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On the Haunted Lives of Girls and Women

Rachel Eve Moulton Considers the Way Horror is Housed in the Body

By Rachel Eve Moulton

September 17, 2019

At Antioch College in the mid 90s, two courses taught by the fabulous Marianne Whelchel shaped my fascination with feminist literature—specifically the "haunted house." Not the kind I'd seen in Scooby Doo cartoons, with strategically set up movie projectors and furniture rigged with puppet strings. A real haunted house is a place where a person or people have suffered in silence.

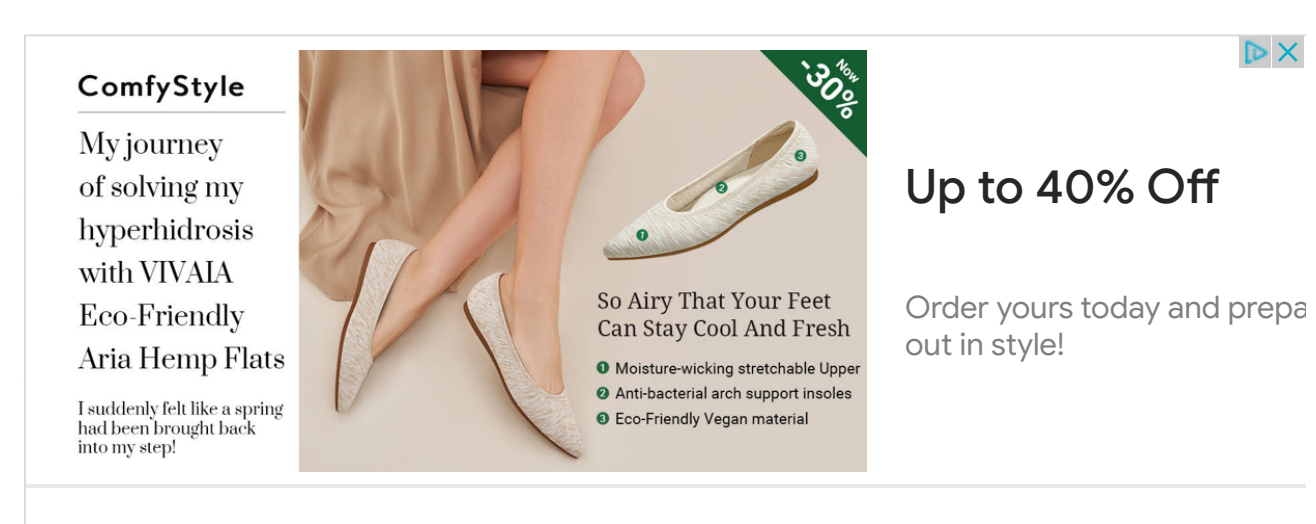
Whelchel was a tall, thin woman with no-bullshit brown eyes, graying hair, and a quiet laugh that made the saddest of topics possible to discuss. We studied works by Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood and Toni Morrison—*The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, *The Good Terrorist*, *Cat's Eye* and *Handmaid's Tale*—all famous, all life-changing. But my favorite assignment was exploring the lives of women whose stories had not been told.

In the college's archives, we found journals and correspondence from a diverse group of women who shaped the town. I interviewed my maternal grandmother and her three sisters and learned of the miscarriages their mother suffered—five, total—and how perhaps this is why she died of a "weak heart" at 40. We talked about birth control or the lack of it, my grandmother's desire to be a gymnast, and the ice rink they'd made in their backyard each winter.

> Women, I believe, are better suited to understand what the haunted house, and horror more generally, does best.

Yet, even in their most intimate stories, I heard an echo of the unspoken, the haunted house in which their stories still lived. I listened for what voices needed to be heard. The haunting resided not just in themselves, in their memories, but also in the history of a particular place—a house, an island, a mountain range where the past is so rich with hurt that it can't help but tangle itself with the present.

I wrote my first novel in middle school—*Children of the House*—about a family who moves into a haunted house that has a persistent blood stain on the hallway rug. It was my first attempt at exploring the unspoken stories that I perceived in my hometown. We had an actual abandoned brick home that I would bike past regularly to get to my best friend's house. With tall blank windows and punched-in roof, it sat back from the road behind tangles of weeds, ivy clogging its mortar. In the few times I was brave enough to sneak up on it, I peered inside the windows to see what life had been left behind. Books on shelves. A dining room table listing to one side. A pile of cloth on the floor. A kitchen cupboard cracked open to reveal dishes piled up carefully like vertebrae.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Our small town's population maxed at 4,000. I was raised on its lore—its haunted houses both literal and figurative. As a child it seemed to me that there was always something I wasn't being told; the flat line of my mother's mouth indicating a story too painful to articulate. The town's haunted house was an obvious mystery, but there were plenty of others, smaller and less visible, even less structurally sound. The broken pile of dishes in my girlfriend's kitchen trash can. The neighbor woman who always had greening bruises on her upper arms. The old widow down the street who invited us to see her collection of snake skins and bird bones. The drawer I wasn't allowed to look in in a friend's rolltop desk. She, I'd understand much later, was the first of us to menstruate and didn't want me to see the feminine hygiene products stored there—it was a humiliation that we could not yet share.

