

Roland Schwarz

My Papa, the Poet

How books change our lives

Translated by
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*To all those brave people
navigating their own personal struggles
who are willing to share their experiences
with the world.*

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Preface

by Christy Collins

“Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born.”

Anaïs Nin, *The Diary of Anaïs Nin*, Vol. 1: 1931-1934

In September 2024 I had the good fortune of meeting Roland Schwarz when we were both writers in residence at the Swatch Art Peace Hotel in Shanghai. He was there to research and write an earlier, German version of this book and I was working on a stage play.

I have loved the idea of this book since Roland first told me the story of his friend, Martin, who read *Moby Dick* and then became a container ship captain because of it. I know how books and literature have expanded my life, but there's a particular satisfaction to a story about an individual's encounter with a single book that changed things for them: careers, loves, languages, geographies, beliefs.

Books reach us in an extraordinarily personal way. While film, theatre, music and dance are shared experiences, books speak directly from one consciousness to another across time and space. Their quiet power to communicate to the most private parts of ourselves is an open secret. It is why books are banned and burned and it is probably why children are often profoundly enchanted by them.

During our first month in Shanghai, I asked Roland the question that he must have been asked a hundred times: 'so what's the book that changed your life?' He managed to respond with undimmed good humour. He has a favourite book, but not one that has changed his life. For my part, I didn't even have a favourite. I only had a book that had brought me back to reading, after I had been away for some time: Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. But this book didn't change my life, it just brought me back to who I already was.

A residency is a creative oasis in the life of any artist, but perhaps especially for those who support themselves – as both Roland and I do – by means of a demanding day job. I'm extremely grateful for my time at 'Swatch' for a multitude of reasons. I'm especially thankful for the connections I made with the other artists there, a couple of whom feature in the pages of this book. But residencies are temporary. At the end of November Roland returned to late autumn in the Danube Valley in Austria and I to a sun-drenched beach-side suburb in Melbourne, Australia.

I don't want to gloss over this: leaving Shanghai was hard, and returning to our old lives seemed to require something to be shed or transformed. As soon as I got home, I felt compelled to declutter my workspace. This feeling persisted for weeks, and I was unable to return to writing until it passed. At the same time, I was texting with a visual artist who, as soon as he got home, felt a compulsion to repaint his whole apartment. He said he'd never experienced such a thing before. Others fell ill, left partners, galleries, studios or found themselves in a state of suspension or grief. Many were unable to create for months after their return.

As Roland and I were beginning to navigate our new long-distance, time-zone-challenged friendship, I wrote to him that I hoped that we would be able to continue to expand each other's worlds through the books that we love. And that's what this book is about too: the way that books enlarge and change our worlds and lives. Books heal us and call us on. They lead us to new places and new ways of seeing the world. In the pages that follow, you'll find a house built, a career launched, travels sustained, a language acquired, and study directions determined – each inspired by a book.

Since we left 'Swatch', my friendship with Roland has become one of the most important in my life. This is a gift I hadn't expected, but it is one I think I was ready for. I was ready for the pleasure, the challenges, and the rich interest of this unapologetically literary friendship. Roland is the person I tell when I'm reading something I love; when there's news about my novel manuscript or my play; he is the person I turn to when I'm feeling disheartened with my writing. He helps me grapple with German-language literature and I try to encourage him to return to working on his own fiction. We fill each other in on details from our lives: things that catch our interest, sadden or irritate us, things that make us laugh. He leaves voice messages about his current book project or mine, and I relisten to them as I plunge back into writing.

Roland's knowledge of – and love for – books continues to expand my literary horizons. For me, our friendship means that being a writer and a reader feels part of who I am all the time, despite the demands of my day-to-day life. And this means that I got to bring a piece of my Shanghai residency home with me, and my life is better for it.

And so it is, that the book in your hands has changed my life. Roland came to Shanghai to write the German version of it and, because he did, I have this friendship that I hope will continue to support and galvanise our writing lives well into the future. Strangely, it's a book that, until this translation, I couldn't even read (a shout out to the translators – both literary and functional – who connect us and open up the world!).

So, you are about to read this book that has changed my life. Perhaps something in it will lead you to a book that might change yours.

I'd like to think so.

