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MBS ([00:00](#)):

If you listen to this podcast, and obviously you do, I have to believe that you love books. You love stories, you love reading. So my question for you is, do you remember where and when that seed got planted? Do you remember when you went, "Oh. Oh, this is a magical portal. I love this. I love books. I love to read"?

MBS ([00:25](#)):

I do. And that's what I want to celebrate in this episode of the podcast.

MBS ([00:32](#)):

Welcome to 2 Pages with MBS. This is the podcast where brilliant people read the best two pages from a favorite book, a book that has moved them, a book that has shaped them. And today it's a solo episode.



MBS ([00:46](#)):

I think this is probably the first solo episode I've done. It's also the hundredth episode of the podcast. It's not the hundredth interview, because we've had a few from the archives, from the Vaults series, but it is our hundredth episode. So hurrah, celebrating that.

MBS ([01:03](#)):

And I thought I would celebrate it by talking about some of the books, or certainly one of the books, that was the starting point of the journey for me. And it's really appropriate that I'm recording it here and now. I'm actually in Australia as I record this. I'm literally in my childhood bedroom.

MBS ([01:24](#)):

This is where I hid under the covers at night with a little torch, trying to read the books that I wanted to read. And the truth is, I was a fast reader early on. I was reading before I was five and went to primary school. And unlike some kids, where you have to really struggle and learn to read, apparently, I just picked it up and I'm like, "Oh, I love this" right from the start.

MBS ([01:52](#)):

Now, it almost got extinguished. Just down the road, it's about 150 yard walk down the road from where I live here in Torrens. Torrens is a suburb of Canberra. I'm a kind of driven first child, want to achieve, love learning.

MBS ([02:11](#)):

So I was doing okay at primary school, but Mrs. Sibley was the librarian at the Torrens Primary School library. She might have liked books. She certainly liked order and control. She certainly disliked kids liking books. So it was a perpetual battle, it felt like, between me and Mrs. Sibley. And did she almost extinguish my love of reading? Well, that's probably overstating it, but she was a barrier to me learning to love and to read books early on.



MBS ([02:43](#)):

But when I think of the books that shaped me, I'm thinking of some series' of books that I kind of vanished into. There's a series called All Creatures Great and Small. It's about a city vet from England, moving up to Yorkshire, and kind of finding his way and telling stories around that. Enid Blyton. I was huge on Enid Blyton for a long time. The Famous Four... no, the Fantastic Four... No, the something four, and then the Famous Five and then The Faraway Tree, I remember reading The Faraway Tree, which I suspect isn't even available anymore. Because it's almost certainly racist and sexist, but it was incredible in terms of opening my mind in terms of what a fantastical other world was about.

MBS ([03:28](#)):

But if I had to pick one author where I went, this is extraordinary. It would be J.R.R. Tolkien, author of The Hobbit, author of The Lord of the Rings. And one of the treats of becoming a Rhode scholar and going to Oxford University to study was that my wife, girlfriend, now my wife, she actually went to Merton College, which was the college where Tolkien was at.

MBS ([03:56](#)):

So we would go into the gardens of Merton College. And that's where he wrote Lord of the Rings. And then he would meet up with his pal C.S. Lewis, Narnia series, in the, what do they call it, The Eagle and Child pub, in Oxford, where they would talk and share their stories. Eagle and Child, we call it the Bird and Babe, or the Foul and the Fetus and all sorts of nicknames, but it was kind of magical to be wandering the gardens and thinking, "Wow, these old trees, these look like Ents." So I thought for the 2 pages that I would read to celebrate where the roots of loving stories and loving reading really began, in terms of books at least, because I'm also remembering that in... this actually wasn't my bedroom then, it was the bedroom next door, where I sat with my brother Nigel, my dad would tell great stories.



MBS ([04:53](#)):

So that was another place where stories were planted. And I talked about it that in a recent episode as well. I'm going to read from The Fellowship of the Ring. So the first book of The Lord of the Rings trilogy, The Lord of the Rings series. And this is the book I read. For those of you who are seeing the video, you'll see that it's an old copy. It's the Unwin edition from 1974.

MBS ([05:23](#)):

I've got a price here, in the UK only the price of this book, 75 Pence, not even a pound. 75% in the UK only. So we might have actually bought this in the UK because in 1975, this is the one big trip my family took. We left Australia and went to England, my dad's English.

