

My favourite book

Natasha Bowen

There have been many books that have been my favourites over the years, but I can be quite fickle, my tastes changing and evolving. I will always remember my first love though – and that's exactly what it was, and still is – love. I fall in love with the books that catch me, hold me there with each word and page.

My first favourite book was the Ladybird edition of *The Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Andersen. I bought it myself and read it when I was six years old. My mum had taken me to the jumble sale in our local church, and I had gone straight to the stall with the books. The cover caught my eye instantly. The enchanting image of a girl with a fish's tail instead of legs, floating in a sea that swirled around her as she watched a ship sail past.

I think I paid 10p for it. I remember handing the coin, giant in my palm, over to the lady who was running the stall. My mum wanted to spend more time browsing but, as far as I was concerned, I was done. I sat next to the tea stand, on one of

the old wooden chairs, and began to read, legs swinging, ignoring the rumble of my stomach and the tempting smell of cake that I didn't have the money to buy.

I read the whole book in the time it took for my mum to excavate some bargains from the mounds of clothes, and as we walked back from the church to our estate, I read it again. I was blown away by the entire story. The tale of the Sea King, his six daughters, and the sea witch captivated me. I loved the stakes, the tension, and the dangerous beauty of the book. What drew me in even more was a brand-new world under the sea, magic, and sacrifice. Even at that young age, the willingness of the little mermaid's sisters to give up their hair to redeem her spoke to me. Every day I saw my mum make sacrifices for me, whether it was less food on her plate so that there was more on mine, or holes in her shoes so that I could have new ones. Sacrifice, I understood. And magic? That's what I wanted. This book gave it to me and started a vivid passion for other worlds and dangerous choices.

I used books to escape, and I still do. But they also became a tool to learn and understand. Now my tastes run across all genres, from Jesmyn Ward and Octavia E. Butler to the adult fairy tales of Katherine Arden and Leigh Bardugo. In the last few years, since writing *Skin of the Sea*, I've enjoyed reading the work of new Young Adult Black fantasy writers such as Tomi Adeyemi, Namina Forna and Jordan Ifueko. Their books all showcase African-inspired fantasy with themes of power, magic and strength, stories that I wished I had been able to read when I was younger.

So yeah, my favourite book? I can't choose, I need them all.

Natasha Bowen

Natasha Bowen is of Nigerian and Welsh descent and lives in Cambridge, England, where she grew up. Natasha studied English and Creative Writing at Bath Spa University, before moving to East London, where she taught for nearly ten years. Her debut book, *Skin Of The Sea*, was inspired by her passion for mermaids and African history and will be published by Penguin in November 2021.

A recording of this talk can be found at [**writersmosaic.org.uk**](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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