Melbourne/Naarm, November 2025

The unbridled power of books

„There is no friend as loyal as a book.“

Ernest Hemingway

Books can give our lives a new direction. They provide comfort, offer advice, and at times bring clarity. Books make our lives more exciting, more entertaining, and occasionally less lonely. Over the past few years I have been collecting inspiring, memorable and at times humorous anecdotes in which a book has completely blown someone off their feet. This collection contains nineteen of them, from different countries, told by people of different ages and walks of life. Some of them are themselves writers or linguists: their stories feel like an intimate glimpse behind the scenes, a small dose of alchemy. All these stories are true, if I may use that complex adjective here, and I have changed the name of the protagonist in only one of them. That said, I would prefer not to say which but leave it as a reminder of the transformation that takes place in every narrative text: the transformation from experience to story. In the words of Austrian novelist Christoph Ransmayr: “Stories don’t happen, stories are told.” Apart from this I have written everything down as it was entrusted to me: behind every anecdote in this book is a real person who has shared their thoughts with me.

The stories in this volume stand as a testament to the bewitching power of books. They are not book reviews, but highly personal anecdotes, even though I allowed myself to sprinkle in a little factual knowledge here and there, in the hope, dear readers, that after reading

this collection, you might find yourself drawn to one of the books yourselves. I am afraid I can't completely escape my roots: I am a teacher by profession.

In the final pages of this volume you will find an overview with references, setting out the books mentioned in the various anecdotes together with their authors. I have also included short biographies of all the artists who contributed in one way or another to this project. Incidentally, my mission is not over: If there's a book that has cast a captivating spell on you, please get in touch! My contact details can be found in the acknowledgments section.

Roland Schwarz,
Prague, July 2025

With Moby Dick on a container ship

Herman Melville and *Moby Dick*

“Of course [Moby Dick] is a symbol. Of what? I doubt if even Melville knew exactly. That’s the best of it.”

English author D. H. Lawrence on *Moby Dick*

“Call me Ishmael” is one of the simplest yet most sublime opening sentences in world literature. Three words that set the 900-page novel on its course, just like the sails of a whaling ship. Our narrator is called Ishmael, and he is addressing us directly.

If I may, I will do the same with you. But please do not call me Ishmael. Make it something else. This story is not about me, but about a young man whose reading of this great American novel had a lasting effect on his dreams and, consequently, his life. Naturally we are talking about *Moby Dick*.

But before we dive into the story, a question: which has been the most important book for you? Which was the one that changed your life, opened your eyes, gave you access to new worlds? This is not an easy question to answer, since different books are important in childhood, in adolescence and in adulthood. Well, for the young man in this story there was just one book that was critical. After I forced this book on him, he hardly picked up another – not until I urged him to read more. As you can see, I am not only the narrator but also a character in this story; without me things would not have turned out the way they did.

It was 2004 and I was enrolled in a teacher training course in the English and Geography Departments of

the University of Graz, while my friend Martin was studying for a degree in Geography. We got to know each other on a hydrological field trip, during which we both showed great interest in the flow regimes of Styrian mountain streams and the effect of fermented beverages on evening Geography sessions. So it was that, during the journey back to Graz, our professor, an older man with a strict look about him (but a good eye for young talent) who was on the verge of retirement, called us to the front of the bus, praising our diligence and our dedication, and offered us positions as his research assistants. We accepted gratefully since this would secure our evenings in our second alma mater – an inn at the edge of the St. Leonhard district – at least financially.

One's student years can sometimes throw up surprising stories. We were two ambitious yet playful students who spent our days in the university library or the classrooms and our evenings in the aforementioned inn, over beer, cider and discussions about philosophy, women and the meaning of life. We drank and philosophised at length, learnt quickly and rested little, at least until the final period, when the final seminars, exams and dissertations loomed. At some point during this final phase of our merry student life, my friend appeared to lose his passion for Geography and all things academic (except for the bar on the edge of town). He no longer appeared in the Institute straight after breakfast, but rather towards noon. I was already working on my dissertation, but he stopped preparing even seminar papers. I referred to it often – my tone sometimes friendly, sometimes understanding, sometimes reproachful – but his reply was always the same: he saw no point in his studies and there were more interesting things to do. Why should he bother typing

out papers that nobody was interested in and would never read?

"There must be more to life!" Martin mused.

"Such as?" I answered, expecting something profound. He merely shook his head and said, "I don't know".

Luckily, I had just sat an exam on the American novel and had a certain book in mind that would surely provide relief and advice to my confused and despondent classmate: *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville. As Franz Kafka, that great novelist from Prague, once said, "a book must be like an axe, to break up the frozen sea within us". The sea would also play a significant role in my friend's story.

