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The writers who inspire me

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The Zodiac Bookshop was in a non-descript suburban parade of shops. It was run by a rather miserable man whose glasses were on a chain around his neck and who, when he peered over them at a customer, never, at least in my memory, cracked the slightest smile. It did not matter. To my 12-year-old self the bookshop was like a gateway into another universe – a universe filled with mind-expanding, life-changing paperbacks, the look and feel, and even smell of which, made my pulse race. And it was in the Zodiac Bookshop that I picked up a copy of *The City and the Stars* by Arthur C. Clarke.

Back home I read: "Like a glowing jewel, the city lay on the breast of the desert..." And I was captivated. I had read novels whose settings spanned the globe and were set decades in the future. This one spanned the entire Universe and was set a billion years in the future. I could feel my head exploding, my imagination catching fire. I read every Clarke book the Zodiac Bookshop had to offer. Science at school was dull and boring – gas laws and Newtonian billiards - but what I learnt in Clarke novels kept me interested: Laser beams would be invisible in space without dust to scatter their light into your eyes; Rockets in space need nothing to "push against" because action and reaction are equal and opposite, and rockets have no choice but to go the other way from their exhaust.

Clarke did more than keep me interested in science – he made me want to do what he did. And much later, when I was doing a PhD at Caltech in Pasadena, it was he I wrote to asking how I could become a writer. He replied from Sri Lanka and, although he did not answer my question, getting a letter from a hero was an electrifying experience. I gave up my PhD and set out to become a writer.

Incidentally, in San Marino, the city next to Pasadena, was the Huntington Library. Among Gutenberg Bibles and Thomas Gainsborough's *Blue Boy*, I stared at James Joyce's *original* manuscript of *Ulysses*. It would be many more years before I picked up a copy, left in a hotel, and was utterly swept away by it, but what impressed me was that the first page contained *more crossings out than text*. I learnt a lesson: Most of what writers write goes in the bin. The road to producing anything good is long and hard.

Recently, I have fallen in love with the writing of Anna Burns. Reading *Milkman*, *No Bones*, and *Mostly Hero*, it is impossible not to feel the sense of the sheer joy Burns gets in constructing her wonderful passages. And she is funny. After years of writing formulaic journalism to earn a living, Burns has reconnected me with the joy I had writing imaginative essays at school. She has inspired me to try new things. I do not know yet where it is going to take me (maybe nowhere). But that is the fun of being a writer.