



This is what my childhood taught me, that learning has to be a part of the real world and that we have to engage in numerous ways.

Reading Can Save Lives

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When I was a kid, my mom used to drive 85 miles per hour across the desert, swigging from a Pepsi can while reading *The Chronicles of Narnia* aloud to the family. Or a book from the The Great Brain series. Or a Mrs. Piggie Wiggle book. It didn't matter what the book was, just that we were flying along in our old cream-colored Volvo, listening to a good story.

Because of my mom, my life has always been about good stories. It began with her reading aloud to us, then all of us reading at her feet, then—one by one—sneaking off to read books on our own.

As a small child I loved books like *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* but quickly moved on to two straight years of Hardy Boys mysteries that I could buy for a quarter each from the used book store. Later, I poured through Tolkien's collected works

and *A Child's History of the World*. After that, the autobiography of Hank Aaron, Tolstoy's *Peter the Great*, and—eventually—all of Jane Austen. An eclectic mix.

When my mom set a book down, I picked it up. Jean Kerr's *Please Don't Eat the Daisies*, novels by the British mystery writers Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie, anything by novelist Kathleen Thompson Norris. Or my dad's Hemingway collection.

I attended one day of first grade before my mom unenrolled me from the Tucson Unified School District. She said, "These schools are horrible. You're going to be homeschooled from now on." Then she said the same thing to my three siblings, and that was the beginning of Hoffmeister Country Day (or HCD), the start of seven years of homeschooling for me.

We lived on seven acres, and we spent a lot of time catching snakes, trapping tarantulas, finding bones that my mother would bleach and turn into copper-and-bone mobiles. We filled our days with adventures, but we also spent a lot of time reading. Some days we would hike up a trail into the Santa Catalina Mountains to read by a spring. Others, we would read out along the fence line. In our house, books were everywhere. Our family didn't own a TV. My mother taught us that video games were "evil," that they would "turn our brains into a vacuous mush." Our entertainment consisted of exploring, swimming, and—of course—reading.

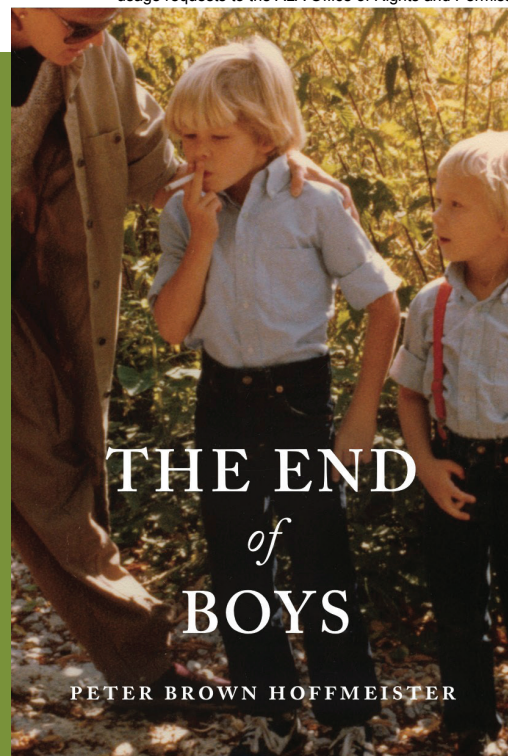
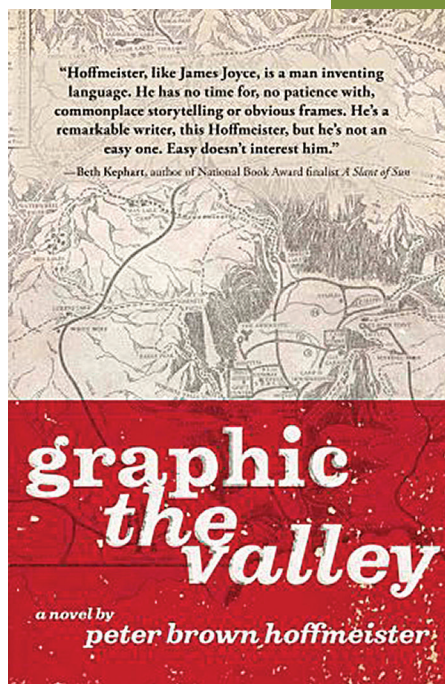
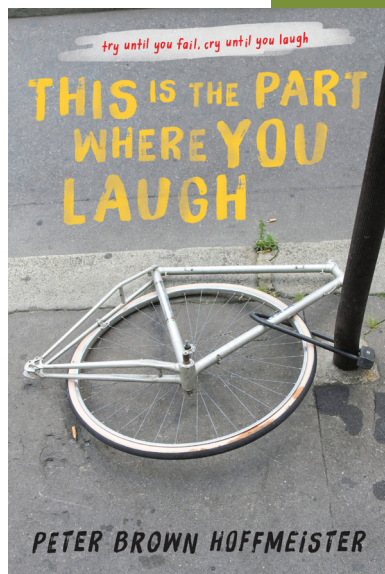
Homeschooling changed over the next seven years. HCD went from teacher-directed learning to what my mother called "the glory and autonomy of being an autodidact." She would take us to bookstores in