MBS ([05:47](#)):

So we went back to Oxford and back to visit my grandpa and granny, Bob and Maida. Maida actually is a writer. So I feel like me as a writer, I've inherited that from her. Actually named my first company after her. It's called Maida CC. But anyway, that's the background. Let me read the opening pages of this. I'm going to start with the opening poem that sets the biggest scene. The Lord of the Rings J.R.R. Tolkien. First published in 1954. This is a 1974 edition with amazing illustrations and runes that Tolkien built into the design.

MBS ([06:34](#)):

Three rings for the Elvin Kings under the sky. Seven for the dwarf Lords and the halls of stone. Nine for mortal men doomed to die. One for the dark Lord on his dark throne, in the land of Mordor where the shadows lie. One ring to rule them all, one ring, to find them. One ring, to bring them all and in the darkness bind them. The Lord of mortal, where the shadows lie. Oh my goodness, what a start? It's like, I don't even know what that's all about, but my mind is already blown. And when we move to book one chapter one, which is, the title's called a long expected party. Part of what I appreciate about this edition in particular is



you got Tolkien's maps that he's hand drawn as part of his extraordinary world creation. A long expected party.

MBS ([07:35](#)):

When Mr. Bilbo Baggins of Bag End announced that he would shortly be celebrating his eleventy-first birthday with a party of special magnificence, there was much talk and excitement in Hobbiton. Bilbo was very rich and very peculiar and had been the wonder of the Shire for 60 years, ever since his remarkable disappearance and unexpected return.

MBS ([07:59](#)):

The riches he had brought back from his travels had now become a local legend and it was popularly believed, whatever the old folks might say, that the hill at Bag End was full of tunnels stuffed with treasure. And if that was not enough for fame, there was also his prolonged vigor to marvel at. Time wore on, but it seemed to have very little effect on Mr. Baggins. At 90, he was much the same as at 50, at 99, they began to call him well preserved, but unchanged would've been near the mark. There were some that shook their heads and thought, hmm, this was too much of a good thing. It seemed unfair that anyone should possess apparently perpetual youth, as well as reputedly inexhaustible wealth. It will have to be paid for, they said. It isn't natural and trouble will come of it.

MBS ([08:57](#)):

What a set up. What I love about this, and I'll keep reading in a minute, is, how quickly we've gone from The Hobbit, which was such a great kid's story and contained. And we're now 60 years down the path Bilbo is already being set up as a kind of a mentor figure. He's the transition from the old story, but this line, I mean, this is the line that sets up the whole story. It will have to be paid for. It isn't natural and trouble will come of it. So good.



MBS ([09:31](#)):

But so far trouble had not come. And as Mr. Baggins was generous with his money, most people were willing to forgive him his oddities and his good fortune. He remained on visiting turns with his relatives, except of course the Sackville-Bagginses. And he had many devoted admirers among the Hobbits of poor and unimportant families, but he had no close friends, until some of his younger cousins began to grow up. The eldest of these and Bilbo's favorite was young Frodo Baggins. When Bilbo was 99, he adopted Frodo as his heir, and brought him to live at Bag End. And the hopes of the Sackville-Bagginses were finally dashed. Bilbo and Frodo happened to have the same birthday, September 22nd.

MBS ([10:21](#)):

"You had better come and live here, Frodo my lad", said Bilbo one day. "And then we can celebrate our birthday parties comfortably together". At the time Frodo was still in his tweens, as the hobbits called that irresponsible period between childhood and coming of age at 33. 12 more years passed. Each year, the Bagginses are given very lively, combined birthday parties at Bag End, but now it was understood that something quite exceptional was being planned for that Autumn. Bilbo was going to be eleventy-one, 111, a rather curious number and a very respectable age for any hobbit. Old Took himself had only reached 130. And Frodo was going to be 33. 33, an important number, the date of his coming of age.

MBS ([11:14](#)):

Tongues began to wag in Hobbiton and Bywater and rumor of the coming event traveled all over the Shire. The history and character of Mr. Bilbo Baggins became once again, the chief topic of conversation and the older folks suddenly found their reminiscences in welcome demand. No one had a more attentive audience than old hand Gamgee. Commonly known as The Gaffer. He held forth at the Ivy Bush, a small inn on the Bywater road, and he spoke with some



authority for, he had tendered the garden at Bag End for 40 years, and had helped old Holman in the same job before that. Now that he himself was growing old, and stiff in the joints, the job was mainly carried on by his younger son, Sam Gamgee. Both father and son were on very friendly terms with Bilbo and Frodo. They lived on the hill itself, at number three Bagshot row, just below Bag End.