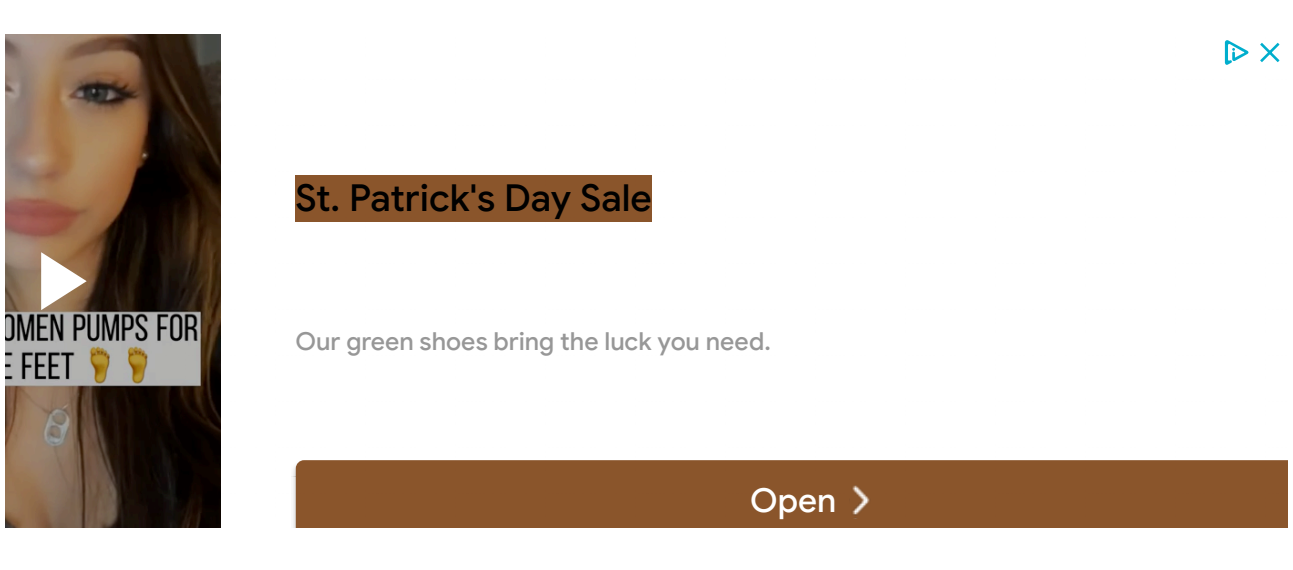
Women, I believe, are better suited to understand what the haunted house, and horror more generally, does best—it manipulates reality to amplify the everyday terror women go through against the power of what it means to be female. We make our homes in bodies that bleed once a month, a gift that brings life, and yet we are told that this body, this shedding of lining is fundamentally disgusting and best ignored. Our orgasms are mysterious and unimportant. The idea that we'd fabricate a story about our body being abused is far more believable than the story itself. Our bodies are the horror show. The ghosts we see are not real. As a woman, what you understand to be true and right could easily be contorted until it is a shape you barely recognize, and in this way, the world can legitimately call you crazy.

> Tell the haunted house's story. Listen to it again and again, especially when it hurts.

Those who identify as female know what it means to be hushed, medicated, erased. In her landmark novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina,* Dorothy Allison writes about the interior—a haunting that violence brings to a life, a story that runs parallel to me with Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*. In each, "ghosts" are forced to occupy the same space again and again, sharing their sorrow with the living. Although *Cowboys Are My Weakness* by Pam Houston might not be classified as feminist horror, to me it sets up the same paradigm: how the ghouls from childhood follow us forward and shape future decisions—good and bad. How is that not a haunting? We women build our haunted houses from remnants handed to us at birth—and the privileges or lack of privilege that came with them. They are constructed on the backs of the secrets we keep about our bodies, how we use them, and how they are used.

To me, the haunted house lurks not on the edge of a normal town, but as a memory, a place, or a time so violently quieted that it comes back at us again and again. Marginalized cultures know this best. Their lives are not worth as much. Their perception of their own circumstances is not reliable. Women, as one example, have been told that what we see is not real. That what we value needs to match the dominate culture.

My grandmother and her sisters laughed and chortled and spoke matter-of-factly about marriage and babies and sexuality. But there are plenty of things they did not say. It's those stories that are the haunted places, they remember even when we don't or won't. The land knows. The house we built up out of it remembers. On a long-ago road trip around the country, we stopped first at my grandmother's house outside of Detroit—it was balanced on top of a great ravine into which her driveway was crumbling. My grandmother kept her external space neat. It smelled of small, rose shaped soaps. She never saw the need to tell the unheard stories, the messier ones, but I could find hints even in her carefully sculpted home. The remnants of her husband—my grandfather—who died too young at 50.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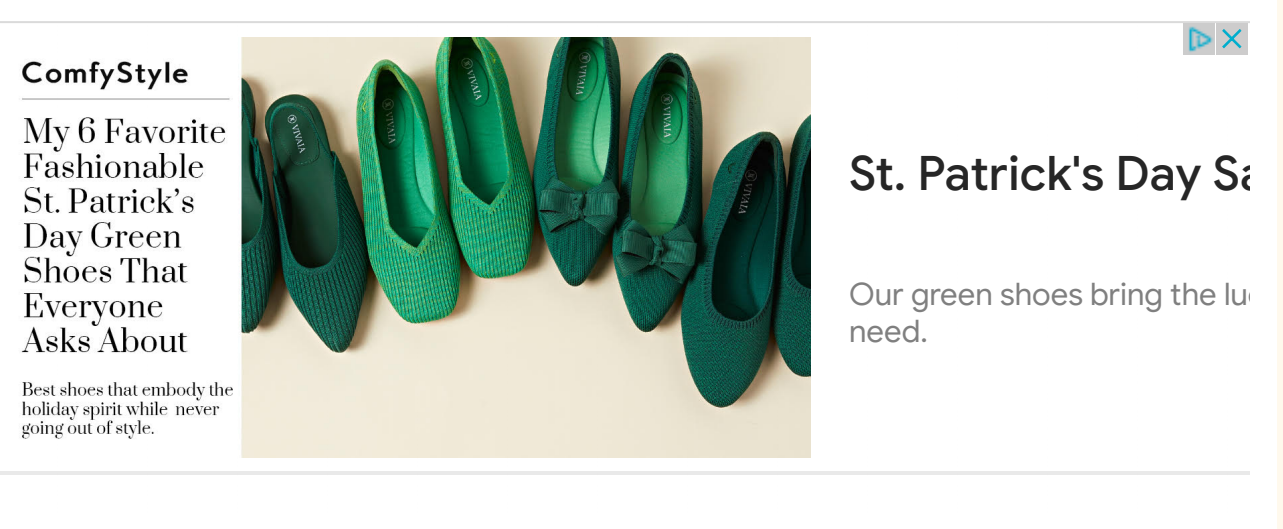
His drawings not heartfelt but careful and full of potential. Her second partner, who lived much longer and louder, his downstairs bar left as is, complete with red shag carpet long after he died of cancer. The Jesus in the upstairs hall that cried oily hot tears, a reminder of the Catholicism that had terrified my mother as a child. My grandmother had done a lot in her life; she'd been brave, raised kids and worked full-time at a bank. She'd had some version of it all, but society had also molded her to fit its shape. Her high heels were the greatest physical evidence of this for me. When not on her feet, they sat at the top of the stairs—worn so frequently and without an alternate that her tendons had grown tight and short, keeping her stride shallow and her ability to change minimal. It has always made me wonder if I'll notice the traps set for me and my generation, the constraints I have taken for granted, not ever trying to disrupt them.