the fall, and we were allowed to pick our own textbooks for the year. She taught us Latin and Greek roots and taught us to write, but then expected us to teach ourselves. She believed that learning meant something only when it was personal, when it was self-directed, guided by personal wonder.

Because of my mother, I know that my students care about their educations only when they're engaged in the material, when they're curious, when they're challenged and intrigued. So I try to integrate. For example, in the outdoor program, I have students read Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, but learning doesn't stop there. We take small groups out into the desert, challenge them on navigation courses, go rock climbing, spelunk in caves, and study water acquisition and survival structures. Then we bring the book back and read the best selections aloud. This is what my childhood taught me, that learning has to be a part of the real world and that we have to engage in numerous ways.

When my family fell apart, when my parents struggled and my brother and I made bad choices as teenagers, somehow we were all still learners, we still possessed books and the power of stories. Even when I was expelled from three high schools and arrested, the lessons of autonomy, the learned models of an autodidact stayed with me.

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Stories were with me when at fifteen I snuck back into the house with a face bloody from a midnight fight in an Albertson's parking lot. I packed books in my suitcase when I went to the East Texas rehab and parole chapter of Life Challenge, and I kept those books with me when I ran from the program, hitchhiking across Texas. Books were with me when I slept for a while under a counter in a Greyhound Bus station in Dallas, Texas, and when I was sleeping on the street in a hedge. Books were with me when I backpacked during the Outback Program for Troubled Teens in Colorado, when I moved out of my parents' house the first time at sixteen, and when I moved out for the final time at seventeen.

Now I take books with me when I paddle rivers, backpack, or rock climb. And I put books in the hands of my students, books by Pam Houston,

Pete Fromm, Jon Krakauer, Cheryl Strayed, Arlene Blum, and David James Duncan. I give young people poetry by Dorianne Laux, Robinson Jeffers, and Patricia Smith.

I love and share short stories too, the authors and collections all running together: Jhumpa Lahiri, Junot Diaz, Edwidge Danticat, and Sherman Alexie. Or telling stories aloud: Ken Kesey's "Little Tricker the Squirrel Meets Big Double the Bear" retold to my daughters over a juniper fire in the high desert of the American West.

Even my fictional characters read. In my first novel, *Graphic the Valley*, young Tenaya reads books he gets from his father. And in my most recent novel *This Is the Part Where You Laugh* both Creature and Travis's grandmother are always pressing books into his hands.

It's all tied together. As my mom preached when I was little, "Readers are leaders."

No one could've predicted that I would be a successful adult after I committed an assault in New York, or was caught in possession of a loaded handgun on school property in Tennessee, or when I was arrested for felony distribution in Oregon. I'm sure most people wrote me off. So now, as a teacher, I try to see past my students' current crimes, past their clothing choices or music, past their partying or addictions. I try to see a positive through-line, ten years into the future.

Also, I think about the power of reading. For my entire life, I've held books in my hands and read the reality of other stories. As a teenager, books showed me the reality of other possibilities, and at eighteen I decided to get off the street and make different choices going forward. In a sense, I wrote a new plotline for my life.

To say it simply: The world I want to live in involves books. But also, my life has been saved by books. Now I have the opportunity to help other people save their own lives.

Peter Brown Hoffmeister is the author of the critically acclaimed adult novel *Graphic the Valley* (Tyrus Books 2013), the memoir *The End of Boys* (Soft Skull 2010), *This Is the Part Where You Laugh* (Knopf Books for Young Readers 2016), and *Too Shattered for Mending* (Knopf Books for Young Readers) out this fall. A former troubled teen, Hoffmeister now runs the *Integrated Outdoor Program*, serving teens of all backgrounds, taking them into wilderness areas to backpack, climb, spelunk, orienteer, and whitewater raft. He lives with his wife and daughters in Eugene, Oregon. Visit him online at peterbrownhoffmeister.wordpress.com and follow him on Twitter @peterbrownhoff.

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