledge and

power in the dark arcane arts.

Rothfuss appears to adhere to the hero cycle, that of a young man who shows promise with powers perhaps beyond his reach, and meets an elder who can start him on a journey but can't take him all the way, before losing his parents and stranding him in a world to find his own way. Through scenes written in both third person *and* first person his story begins to unfold and take shape.

The Name of the Wind is a hefty novel, boasting 722 pages, 169 of which I've read so far. But with a book

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this size and crafted so meticulously I find that I can't skim, which I'll admit I'm often guilty of.

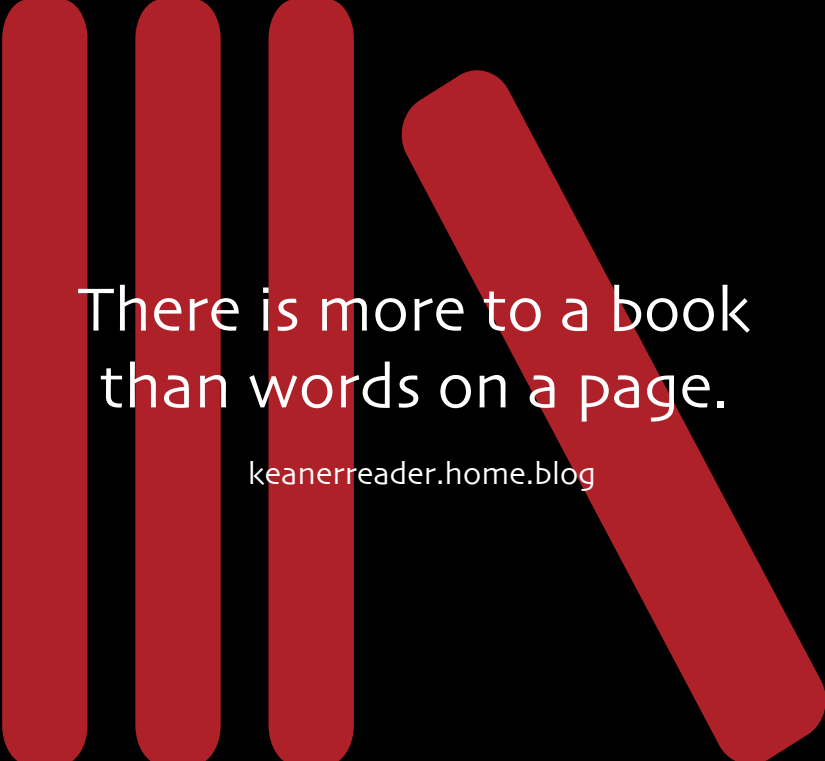
Glossing over pages of this novel robs you of an experience, of a chance to really submerge yourself into a world that could possibly exist just below the veil of reality. The characters are well rounded, flawed and mysterious, and the subject of magic is logically explained and just beyond

the fingertips of this level-headed reader. Instead of tearing through this book, I'm slowly consuming it on the train, between classes, before bed, whenever I know I'll have at least half an hour to read.

When Luca handed me this book I was worried that its fate would be that of other shelf-warmers, and I'd have to face my classmate every day with the sheepish exclamation, "No, no, not yet. I just haven't had time."

It's the exact opposite - I try to find Luca to give him an update at least once a week. And, much to my delight, when I was reading the book on the train last week, the young man across from me (who had been ploughing through *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller for the duration of his ride) said, as he was readying to depart the train, "That is an amazing book. I can't wait for the third one to be released."

There really is nothing like the endorsement of a stranger who knows nothing about you, but remembers how they feel about the book you're reading. You become minutely linked through the book, and the experience of the book, and you can't wait to read more, and perhaps wonder which parts that person loved best. III \

A graphic of four red, rounded rectangular shapes representing book spines. Three are vertical and one is tilted at an angle to the right.

There is more to a book
than words on a page.

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