A year ago, my family moved to New Mexico not 30 minutes, I now know, from Jeffrey Epstein's ranch—a haunted house in the making if not already made. Atrocities committed against women, those we do to ourselves, the ones we pass on to our daughters and granddaughters, and the ones we ignore do not go away even when we bend our own bodies to fit the mold provided. They hibernate, sometimes in plain sight. They find a way to rise back up out of the earth to be seen and claimed as real, worth talking about. Stories fighting to be told.

I would argue that the safest way to live, particularly as a cisgender, white woman, is to look at the horror. As a reader, I want to live in the haunted house. As a feminist writer, I want to do even more: flip over its objects, give it life, and follow the path to reveal all its dark secrets. Tell its story. Listen to it again and again, especially when it hurts.

TINFOIL
BUTTERFLY
A NOVEL
RACHEL EVE
MOULTON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My 6 Favorite Fashionable St. Patrick's Day Green Shoes That Everyone Asks About
Best shoes that embody the holiday spirit while never going out of style.
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Rachel Eve Moulton's novel, The Tinfoil Butterfly is now available from Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

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Rachel Eve Moulton

Rachel Eve Moulton earned her BA from Antioch College and her MFA in fiction from Emerson College. Her work has appeared in *The Beacon Street Review, Bellowing Ark, Chicago Quarterly Review,* and *The Bryant Literary Review,* among other publications. *Tinfoil Butterfly* is her first novel.

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3 years ago
Brilliant article. Thank you!
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Star Wisher
4 years ago
This is gorgeous writing and I love the message. I treasure these words. Thank you.
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msyvnl
4 years ago
Everyone, including women, needs to stop vying for the patent to human suffering. That belongs to children of all ethnicities. Children are completely denfensless. Growing up they don't exist in haunted homes, they grow up in homes inhabited by ghouls. So to the author I say " Get over yourself."
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Robin Voves ➦ msyvnl
3 years ago
That conveniently ignores the fact that female children grow up to be female adults. A lot of women were targeted and abused as children, simply because of their gender, and this is a part of the haunting carried in women's bodies that the author refers to. At the very least they're socialized differently from their male counterparts as children in a way that has a lasting and frequently detrimental (and well documented)

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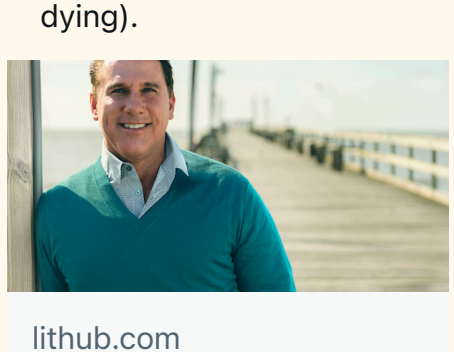
Ayn Rand's "Atlas Shrugged" was published 61 years ago today, and since then has served as an excellent way to weed out potential romantic partners.
407 43K

Literary H... · Jun 13, 2019
Nicholas Sparks believes marriage is between one teenage man and one teenage woman (who is dying).



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Nicholas Sparks tried to prevent a "gay club" at th...
268 13K

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3K 7K

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RIP to the great Beverly Cleary, who taught girls to embrace their "too muchness."

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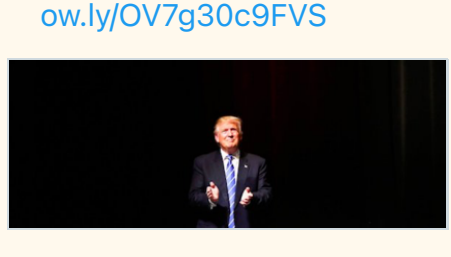
How Ramona Quimby Taught a Generation of ...
51 7K

Literary H... · May 30, 2017
Rebecca Solnit on the corrosive privilege of Donald Trump, the most mocked man in the world. ow.ly/lOV7g30c9FVS



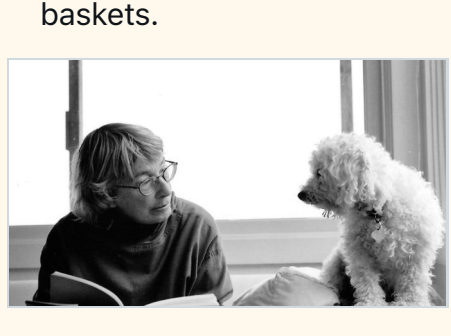
215 5K

Literary H... · Nov 9, 2018
(_/)
(•.•)
/ >❤ u want this?

(_/)
(•.•)
❤<\ never ask me how the writing is going.
18 5K

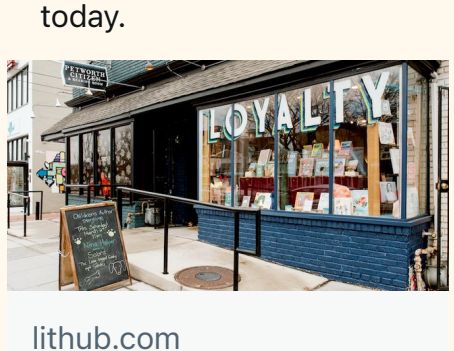
Literary H... · Jan 17, 2019
"Poetry isn't a profession, it's a way of life. It's an empty basket; you put your life into it and make something out of that."

RIP Mary Oliver, filler of baskets.



27 4K

Literary H... · Jun 3, 2020
Support Black-owned independent bookstores today.



