

# SPECIAL FEATURE

## FIVE BOOKS THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

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*Invisible Man*, by Ralph Ellison

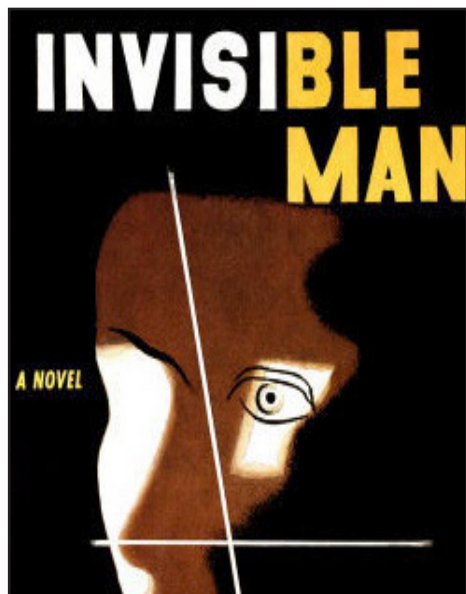


Photo courtesy of candlesbook.com

In 1981, my sophomore year at Georgetown, I read this epic 1952 novel during spring break, barely pausing to eat or sleep. Ellison's mas-

terwork displays the nameless narrator's deepening despair as one form of racism after another strips away all his illusions. There's the battle royal scene when drunk white townsmen force black students to fight blindfolded for a single college scholarship. There's the narrator's briefly-held job making paint for the exterior of the U.S. Capitol building, a perfect shade of white whose purity comes from the presence of ten drops of black coloring absorbed and erased within the mixture. There's the stunning revelation when the narrator grasps that the white leaders of the radical Brotherhood movement have been using him as a token spokesperson.

*Invisible Man's* brilliance inspired me to learn more about the role of literature in the African-American freedom struggle and turned me into an English major.

*The Light From Another Country: Poetry from American Prisons*, edited by Joseph Bruchac

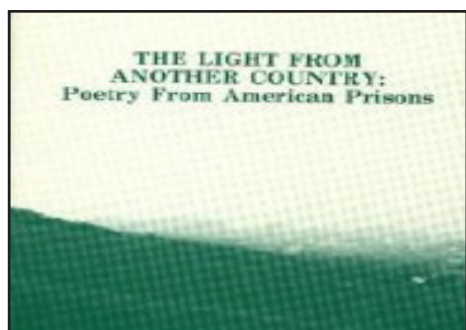


Photo courtesy of amazon.com

In 1986-87 I taught classes in two prisons — and met courageous students who dedicated themselves to keeping

their minds alive within the belly of the beast. Through that, I stumbled upon Bruchac's little-known anthology containing hundreds of poems from prison. The writing was striking, honest, and often beautiful. For these women and men, poetry provided a weapon against the assault on dignity that all prisons carry out. Just like other poets, writers such as Carolyn Baxter and Jimmy Santiago Baca explored vast topics like love, hope, friendship, injustice, and nature. This book called me to pursue a Ph.D. and write a dissertation on the captive voice — writing that reaches for freedom within conditions of confinement.

*The Circuit*, by Francisco Jiménez

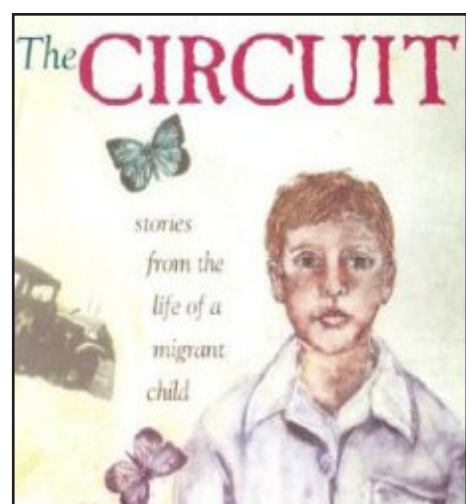


Photo courtesy of amazon.com

Jiménez was a legendary professor of Ethnic Studies at Santa Clara University, and this collection of short stories and vignettes is a memoir of his childhood. I first read it in 2004 while developing a course called The Needs of Newcomers, in which my students tutored and mentored newly-arrived immigrant children in Washington, DC.

In clear, poignant prose, the book shows a child's perspective as a loving family of undocumented migrant

workers circles the state of California harvesting crops for subsistence wages. For years on end, they possess nothing except their love, labor and hope — and belief in the American Dream. Francisco can only attend school periodically, but truly loves learning. The book makes plain the child's stress and shame of not grasping the teacher's English words while being told to his face that Spanish is bad.

It's painful reading — but it opens the heart and puts on the page problems children can't easily convey. Through it all, we see how family, faith, and Mexican culture give the Jiménezes both dignity and joy in deprivation. This book made me want to teach from it. I've now done so more than ten times and always learn something new from my students' responses.

*The Circuit* ends tragically, as Immigration officers pull Francisco from 8th grade just as, having learned English, he's proudly reciting the Declaration of Independence. But the larger narrative is uplifting; eventually the little boy returned to America and became a celebrated Santa Clara professor.



Photo courtesy of fandm.edu

*Wit*, by Margaret Edson



Photo courtesy of charlottecultureguide.com

Winner of the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, *Wit* tells the story of Dr. Vivian Bearing, a majestic and friendless scholar of 16th century poetry as she deals with Stage IV ovarian cancer. I read the script in 1997, my first year as an assistant professor of English at Georgetown. The play shows how Professor Bearing bases her identity and self-worth on being a rigorous teacher and towering scholar. But how durable is this foundation as death comes near? Reading Edson's superb work early in my academic career was a gift — and a warning.

*Goodnight, Moon*, by Margaret Wise Brown



Photo courtesy of harpercollins.com

*In the great green room  
There was a telephone  
And a red balloon  
And a picture of  
The cow jumping over the moon*

How many times did I recite these words at bedtime to one of my three daughters? For all the books I've read over five decades, none approaches the moral resonance of Margaret Wise Brown's evocative 1947 classic.

When we become parents, our lives change forever. Our children become our calling. They are helpless miracles, depending fully upon us. We are theirs, and they are ours.

*Goodnight, Moon* does the parental work of making young children feel safe enough to sleep. Within that great green

room, simple and secure, there's a fire to keep them warm, mush to eat, a comb for grooming, balloons and toy bears for fun. There's artwork, mittens and kittens, and a quiet old lady whispering "hush." The quiet rhythms of the text suggest order and coherence, a secular prayer. And so it concludes,

*... Goodnight stars  
Goodnight air  
Good night noises everywhere*

If the children feel secure, we parents see a larger picture. Beyond the great green room, it's actually dark and wintry. There are mice in the room, invaders from outside. The old lady is, well, "old" — and her image vanishes from the room when we wish her goodnight. Has she left the room, or left the living?

*Goodnight, Moon* hints at scary realities and then resolves them so the children can nod off. But what about the adult readers? Sadly, life has taught us too much. When we whisper the book's final lines, and invoke the vast cosmos that's ultimately indifferent to our children's little lives, it may not be so easy for us to close our eyes.

In these times, as a friend once wrote, we parents aren't actually holding our babies. They're holding us.