MBS ([12:09](#)):

"A very nice, well spoken, gentle Hobbit is Mr. Bilbo", as I've always said, The Gaffer declared. It was perfect truth, for Bilbo was very polite to him, calling him Master Hamfast and consulting him constantly on the growing of vegetables. In the matter of roots, especially potatoes, The Gaffer was recognized as the leading authority by all the neighborhood, including himself.

MBS ([12:34](#)):

"But what about this Frodo that lives with him?" Asked Old Noakes of the Bywater. "Baggins is his name, but he's more than half a Brandybuck they say. Beats me why any Baggins of Hobbiton should go looking for a wife away there in Buckland where folk are so queer". "And no wonder they're queer". Put in Daddy Twofoot, the gaffer's next door neighbor. "If they live on the wrong side of the Brandywine river and right again the old forest, Ooh, that's a dark bad place, if half the tales be true". "You're right, dad". Said The Gaffer. "Not that the Brandybucks of Buckland live in the old forest, but they're a queer brand seemingly. They fool about with boats on that big river. And that isn't natural, small wonder that trouble came of it, I say, but be it as it may, Mr. Frodo is as nice a young Hobbit as you could wish to meet. Very much like Mr. Bilbo, and in more than looks. After all, his father was a Baggins, a decent, respectable Hobbit, that was Mr. Drogo Baggins. There was never much to tell of him until he drowned".



MBS ([13:42](#)):

That is the first two pages of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Just, I haven't read this book for decades. So I'm just loving, first of all, the language, it's so beautifully written, but also just the setup, the play it small, play it safe, ooh, it's dangerous by the river. It's dangerous by the forest, they're queer folks.

MBS ([14:05](#)):

And just that parochialism that Tolkien is seeing. And in some ways celebrating, he was such a champion actually for that kind of, the old way of living, the conservative way of living, having been scarred by the industrial brutality of World War II. But you also can feel the sense of adventure beginning to call, the hero's journey where the hero is called across the threshold. Like she, or he resists to the call, but finally goes on the adventure. Well, you can feel that we're on the other side of the threshold right now.

MBS ([14:44](#)):

What this book did for me was twofold, I think. I think it gave me permission to imagine. And that in itself is a pretty extraordinary gift. You know, I write nonfiction books now, but I read a large amount of fiction. And partly I love the books that take me into another world. I love movies, particularly, if it's a trilogy of movies, I love the first movie because it's where the world creation gets going. And this idea of, there are multiple universes, multiple worlds,§ allows me to be skeptical of this world. You know, part of the bigger work that I try and do at [mbs.works](#) and also through [boxofcrowns.com](#) as well is to be thinking about how do I try and make this world better? How do I improve it? How do I resist the status quo and the way power and privilege and hierarchy and expectations and distribution and unfairness happens. And I do feel that there's something about reading fiction and seeing how other words are imagined, that allows me to say, so I can imagine a different world as part of that.





MBS ([16:06](#)):

And I think the other way that this book has influenced me is probably just the insight, that, the way you become a good writer is twofold. You read a lot and you write a lot. You need to read to learn how other people write, how masters of the game write to develop their skill, to develop their strength, to develop their voice, to know how to write with an elegance and a pace that moves people through a story. And you need to write, you need to keep writing because the way to become a good writer is to be a bad writer, first of all. And I think this is just one of those early examples of, for me as a child, reading an adult book, a book written by an adult for adults, not just for adults, but definitely for adults and just going I'm having one of the first layers laid down of, this is what good writing looks like. This is what adventure looks like. This is what pace looks like.

MBS ([17:08](#)):

I think that's it. Thank you for being part of 2 Pages with MBS. It is a joy to do this podcast. I seek out amazing people who inevitably choose thoroughly interesting books. So I feel like in just being the person on this side of the microphone, I get to talk to wonderful people. And I get to hear about books that, A, I might know, but I haven't considered through a particular lens before.

MBS ([17:38](#)):

More often, quite frankly, books that I don't know. And I have a pile of honestly, unread books, mostly from this podcast, which I am inspired by, but thank you for being a listener to it. I mean, I would do this perhaps even without any listeners, but having listeners makes me feel better about it. Thank you for all you've done to support it, whether that's through a review or passing an episode on, or emailing me a nice note or giving it a boost on social media, however you might have championed this in some way. And even if that way is purely and only by listening to the episodes that in itself is all I could ask for. You're awesome. And you're doing great.