

THE IMPACT OF STORIES: AN IMAGINATIVE MEMOIR

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Abstract

This thesis is a collection of short stories expressed in the style of a creative memoir. Each story connects a particular time in my life to the book I was currently reading. In my youth, I was introduced to the works of many authors, but it was ultimately the stories of Paul Gallico that left the deepest imprint on me. Paul Gallico was an author who, sadly, has not been given the proper place in American literature that I firmly believe he deserves. His timeless tales of innocence and beautiful use of the English language have enriched my life. As a child, my mother spent countless hours reading to me; stories dominated my childhood, allowing my imagination and creativity to run free. To this day, I remain an avid reader. I believe that the power of stories during one's formative years is vital to the development of imagination. Those childhood days of storytelling were magical to me, and are the inspiration for this collection. I hope that my stories will communicate some of the magic that Mr. Gallico's did for me.

Introduction

“There are compartments just for that called, ‘I Can,’ and ‘I Will.’ When you have learned to unlock them, the strong magic will help you to move mountains’” (The Man Who Was Magic 119).

There is a wall in my living room that is covered with books. From top to bottom, it houses hundreds of worlds, all eagerly waiting to come to life upon opening. Thousands of pages, millions of words, countless possibilities. To a small child, that wall stretched past the clouds, through the sky. So many letters and patterns, colors and textures all awaiting my attention. There has always been a desire within me, something big and unexplainable: a desire to bask in the possibilities of the unknown. Since my youth when pages contained clusters of unidentifiable black lines, I have always been fascinated by words. The power of stories, the images they evoke, and the feelings they inspire have impacted countless lives throughout time. The stories experienced throughout my childhood have shaped the adult I am today.

This thesis hopes to capture several of those experiences that particularly affected me during my developmental years. Of the authors introduced to me throughout my youth, the works of American author Paul Gallico have had the greatest influence. My mother, a wonderful educator who homeschooled her two children with grace and patience, read aloud many of his stories. I am stronger today because of his words and the way she communicated them to me.

Everyone is inspired by something or someone. Although it is singular for each individual, I believe there is a yearning within every human soul for magic: the magic of imagination and creation. It is omnipresent, and yet we often neglect to look for it. It is easy to forget the power that pages contain and the difference that stories can make. Whether it be the excitement of a new journey for a small child, an escape from the harsh reality of adolescence, or a teenager's desire for a forgotten innocence, stories make magic. I hope that mine will spread a little bit of the magic that changed my life.

A Brief Biography of Paul Gallico

From his birth in 1897, Paul Gallico spent his adolescent years growing up in the heart of New York City. His Italian father, Paolo Gallico was an accomplished musician and teacher who had emigrated with his wife, Hortense, to the United States in 1895. Gallico graduated from a local New York high school, and began his pursuit of a medical career at Columbia University in 1916. His time at university was interrupted in 1918, however, when he enlisted in the U.S. Naval Reserve. Returning to school having lost a year and a half, Gallico graduated with a bachelor of science degree in 1921.

Paul Gallico quickly earned a job working for the National Board of Motion Picture Review after letting go of his medical pursuits. Although memorable, his time there was short-lived as he began work as a film critic for the New York Daily News. Gallico made a name for himself after launching his career as a harsh, but well-respected critic. He was ultimately transferred to the sports department, where his bold opinions were thought more appropriate. The sports atmosphere suited him very well, and he soon became one of the most respected and recognized sports critics in America. Although he had gained fame and wealth, Gallico decided it was time to leave the sports world behind to finally pursue his longtime dream of writing fiction. Beginning with his book *Farewell to Sport*, Gallico moved to Europe and began his career as a novelist and short story writer.

Paul Gallico wrote in multiple genres, including: child's literature, fable, adventure, mystery, drama, and a peculiar string of cat books. Gallico's mastery of the English

language transported his readers and raised his status as an American author. Several of his works were made into major motion pictures or television specials, such as *The Snow Goose*, *The Poseidon Adventure*, *Mrs. 'Arris Goes to Paris*, *The Three Lives of Thomasina*, and *Lili* which also inspired the stage musical *Carnival!* both based on Gallico's book *Love of Seven Dolls*. Gallico had a hand in most of these adaptations, and even wrote the screenplays for several of them.

