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For most of my childhood, I hated reading. I acknowledge that this isn't the best start to a story, especially one about books, but thankfully this story has only just begun. My despise for reading was all encompassing, from the daily reading time, where we were to read from boring and predictable titles, such as "Junie B. Jones" or "the box car children", to the annual reading placement, which would tell me that my reading comprehension was on a level most people won't reach until their college years. This last bit was obviously wrong, because, as stated previously, I hated reading. Whenever I was forced to read a book, I would choose one with a fun cover, open the first page, then ignore it for the half-hour designated as personal reading time. It wasn't until the fifth grade that I first learned what a book could be, but this story is not about that story. This tale begins in Mrs. Romary's second grade classroom and ends a decade and a half later in a barracks room on the other side of the country.

In our language arts textbook there were short stories and excerpts from books I didn't care to think about, and only once did I ever think to care about. That one time was a curious point in my childhood though. I never actually forgot it. I don't remember why we read it, as most of the excerpts were associated with a writhing style or were meant to teach us about a period in the history of Literature. I don't remember what exercises we did in relation to it. But I do remember the story. For almost fifteen years it has stuck with me. I remember opening my textbook to a page that had a simple picture of a boy looking at a dog. I remember that the background of that picture was blue. I remember that the dog was very large and sitting on very large haunches. I remember that the very large dog sitting on very large haunches had a very large clock on its side. I remember thinking that this was all quite peculiar. But what I remember most vividly was the story. A boy, I had forgotten his name, driving in a toy car in a strange land, meets a dog who's name I also had forgotten. They travel together and meet a bug. I admit that this is probably the most meager description of a book ever written, but to a ten-year-old boy that hated reading, this was quite a bit. I had forgotten all the names, to include the title, but I never forgot the witty banter of the characters, the masterful word play of the author, the fact that this was only the second chapter of a much longer text, or the enjoyment I had reading it.

I finished that short chapter and wondered what the rest of a book such as this must be like. I wondered that when I moved up in years. I wondered that in the fifth grade when I read "Hatchet" by Gary Paulsen and learned what a story can do, I wondered that in high school when I spent so much time in the library that I was on a first-name basis with the librarian. I wondered that when I graduated boot camp and was given the freedom to read again. I kept this wonder, always curious but never sated, because I couldn't remember the title, and nobody I talked to could find the right story about a boy, a dog, and a bug.

It wasn't until I was living on the presidio of Monterey in California, learning Russian, that my desperate desire to finish that story was satisfied.

My classmates and I took the bus over to the local strip mall to catch a movie. Having gotten there too early, we decided to split up and walk around. Some of my friends went to look at clothes, a few got a haircut, but I went to the local toy store. Childish of me, I know, but I still like to go into those from time to time and see what new toys are out, and which old ones are still holding on. After perusing for a bit in the Lego section, I made my way back to the entrance. On my way I passed a display of children's books. I hadn't noticed it on the way in because the other side was filled with figurines of dragons, and zoo animals. This side though was filled with Doctor Seuss and C.S. Lewis, and other such classics. I picked each up in turn and admired the cover and remembered a time when I would read one, or even an earlier period in my life when I had snubbed my nose at the very thought of doing so. As I made my way through the selection I finally picked one up whose title, "The Phantom Tollbooth", I didn't recognize. I paused for a moment when I saw the cover. It was blue. There was a boy. There was a dog. The dog was very large. And it had a very large clock on its side. I bought the book immediately.

After years of waiting to see how a children's story would end I finally had an answer. I was twenty years old, finally caught up to my comprehension levels from my youth, and reading a book intended for people half my age. And it was one of the most profound experiences of my life.



It's the story of a boy named Milo, who has everything and is never happy. It's about his adventures in the Kingdom of Wisdom. He must save the Princesses Rhyme and Reason from the Mountains of ignorance. His travels take him through lands and provinces that teach him not just to think outside the box, but to question if the box even exists. The wordplay is masterful, the puns are uncountable, and my horizons were infinitely broadened. I finished this book and looked at the world from a new perspective, questioning everything, and appreciating everything else.

It has been fifteen years since I read Chapter two of "The Phantom Tollbooth" in Mrs. Romary's class, and almost four years since I read the entire thing over a weekend in Monterey. I have bought three copies since then and given them away. I try to read it at least once a year, and always try to think of things differently.