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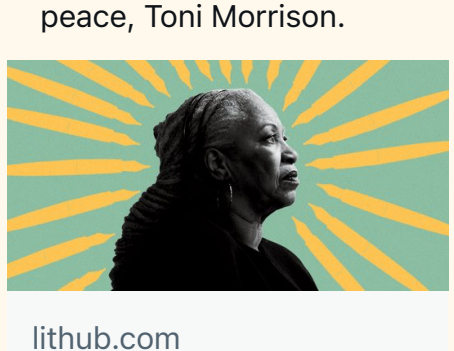
You can order today from these black-owned ...
38 4K

Literary H... · Feb 4, 2019
Meanwhile, women in publishing are like "Should I put that I'm proficient in Excel when I'm only intermediate?"
25 4K

Literary H... · Aug 6, 2019
"Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge." Rest in peace, Toni Morrison.



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"You Don't Know Anything." And Other Writing Advice...
7 3K

Literary H... · Feb 3, 2019
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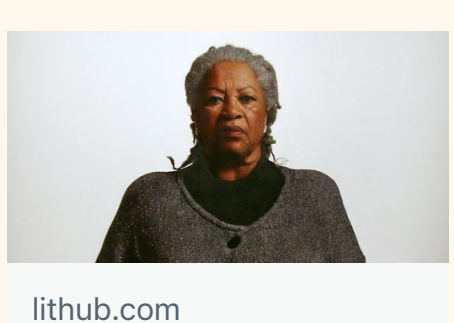
ooks?
60 3K

Literary H... · Aug 6, 2019
"[S]omebody said, 'What advice would you give to young writers?' and I said, 'Start at 40.'"



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Toni Morrison on Reality TV, Black Lives Matter, an...
21 3K

Literary H... · Mar 7, 2019
Please know that if you tweet something unkind at us, we will spend at least three minutes reading your other tweets aloud in the office.

It's called self-care, and it's going great.
62 2K

Literary H... · Feb 14, 2019
Happy Valentine's Day to books.

We love books.

We love them.

So much.
13 2K

Literary H... · Jan 3, 2019
RT if you agree: books.
23 2K

Literary H... · Jul 20, 2021
Tweet of the day.

… ✓ · Jul 20, 20
I prefer watching the launches of independent bookstores. They're a lot more entertaining...
12 2K

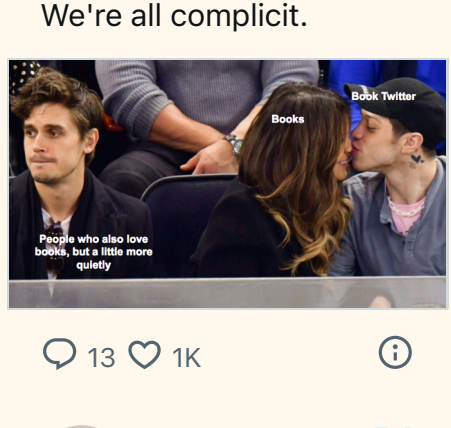
Literary H... · Feb 19, 2019
RIP Karl Lagerfeld, one of the great book hoarders of our time.

lithub.com
10 Famous Book Hoarders
34 2K

Literary H... · Mar 5, 2019
We're all complicit.

13 1K

Literary H... · Sep 18, 2019
Honestly, more poets in politics, please.



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One of Elizabeth Warren's strategists is longlisted fo...
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Literary H... · Mar 18, 2020
This is very good.

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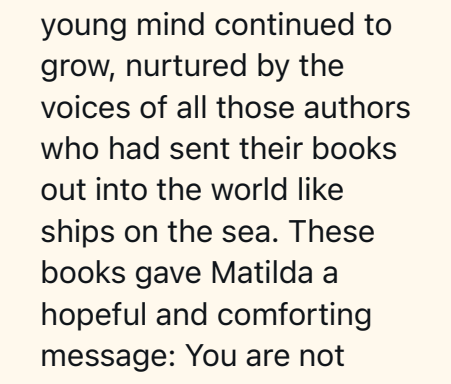
Big-hearted strangers turn Little Free Libraries into ...
11 1K

Literary H... · Sep 21, 2018
A ranking of punctuation marks based on a conversation overheard at the Lit Hub office just now:

11. You
10. can't
9. rank
8. them
7. because
6. each
5. is
4. vital
3. to
2. disambiguation
1. emdash
20 1K

Literary H... · Sep 13, 2018
"So Matilda's strong young mind continued to grow, nurtured by the voices of all those authors who had sent their books out into the world like ships on the sea. These books gave Matilda a hopeful and comforting message: You are not alone."

Happy birthday, Roald Dahl!



7 1K

Literary H... · Mar 6, 2020
The walk-out worked!

lithub.com
Woody Allen's memoir has been cancelled. (Proof th...
69 1K

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This is the perfect list for anyone who feels honestly a little attacked by anything with the title "30 Under 30" (✋)

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20 Debut Works of Fiction by Women Over 40
15 1K

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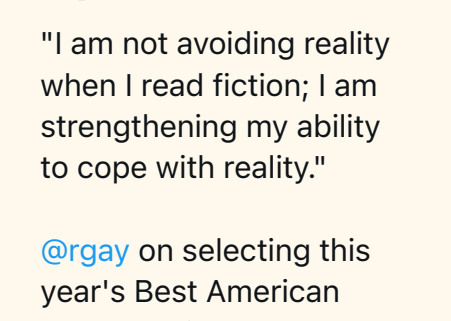
Somebody get Bernie a book!!!

10 1K

Literary H... · Oct 3, 2018
"I am not avoiding reality when I read fiction; I am strengthening my ability to cope with reality."

@rgay on selecting this year's Best American Short Stories, and what political fiction looks like now.