Although Paul Gallico has written over fifty distinguished works, it is unfortunate that his name does not resonate with the majority of Americans today. His timeless tales of innocence, feisty sports critiques, thrilling adventures, tantalizing mysteries, witty humor, heartwarming fables, and curious insights into the lives of felines, go unrecognized by many, but unforgotten by others. I am one of those admirers. I hope my series of essays will communicate some of the passion and inspiration that Mr. Gallico's legacy has left for us to experience.

The Beginning: Mrs. 'Arris Goes to Paris

“These flashes of color satisfied her. They were something to return to in the evening, something to wake up to in the morning” (Mrs. 'Arris Goes to Paris 24).

Hidden inside the trees, a quaint porch sits in the heart of Benicia, California. It is a small wooden affair, shaded by an overhanging roof and a cluster of tall trees. A large well-worn, once green couch stands sturdily against the side railing accompanied by two chairs: a robust and faded golden armchair whose center cushion is sunken near to the ground, and a small, rather uncomfortable brown basket-woven seat. A shabby red faux-Persian carpet with unraveled tassels lays upon the wooden floor, a bright green spool rests upon the carpet, and a washed-out sand-colored lamp sits upon that. Sunlight sparkles through the branches and illuminates the porch in glistening fractals. The string curtain of plastic beads hanging against the plexiglass side wall create a continuous rhythm as the gentle breeze orchestrates their movement. Birds sing to each other, and squirrels argue across the long branches. Everything is green; everything is alive. The house on the corner of the street surrounded by the bustling trees in Benicia, California is breathing, and seated on the porch in that old sunken-in golden armchair is a young girl and her mother.

As the daughter of two California hippies, my education was by no means traditional. My brother, four years my superior, had faced the inadequacies and injustices of the

public schooling system for several years before I was given the chance. Elementary school had been cruel to a shy, smart, talented little boy who asked too many questions. My parents, intelligent, thinking people, did their research and made a decision; my brother, and I by extension, would no longer face a system more eager to medicate than to educate. My father would continue earning our living and my mother would teach the children their lessons at home. My brief stint in kindergarten would mark my last experience with public school. I was now an official homeschooler.

Introverted and uncomfortable in crowds, I felt safe and incredibly happy to spend my days on our colorful porch surrounded by nature. My mother, a brave and talented woman, generated an itinerary of learning that was both progressive and stimulating. No question was denied, no line of inquiry overlooked. Nothing was stuffy or forced, education was fun!

I was a late reader according to traditional schooling standards, and so my mother became the key to the magical world that I was not yet granted access to. She was the only one who could transport my mind to an entirely different place and time. My imagination was an artist, ready at every moment to begin its brush stroke, but my mother was the easel, the sturdy base with which I could begin my work. Together, my mother and I created masterpieces. I will never forget those days when written words were unknown, but imagination was my favorite medium.

My classroom was the porch, and magic took place there. Through the stories my mother read to me, that porch traveled the world. As a young child, I was introduced to the wonders of Paul Gallico, whom I later dubbed ‘the magic maker.’ Some of my earliest memories are those of his stories. Sitting on the porch surrounded by the vibrant sounds of wildlife and the sparkling sunlight, his words took over my senses. My mind took a journey, leaving my body hollow: the power of transformation. I had never experienced anything like it before in my young little life. It could only be magic! The enchantment of genuine excitement: that tingling feeling in the depths of the stomach that every child experiences as life begins to unfold its secrets. There was that constant sensation of anticipation. Doors were opening as my imagination expanded into new realms of existence.

The first Gallico novel my mother read aloud to me was *Mrs. Arris Goes to Paris*. It is the charming tale of a poor, middle-aged London charwoman who experiences beauty for the first time in her life. While cleaning someone’s house, she stumbles upon a Dior dress. It is the most stunning thing the shabby Mrs. Harris has ever seen! She saves up her money for several years, and eventually is able to make the journey to Paris for one glorious day where she will purchase her very own Dior gown. The trip, however, does not go quite as planned. After all her hard work and a thrilling adventure, the dress is unwittingly destroyed. Mrs. Harris, however, recovers from the pain as she realizes that it was the experience and not the dress that held the true beauty.