In this particular story, the great American novel is more than just a novel: it is first aid, medicine and therapy. You are probably familiar with the plot – the narrator, Ishmael, confused and tired of life, feels an irrepressible urge to go to sea, to escape his melancholy and taste adventure. He ends up aboard the *Pequod*, a whaling ship with a driven and enigmatic captain who is intent on killing a legendary white whale. One evening in late autumn I took Martin my own copy of this novel, one that I was more than a little proud of, since I had annotated it carefully wherever I found the digressions on philosophy and natural history to be particularly thoughtful.

In the days that followed I saw my friend only seldom, and when I did, he appeared deep in thought yet somehow relaxed, and always with a roguish smile about his lips. I had hit the mark with this book, he told me: "I love this book!" I remember his exact words, since he rarely used the word "love", either for his studies or for women – the only exception being his sailing boat. Towards the end of the semester – it was late January, and we were sitting around a table in

good company in our usual inn – he made an announcement that left us speechless with amazement: “After my studies I’m going to become a sea captain!”

I knew where he’d got this daydream from, and said, with some cynicism, “Moby Dick is dead!”

“You are making a huge mistake,” he retorted. He told me I need not worry about him, since he did not want to be a whaler; after finishing his studies and some additional training at the maritime college in Cuxhaven, he planned to sign up with a container shipping company. He was drawn to the world’s seas, all seven of them, and contended that a container ship offered him the most direct path – “you need to try and keep up with the times!”

I was stunned and baffled, just like the rest of the assembled company, including the waitress who was just serving us some beer. Our friend Martin seemed to think that the route to the captain’s cabin on a container ship was just a walk in the park!

Fast forward seven years to December 2011. By then I was working as a secondary school teacher, and coming home one afternoon I found a postcard from Namibia: “Best wishes, a hearty toast and a wistful smile to the home that I carry in my heart although I do not miss it. Keep your chin up and Merry Christmas!”

Martin had made it and made good on his promise of seven years ago – the promise we had greeted with astonishment, support and not a little condescension. He completed his Geography studies with reasonable success – despite everything – only to move to Cuxhaven a few weeks after his graduation ceremony, in order to “grab” another degree from the maritime college there and finally – after numerous internships and assignments with various shipping companies –

travel the world as the second officer on a container ship. Last week Spain, today Namibia, next week Hong Kong.

I met up with Martin a couple of months ago, during my summer holidays in Hamburg, and asked him, as you do when you haven't seen someone for a while, "Are you happy? Your search for happiness seems to be based on a novel about a white whale."

"You are wrong, my friend. Moby Dick is not a whale. Moby Dick is a symbol, a mystery, and Melville devotes a whole chapter to its beauty and purity. Christians might call it the search for God. I call it the search for truth and beauty."

This insight into the symbolism of the whale was familiar to me from undergraduate seminars, but my friend's next revelation was not. When I asked him whether he had considered that this striving for truth might lead to a tragic end, like that of Captain Ahab, he replied in a lofty manner, and with an eloquence better suited to a professor of literature, "Ahab is obsessed with finding and killing Moby Dick and with establishing himself as the conqueror of the divine. Not even the loss of his leg can change his absurd mindset. But I do not want to conquer truth and beauty, I do not even want to find them; as long as I am looking for them, I can sail the worlds' oceans. This is my own personal vision of happiness!"

I was impressed and moved by this statement and by the thought that literature continues to do that which, in the best-case scenario, it always does, and that which is its most essential function: *prodesse et delectare* – to instruct and to delight, and above all the former! It was clear to Herman Melville at its first publication that his monumental work *Moby Dick* would not be an immediate success, but he was convinced that the novel

was profound enough for his readers to ultimately lose themselves in it. And this is just what happened to my friend: without the insights he obtained by reading this great novel he would never have become aware of what it means to travel by sea. He might never have enrolled in the maritime college and would not now be enjoying his nomadic life on the world's oceans. The white whale is "unslayable" because it is not a whale. Moreover, white is the colour of infinity, purity and silence. And so of course my friend was right, seven years ago, when I insisted on the death of the white leviathan in that casual, cynical, ignorant – and flippant – way, and he replied somewhat angrily, "you're making a mistake!" Today this makes me extraordinarily glad.