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Annie Proulx: "I didn't start writing until I was 58." Immediately gains love of all humans.
8 1K

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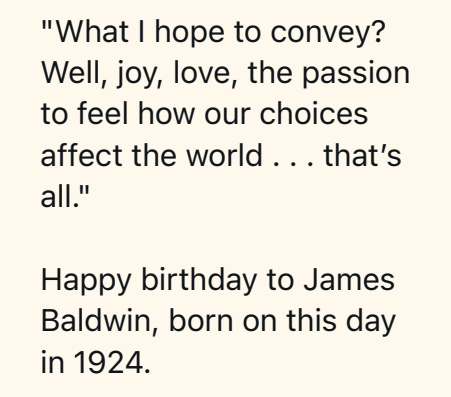
New goal: finish your novel before every insect in the world dies.
27 1K

Literary H... · Oct 15, 2019
We can admit it.

36 1K

Literary H... · Aug 2, 2019
"What I hope to convey? Well, joy, love, the passion to feel how our choices affect the world . . . that's all."

Happy birthday to James Baldwin, born on this day in 1924.



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"Write a Sentence as Clean as a Bone" And Other ...
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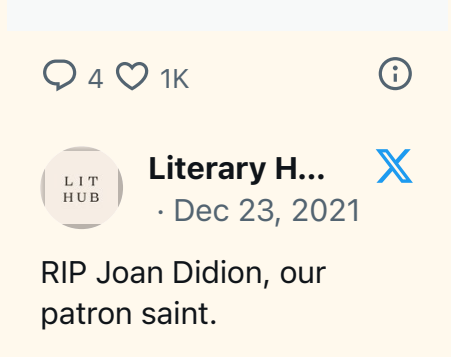
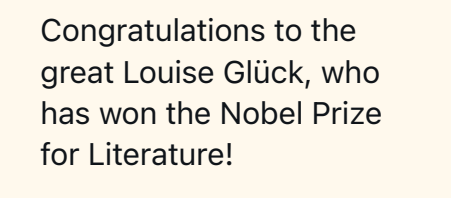
Literary H... · Dec 23, 2021
RIP Joan Didion, our patron saint.



lithub.com
Joan Didion has died at 87.
8 1K

Literary H... · Oct 8, 2020
Congratulations to the great Louise Glück, who has won the Nobel Prize for Literature!



lithub.com
Louise Glück has won the Nobel Prize for Literature.
7 1K

Literary H... · Aug 30, 2019
"Even in an age when we can buy most any book with a single click, the InterLibrary Loan system remains a beautiful creation." A brief history of the apex of human civilization.

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InterLibrary Loan Will Change Your Life
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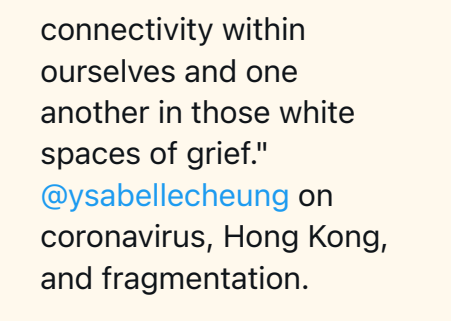
"We must find connectivity within ourselves and one another in those white spaces of grief." @ysabellecheung on coronavirus, Hong Kong, and fragmentation.



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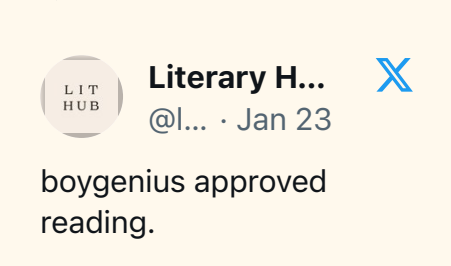
What Happens to Writing When We Stop Pretendin...
40 1K

Literary H... @l... · Jan 23
boygenius approved reading.



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The boygenius book club: 48 books the indie rocker...
5 1K

Literary H... · Apr 8, 2020
Hey, it's our 5th birthday.

42 1K

Literary H... · May 25, 2019

"I want to write until I die, and I hope to live a long time. I don't want to reach a plateau; what I am interested in is living, living."

Happy birthday to the great Jamaica Kincaid, born on this day in 1949.

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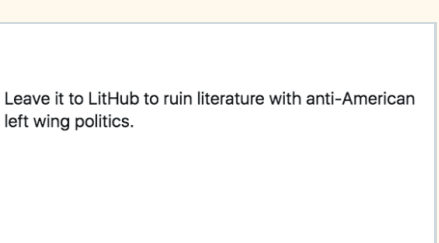
Jamaica Kincaid on How to Live and How to Write

8 ♡ 1K

Literary H... · Feb 18, 2020

SUCK IT, LITERATURE.

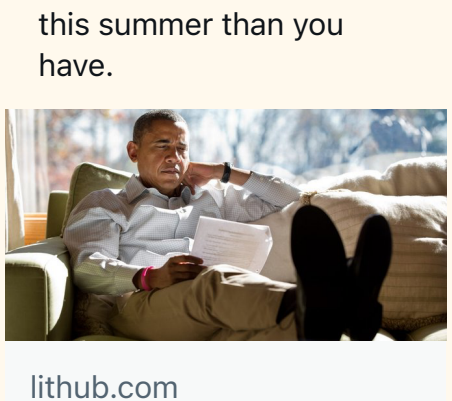


Leave it to LitHub to ruin literature with anti-American left wing politics.

19 ♡ 1K

Literary H... · Aug 14, 2019

President Obama has probably read more books this summer than you have.



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President Obama recommends Téa Obreht,...

55 ♡ 1K

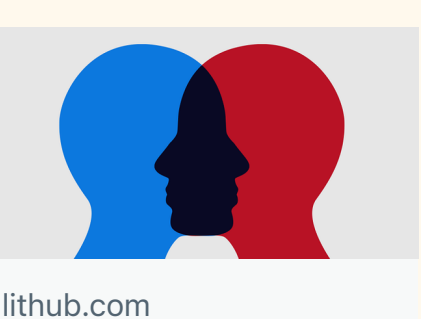
Literary H... · Oct 10, 2018

lol

5 ♡ 1K

Literary H... · Aug 8, 2018

"When we read fiction, the brain actively simulates the consciousness of another person, including those whom we would never otherwise even imagine knowing."