Very much like Mrs. Harris, I had never experienced such beauty. Gallico's simple, alluring tale of passion stirred something deep within me. The story took control and soon it was everywhere. My Barbies recreated Mrs. Harris's Parisian adventure and adorned the most luxurious Dior ball gowns, strutting proudly down the runways of my floor. The stuffed animals, looking down from the cheap seats of my loft bed, witnessed the fashion show with great excitement. They applauded loudly in encouragement causing the delicate figurines in the box seats upon the piano to join in the cheers. Even the bright yellow walls, colorfully painted with flowers, acted as the lights illuminating the fashion show. Everything worked together. And it was magical.

Everybody experiences beauty, yet it appears to everyone in different forms. For Mrs. Harris, it was a dress; for me, it was words.

Adolescence: *Love of Seven Dolls*

“In Paris, in the spring of our times, a young girl was about to throw herself into the Seine” (Love of Seven Dolls 7).

Words were as addictive as drugs and as intoxicating as alcohol. The young girl sat on the porch of the house, soaking up every comma and ravishing every colon. Her veins pulsed with desire and her heart beat rapidly with exultation. She was addicted to magic. The porch swirled into a frenzied blur, the beads beat faster against the plexiglass wall and all was swept up into a cyclone reaching high above the clouds. She was in the air, out of sight. Everything below was miniscule with distance. The whirlwind of words swarmed around her and all was lost. She was at the Seine river in Paris with Mouche and seven mystical puppets, and the world was illuminated by their stories. The Captain was there, his darkness casting a shadow over Mouche’s radiance. The puppets disappeared and his hands reached for her body. The clouds condensed and suddenly all light was gone. She couldn’t see anything, but the screams were piercing. A tear the size of an ocean landed with a colossal thud on the page as reality snapped its gates on the girl, dropping her from the sky onto the solid wooden floor of the porch. The girl looked around. She was no longer in Paris.

At the age of twelve, life reveals many of its coveted secrets. For a young, skinny, shy girl with dreams of dancing, the world felt stable and consistent. The porch protected

her, encapsulating her solitary existence inside a safe bubble of routine. With the aid of her mother, the girl learned her lessons with diligence in the daylight, enjoyed the company of her family in the dark, and every moment in between was filled with words. The magic kept her alive and sparked her pores with electricity. The porch traveled the world as she explored new realms of reality. The physical world always faded away.

But sometimes it didn't.

The door opened. The large, fluorescently lit room was teeming with shouts, screams, giggles, whispers, pimples, and puberty. The cacophony of adolescence steamed the room like a hothouse, suffocating the young, skinny, shy girl standing frozen and icy in the doorway. She stared desperately at the overflowing sea of her peers as her stomach churned in panic: butterflies flapping in angry terror, flying up through her innards, reaching her parched throat. A sudden warmth upon her shoulder; she was ushered inside the jungle by a large, middle-aged woman sporting a proud, Britannic Bold badge:

VOLUNTEER.

The room smelled toxic and sterile, completely unrecognizable from nature. The girl yearned for the trees, birds and squirrels, the rustic furniture and plastic beads making music against the plexiglass. She longed for the comfort of solitude. Words were beautiful on paper, but the dissonance surrounding her was something entirely different.

Fully inside the room now, she was issued a nametag and told to “go meet the other kids” for a couple minutes before it was time to start the fun name-games and other bonding improv activities. The girl turned to face the swarm of voices and bodies. The flapping wings of the butterflies escalated to new extremes, and she began to wonder if she might be sick. She realized that the journey to the bathroom could easily require the remaining five minutes of free time, and so, with a sharp turn, reversed her direction. She walked with gusto toward the doorway, but another valiant **VOLUNTEER** badge halted her expedition. “Sorry honey, we’re about to circle up. You can use the restroom when we take our break. Go join the other kids!” The broad smile and motherly sweater momentarily rejuvenated the girl’s spirits. Slowly looking over her shoulder, she once more began the voyage to the center of the room.

The walk was excruciating. Every sharp step stabbed the butterflies, causing their tired wings to flap more violently. She must have walked for hours by the time she eventually reached the other children. One final step would take her into their realm. With great pain, her leg took the initiative. She was inside.

Everyone was segregated into groups. They were not the stereotypical jocks, geeks, mean girls, but simply distinct groupings of previously established friends. The girl feared the eyes most of all; she desired an unnoticed existence. Luckily, her wish was granted. She walked through the crowd like a ghost, invisible. Everyone was laughing and shouting, eagerly engaged in conversation. She could not join them, but could not leave. She was alone in a room full of people.

The corner beckoned her, and while happily hidden within its shadows, she began to dream. The children huddling in the center of the room seemed miles away. The girl in the room joined the girl in Paris. She was with Mouche again.

“Something, or someone cried out of the darkness: ‘Hello there, you with the suitcase! Where are you going and what’s your hurry?’

Mouche paused, startled and bewildered, for the shrill little voice obviously was directed at her, but she could not make out whence it came. The impudence of the query angered her for it had the effect of returning her to a world she had in effect already departed”
(11).

The water glistened as the river flowed through the city. Everything was dark, and Mouche was staring at the sparkles below, ready to jump. The trials of life had proven too harsh for the shy, skinny, French girl and she was determined to leave it behind forever. Life had been cruel, so there must be some place better beyond it. Fear and exhaustion clouded her mind as she stood above the Seine. Just as her leg began to take the initiative, a voice called to her, halting her momentum and bringing her back to life.

The voice came from a small red-headed boy who happened to be a puppet. He called her away from the bridge, beckoning her to his puppet booth. She was introduced to seven charming puppets with distinct personalities that collectively convinced her to

travel the road with their puppet show. Elated, the girl joined the joyous troupe. The magic of innocence allowed her to disconnect the little creatures from their dark animator hidden behind the curtain: a cruel and unhappy man. On the road, the girl's love for her puppet friends, and hatred of the man, grew. The anger and frustration buried in his soul manifested itself into a dark obsession with the girl. Her innocence destroyed him with its purity, and the need to break it became all encompassing. Nothing so simple and loving could possibly exist. He sought to extinguish the lightness she radiated by ravishing and tarnishing her body. The girl's resilience, however, allowed her innocence and belief in the puppets to persist. Nothing could dull the girl's love for the seven magical creatures that had saved her life that day at the Seine. How could their animator long to destroy it?

Eventually a young, handsome man came to witness the girl whose friendship with the seven puppets had become infamous. His love for her was immense, and to his glee, his proposal of marriage was accepted. The girl, now a young woman, was heartbroken to leave behind her dearest friends, but the torture of their controller had simply proven too much for her sweet temperament to endure any longer. Something strange occurred when she said her final goodbyes to the puppets, however. Their voices began to morph into something unfamiliar. Terror welled up in her as they asked her a simple question: but Mouche, who are we? Her hand reached behind the curtain to touch the face of the sad, angry man who loved her so dearly and yet treated her so ill. Tears streamed down their cheeks, and the girl realized that the seven puppets were a part of this man, not a separate entity. The red-headed puppet boy who had saved her life that day on the bridge

was the same man who sat behind the curtain weeping. They were one. And she loved all of them. Even the –

-- “Hey! I think we’re starting now. Do you wanna come sit with me?”

The young, skinny, shy girl sitting in the corner of a crowded room dreaming of Paris, looked up. A smile as pure as light broke through the pages of fantasies, bringing her back to life. Her very own red-headed puppet: an angel whose smile softened the fluorescents and dimmed the drone. They were suddenly on the porch surrounded by green beauty and chattering creatures. The beads beat lightly against the plexiglass, and the sunken furniture inflated with life. The girl was safe, and for the first time ever, her sanctuary was not solitary. She was not in Paris with Mouche and seven magical puppets and a cruel master, nor was she in England with a charmingly charismatic charwoman desperate for a beautiful garment, nor even with Adam, the Magic Man; there were no words and no pages. In fact, they were not even on the porch. It was simply a moment shared between two young human beings.

The two girls walked together to the center of the room to join the other kids at the theatre rehearsal.

A Brief Retelling of *The Man Who Was Magic*

“The hill on which it stood could be located somewhere west of East and just to the south of North and only a mile or so over the boundary of time, so that there was very little difference between yesterday, today and tomorrow” (The Man Who Was Magic 9).