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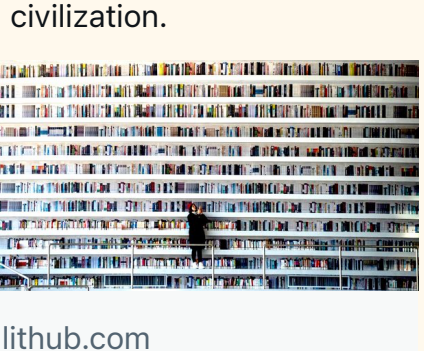
Literary H... · Jan 6, 2020

"Even in an age when we can buy most any book with a single click, the InterLibrary Loan system remains a beautiful creation." A brief history of the apex of human civilization.



lithub.com
InterLibrary Loan Will Change Your Life

10 ♡ 1K

Literary H... · Jun 21, 2019

In honor of Octavia Butler's birthday tomorrow, a look at her grand cultural influence.

lithub.com
The Grand Cultural Influence of Octavia Butler

2 ♡ 1K

Literary H... · Mar 25, 2019

Sometimes we accidentally type Lit Hub as Lit Hut.

```
┌┐
| |  ╱╲   in this
| ╱  ╲   hut
╱ ╱ ╭╮ ╲ ╲  we
┐  └┘  ┌  love books
```
more than you can believe, seriously so much.

9 ♡ 1K

Literary H... · Mar 20, 2019

The real heroes are the people who will like a tweet and then like it again after you delete it and tweet it once more, sans typo.

9 ♡ 1K

Literary H... · Dec 28, 2018

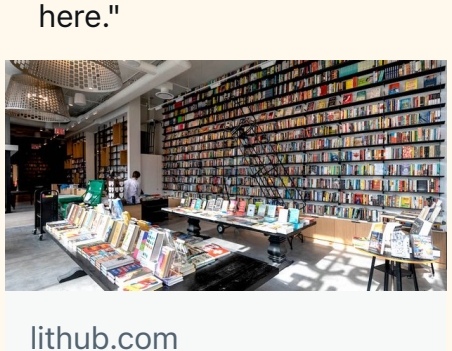
"To me, literature is a calling, even a kind of salvation. It connects me with an enterprise that is over 2,000 years old. What do we have from the past? Art and thought. That's what lasts."

–Susan Sontag, who died on this day in 2004

5 ♡ 1K

Literary H... · Feb 17, 2019

"We want people who love to read, walk through the door and feel, oh here's my tribe. I'm at home here."

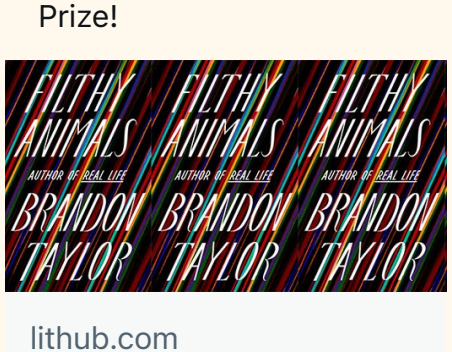


lithub.com
The New Center for Fiction Is Opening in Brooklyn

14 ♡ 1K

Literary H... · Apr 13, 2022

Brandon Taylor is the winner of this year's Story Prize!



lithub.com
The winner of this year's Story Prize is Brandon ...

8 ♡ 1K

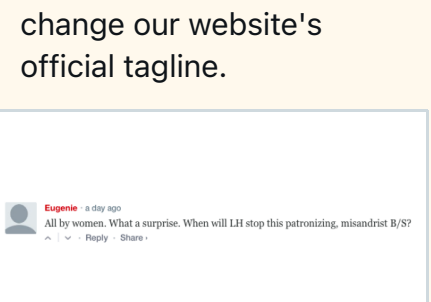
Literary H... · Oct 27, 2018

"The moon has nothing to be sad about,
Staring from her hood of bone." —Sylvia Plath, born on this day in 1932

1 ♡ 985

Literary H... · Sep 5, 2019

Might fuck around and change our website's official tagline.



Eugenie · a day ago
All by women. What a surprise. When will LH stop this patronizing, misandrist B/S?
Reply · Share ·

22 ♡ 993

Literary H... · Mar 10, 2019

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|PAY LIBRARIANS |
|AND TEACHERS   |
|MORE
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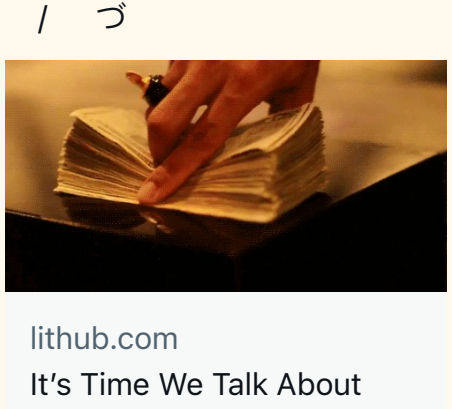
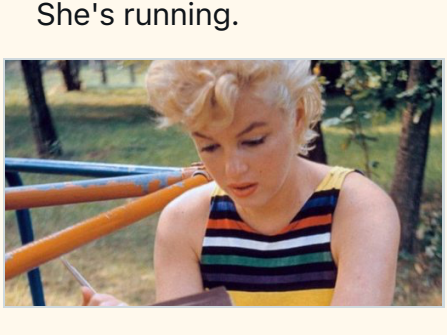


lithub.com
It's Time We Talk About Librarians and Money

4 ♡ 990

Literary H... · Apr 5, 2019

She's running.



14 ♡ 991

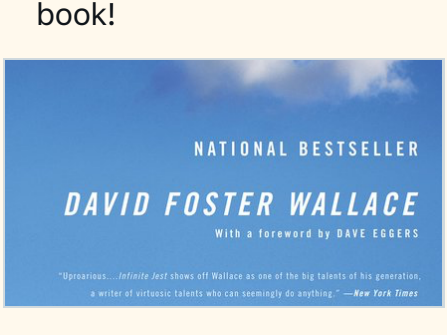
Literary H... · Aug 30, 2019

Happy birthday, Mary Shelley!

7 ♡ 991

Literary H... · Feb 1, 2019

Happy birthday to your Tinder date's favorite book!