There is a mystical land called Mageia where magicians rule the city. The community and economy survive solely on the city’s main source of revenue: magic. The fanciest tricks are produced and praised, the most intricate slights-of-hand and illusions of wit are practiced, but the mechanics are never revealed. The finest magicians in world dwell in this city, and yet all are frauds. No magician in the great Mageia understands what genuine magic is.

When a mysterious redheaded stranger with a long staff and a fluffy dog appear at the city gates, the citizens of Mageia are forever changed. Adam, as his name is later revealed, is a magician, but not of the Mageian variety. His magic requires no trickery; he claims simply to be magic. When Adam performs a special magic trick by cracking an egg, spilling its contents, and reassembling it perfectly, the spectators are stunned. They desperately search for the explanation of Adam’s incredible illusion, but find no solutions. The magicians are perplexed, horrified, and thoroughly envious of Adam, who instantly becomes the greatest threat to Mageia’s livelihood.

Although he is hated by most, this simple, kind-hearted man finds friendship in two people: Jane, the young daughter of the mayor who dreams of becoming a magician herself, and Ninian, a failed magician whose skills are lackluster, and whose reputation is all but ruined. Adam inspires in them a desire to pursue their passions regardless of the judgement of others.

When Adam is ultimately exiled from the city, he leaves a parting gift for Jane. She is desperate to understand his brilliant trickery, and begs him to explain his form of magic. In response, Adam describes what true magic is to Jane. He tells her that it is around us at all times. That the caterpillar performs the greatest trick of transformation when it becomes a butterfly; the bird who leaves its nest to fly high into the sky is a master of levitation; the chicken who creates an egg out of thin air displays the wonder of illusion; and when the tree's leaves blow away in the fall breeze it is the most stunning vanishing act. True magic is what surrounds us. You just need to remember to look for it sometimes.

And then Adam disappears.

Remembering: *The Man Who Was Magic*

“Adam gently touched her forehead with a long finger. ‘It’s all inside there, Jane, like a box with many compartments. Each one you can call upon for anything you want or desire. It contains the greatest magic of all. It can carry you into the past, or let you imagine the future. It can help to make you well when you’re sick and make bad things good. Everything that men or women have ever accomplished has come out of that miraculous box. When you use it properly it enables you to think of or create things that no one has ever done before, even the way to the stars’” (The Man Who Was Magic 119).

Magic is everywhere. It produces its miracles around us constantly. It flows through the air creating the source of our breath; it sends water rushing into our bodies creating transformations of vitality; it closes our eyes at night and allows us to wander to far off realms of reality. It lets us fly. The magic inside us is invincible, and to the girl, the magic surrounding the porch hidden inside the trees in Benicia, California contained the most sacred magic of all: the magic of her childhood. And soon she would be gone, leaving the young, shy, skinny girl forever behind on the porch.

Since that first day of rehearsal when the girl journeyed to the center of the room with her new friend, the magic of theatre took complete control of her being. Everything changed from that day on, and the changes transformed the young, skinny, shy girl into something beautiful. She had found it; that once distant glimmer now bathed the girl in a glowing

spotlight. Pages still contained glory and the porch still held its magic, but with friends at her side, their wonders were no longer a necessity for refuge. Her imagination still thrived, but now it had a new home. This was something she was good at, really good at. This was the missing puzzle piece that now seemed to complete her existence. It was more than an evening hobby, it was more than an excuse to socialize, it was where she belonged: something she had to do. Everything made sense now.

With the support of her family, the girl climbed to new heights. After a sufficient interval, she surpassed her peers in the friendly children's theatre arena, and with apprehension and excitement, escalated to the world of adults. Her youth illuminated the atmosphere and she was easily accepted into new circles. She matured alongside these experienced beings, and ultimately found herself at ease with them.

As she grew, so did the girl's appetite for challenge. With every new endeavor, another line of black figures was added to the sheet of paper containing her experience. She wanted more. She wanted to travel to new stages to adopt other personas and speak the words of someone else's story. This new world of passion and excitement had swallowed her up entirely. The elation of applause sent the girl flying. She was finally seen. Eyes no longer terrified her; the center of the room was where she wanted to be. She filled it with power and confidence now.

But the honeymoon never lasts.

Sometimes when she was flying, the girl would fall to the hard, cold ground with a start, bewildered and frustrated by this unexpected sensation. Why had she not been chosen? What had she done wrong to anger the floating heads seated behind the ominous table? The distance between the room's center and the dreaded jury extended for miles; the girl could no longer hear their voices or see their pursed smiles. The only sense she could now experience was that of judgement scorching through her every pore. Blackness filled the irises of her adjudicators causing the girl to once again fear the eyes of others. Her brain swirled with frenzied thoughts and confusing images. They did not want her. There were others like her, equally talented and qualified for the same position. And there were many of them. The realization of competition caused a dullness to cloud the girl's color as the beauty of innocence faded from her essence.

The magic was vanishing, but the seasoned young actress would not give up. She powered through every audition and tried desperately to ignore the accusation dwelling deep in the eyes that watched her, both from the panel and the waiting room. Nerves began to live in her stomach at all times: a permanent cage of butterflies. She accepted their existence and coped dutifully with the anguish they caused her. She had accumulated a daunting collection of stress eating her alive from the inside and came to the realization that this lifestyle of pain was the norm. There was nothing unusual about a life without magic. This must be adulthood. The memories began to drift away...

It was almost time. College was approaching, and with it, the biggest decision of the girl's life to date. With her mother at her side, the pair traveled the country on a tour de

force of auditions. This was the big one. This one would decide her future...or so she thought at the time. Each venue held hundreds of eager girls in jewel-toned dresses, crowding the lobbies and halls waiting for their chance to dazzle. The mother and daughter swam through a sea of desperation and hairspray, fighting for their equal opportunity: the girl for a dream, the mother for the love of her daughter. The battle raged on for months, driving the duo near to insanity. When the physical war was concluded, the waiting was excruciating. One day, the news reached them.

Her destiny was set.

The decision pulsed through the house with an air of finality. Everything was set now. The girl would leave her family behind and begin a new journey far away. The parents and brother roamed the house like ghosts as the coming change loomed in the atmosphere. The girl hid, scared of the emotions she so deeply repressed. This was all she had known. This house, this porch, this family. She was frightened. How could she possibly abandon the people she cared so much for in order to follow a ridiculous, hollow, stressful career? She was lost.

It was one of the last days before her journey would commence. The girl and the mother walked together. There wasn't much to be said, words were irrelevant. They simply walked, embracing their togetherness and pondering the sadness of separation. The butterflies flapped a steady beat causing a constant unpleasantness inside the girl. The pair reached a stopping point and sat down on a bench. They stared out at the water and

watched the sunset in silence while the mother held her daughter. Then she gave her daughter a book.

“So you’ll always remember.”

Everything seemed gray; the colors had left the sky. The wind breathed, the trees sighed, and the porch remained steadfast. The girl stood on the wooden floor and walked toward the robust, once golden armchair. She let her body sink nearly to the ground as she plopped herself upon its cushion. The girl opened the book. On the first page an inscription in her mother’s handwriting read: “For our dear magical daughter. Always find the magic out there...” Tears dampened the page as the flood gates burst open releasing a tidal wave of memories. The girl could barely stay afloat amidst them. The magic hidden within the tiny black letters lifted off the pages and climbed up into the trees. The squirrels began to awake and resume their angry chatter. The birds lifted out of their nests, flying happily into the sky and filling the air with music. The slow beating of the beads against the plexiglass changed time signatures and the rhythm became intoxicating. The faded furniture transformed in plain sight as it restored its once brilliant color. Sunlight glistened on the house walls and choreographed intricate dance routines on the wooden floor. Suddenly everything was alive and breathing. Everything was dancing! The magic flowed from every crevice of the porch, house, yard, neighborhood, and from the girl herself. The magic welled up inside her, releasing the caged butterflies into the wild. Water streamed from her eyes. She was smiling, she was happy, and she

remembered. She remembered everything: all the magic that had taken place throughout her life. The magic that had allowed that young, skinny, shy girl to travel around the world without ever leaving her porch; the magic that had allowed her to transform into an entirely different human being; the magic to paint beautiful pictures while her mother read her a story. The magic had never left. The porch may stand firm, but the magic would always be inside of her, and with it she could travel to the stars.

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