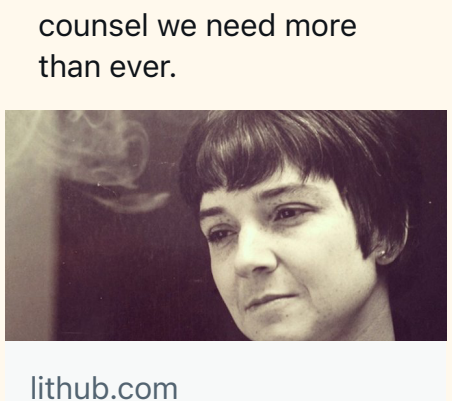


26 ♡ 974

Literary H... · May 16, 2019

"If you are trying to transform a brutalized society into one where people can live in dignity and hope, you begin with the empowering of the most powerless."

Happy birthday to Adrienne Rich, born on this day in 1929, whose counsel we need more than ever.



lithub.com
Life Advice From Adrienne Rich

5 ♡ 963

Literary H... · Oct 28, 2020

Indie bookstores need your holiday $$$ NOW, not in a month.

lithub.com
Independent bookstores need a second wave of ...

10 ♡ 1K

Literary H... · Oct 10, 2018

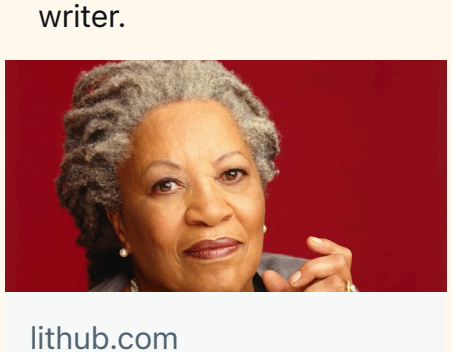
Replying to @Dubes123 and @jendeaderick

If you choose not to date 1970s-era Neil Peart you still have made a choice.

23 ♡ 878

Literary H... · Nov 12, 2019

Honor a great American writer.

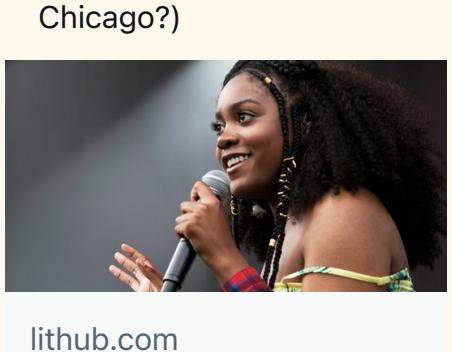


lithub.com
Public memorial for the great Toni Morrison set fo...

6 ♡ 891

Literary H... · Jul 25, 2019

Welcome to the world, @NonameBooks! (Also, did you know that @noname's mother was the first black woman to run her own bookstore in Chicago?)

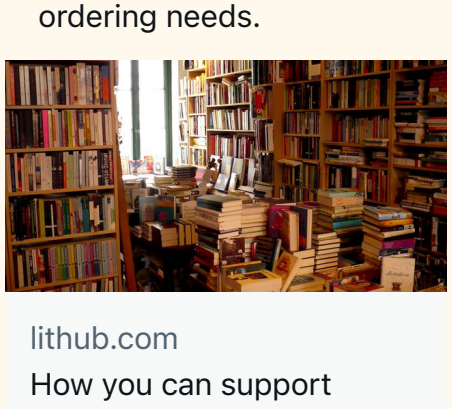


lithub.com
Chicago rapper Noname's new book club highlights ...

1 ♡ 843

Literary H... · Mar 17, 2020

Updated with more than 100 bookstores for all your quarantine book-ordering needs.

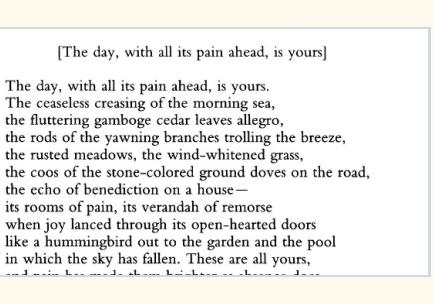


lithub.com
How you can support bookstores during the ...

12 ♡ 874

Literary H... · Mar 17, 2017

RIP Derek Walcott (1930 - 2017)



[The day, with all its pain ahead, is yours]

The day, with all its pain ahead, is yours.
The ceaseless creasing of the morning sea,
the fluttering gamboge cedar leaves allegro,
the rods of the yawning branches trolling the breeze,
the rusted meadows, the wind-whitened grass,
the coos of the stone-colored ground doves on the road,
the echo of benediction on a house—
its rooms of pain, its verandah of remorse
when joy lanced through its open-hearted doors
like a hummingbird out to the garden and the pool
in which the sky has fallen. These are all yours,

7 ♡ 806

Literary H... · Jun 27, 2019

A novelist on the cover of "Time" is like an eclipse! (But one you can and should look at directly.)

lithub.com
Colson Whitehead is the first novelist to grace the ...

7 ♡ 847

Literary H... · Mar 15, 2019

Corporations are not your friends. Only literary websites are your friends.

12 ♡ 810

Literary H... · Sep 12, 2020

Our list of more than 80 Black-owned bookstores around the country that are open for orders.

lithub.com
You can order today from these black-owned ...

7 ♡ 829

Literary H... · Sep 8, 2018

"The literary world should make greater efforts to reach teenagers, and more high schools should promote contemporary literature by living authors."

lithub.com
Every Book Tour Should Include a Public School

15 ♡ 778

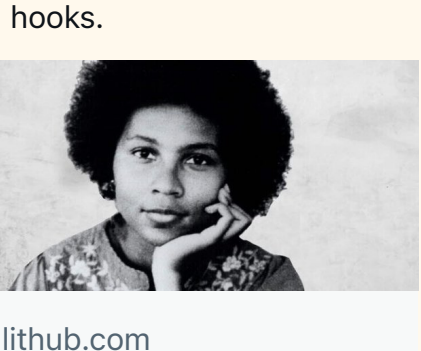
Literary H... · Oct 16, 2019

Proud to announce that as of today, we have read every book.

27 ♡ 772

Literary H... · Dec 15, 2021

"I will not have my life narrowed down. I will not bow down to somebody else's whim or to someone else's ignorance." R.I.P., bell hooks.



lithub.com
bell hooks, generous feminist thinker, has died ...

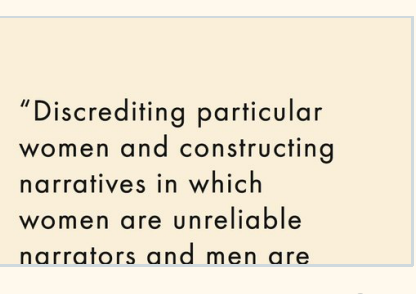
5 ♡ 817

Literary H... · Jan 28, 2019

What about an anthology where writers write about the best thing they learned while they were recklessly diving down internet rabbit holes to avoid writing?

31 ♡ 753

Literary H... · Sep 27, 2018

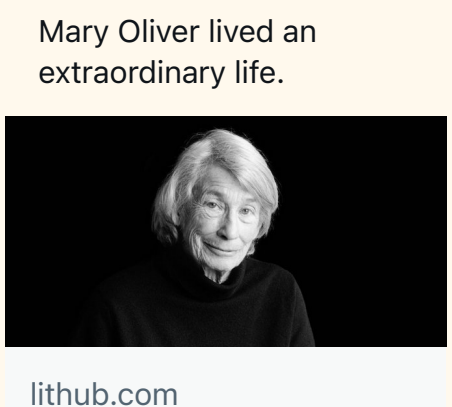


"Discrediting particular women and constructing narratives in which women are unreliable narrators and men are

3 ♡ 749

Literary H... · Jan 17, 2019

Mary Oliver lived an extraordinary life.



lithub.com
Poet Mary Oliver Dies at 83

8 ♡ 724

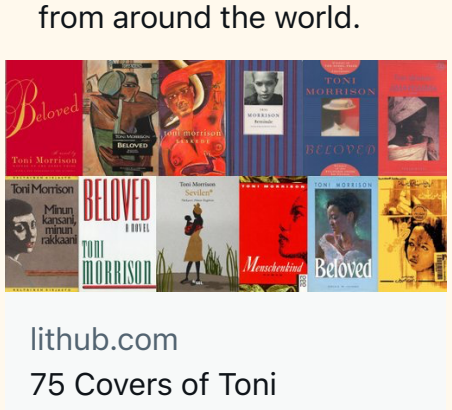
Literary H... · Dec 5, 2018

Happy birthday to Joan Didion, born on this day in 1934—a literary icon who also looks *damn* good on a tote bag.

8 ♡ 712

Literary H... · Aug 6, 2019

75 covers of "Beloved" from around the world.



lithub.com
75 Covers of Toni Morrison's Beloved From ...

4 ♡ 764

Literary H... · Jul 25, 2019

Therapist: And what do we do when—

Me: Books lol

Therapist: No

4 ♡ 727

Literary H... · Nov 27, 2018

Ladies, if he:

-disappoints your family
-veers off in unexpected directions
-scares your friends
-doesn't pay for anything
-is always negative (capability)

He's not your man, he's poetry.

5 ♡ 703

Literary H... · Jul 5, 2019

"There are so very many books, and we have forgotten almost all of them."

lithub.com
Here are the Biggest Fiction Bestsellers of the ...

9 ♡ 739

Literary H... · Sep 24, 2019

Reader, he blocked us.

9 ♡ 717

Literary H... · Aug 7, 2019

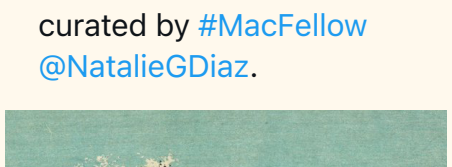
"It is comforting to delude ourselves that everything is available online, but there's a wealth of significant material that remains only in print."

lithub.com
InterLibrary Loan Will Change Your Life

6 ♡ 750

Literary H... · Oct 8, 2018

We're not publishing today, but we'll be sharing links in honor of #IndigenousPeoplesDay, starting with this series on Indigenous women poets, curated by #MacFellow @NatalieGDiaz.



lithub.com
New Poetry by Indigenous Women

7 687

Literary H... · Mar 20, 2020

We're launching... a TV channel?

lithub.com
Literary Hub Presents: The Virtual Book Channel

26 738

Literary H... · Mar 16, 2020

It's never a bad time to support indie bookstores, but now is an especially *good* time.

lithub.com
How you can support bookstores during the ...

7 700

Literary H... · Mar 31, 2018

"For heaven's sake, publish nothing before you are thirty."

lithub.com
Essential Writing Advice from Virginia Woolf

11 639

Literary H... · Jan 7, 2019

In honor of Zora Neale Hurston's birthday, a story of her role in creating the first realistic black baby doll.

lithub.com
How Zora Neale Hurston Helped Create the First ...

7 657

Literary H... · Apr 7, 2020

Replying to @knguyen

Ah, fuck. You're right.

6 658

Literary H... · Oct 21, 2019

"Go on and do your work. Do it well. It is all you can do." Thinking of Ursula K. Le Guin's best life advice on her birthday.

lithub.com
Ursula K. Le Guin's Best Life Advice

1 678

Literary H... · Nov 25, 2020

"During the summer of 2020, I spent countless hours helping irate customers cancel their orders of popular anti-racism books."

Katherine Morgan (@blktinabelcher) on selling books to white "allies."

lithub.com
About That Wave of Anti-Racist Bestsellers Over th...

6 695

Literary H... · Jan 27, 2022

We're hiring an assistant editor! $46,000 a year, remote candidates considered, lots of good book gossip. Apply by 2/7! lithub.com/?page_id=157579

11 725

Literary H... · Dec 16, 2021

"Rick Moranis cost me a lot of money because I ruined so many takes he was in by helplessly breaking into loud laughter." Follow @MelBrooks behind the scenes of "Spaceballs."

lithub.com
Mel Brooks on the Making of Spaceballs

15 695

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