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Why We Should Read Hard Books

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Words, be they written or spoken, texted or tweeted, are under intense scrutiny these days. Publicly spoken or written words are met with criticism, anger, and even a rush to censor and punish the person who said them. We bristle, we shake our heads, and perhaps we even protest such unfortunate myopia, especially when we agree with the censored speech. Why, then, in certain Catholic and Christian circles, is the propriety of reading words that come at us from the other direction, from voices that challenge us or clash outright with our sense of morality, truth, and virtue, such an enduring problem? Can it be worthwhile, particularly in the case of literature, to read about a depraved character, or to consider the ideas of an author whose life was less than exemplary? Or must we, on our pilgrim journey towards holiness, simply avoid such literary topics as scandalous stumbling blocks? If our instinctive response to the “cancel culture” is disapproval, and if we think that people who steadily challenge the reigning, secular socio-cultural mentality should be allowed to write and speak, so should we as Catholics or Christians be willing to encounter words that challenge us and press up against our norms. We cannot, in good conscience, enact our own version of “Christian cancel-culture” and remain consistent. Let us, then, consider the propriety and even the necessity of the thoughtful reading of literature that stretches us beyond our comfort zone. Such literature may include objectionable elements and may be written by authors whose worldview, behavior, or experiences may diverge from what is virtuous and moral. Arguably, however, careful readers must encounter such content or risk living in prideful isolation, without the sympathetic understanding of diverse human experiences that facilitates and enables true charity.

Pope St. John Paul II, in his *Letter to Artists*, pointed out some of the key dynamics at work in art or literature that focuses the reader on the darker side of things:

Even beyond its typically religious expressions, true art has a close affinity with the world of faith, so that, even in situations where culture and the Church are far apart, art remains a kind of bridge to religious experience... Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption.

True art, in his estimation, can serve as a valuable, two-way bridge that enables communication between a culture and a Church that can at times seem worlds apart. But at the core of every soul are regions both resplendent and shadowed, and art has the potential to reveal these, and to draw back the veil on our oft-hidden commonalities. In particular, literary art is able to “give voice” to the cry of each human heart for redemption, whether explicitly acknowledged or not. In characters who disgust or repel us, we find a mediated way to confront and understand the struggles of others. This has the potential to set us on a journey to deeper empathy with others—perhaps before we stumble upon such struggles in the fleeting encounters of day-to-day life. Literature gives us more space for contemplation, and more time to consider how we ought to respond with the mercy of Christ in particularly difficult situations. This provides a sort of literary, along-the-way education in humanity, which is not the sole purpose of reading literature, but certainly a key benefit. It is crucial, for the purposes of both charity

and evangelization, for us all to be educated deeply in what it is to be human. “The educational method with the greatest capacity for good is not the one that flees from reality in order to affirm what is good separately, but rather the one that lives by advocating for the triumph of good in the world,” asserts Servant of God Father Luigi Giussani. Sometimes, in literature, this may mean witnessing the terrible reality of a life lived without Christ—not to glorify sin, but to illuminate our deepest need for salvation. This side of heaven, there will always be a rift between the world and the Christian ideal. Literature reveals the paradoxical tension of the world to us: we live in a world that is both a “vale of tears” and a wellspring of God’s graces, which are conveyed, at times, through the most surprising situations and people. We strive, love, and suffer in this world, yet always long for heaven: while “in” the world, but not “of” it, we must, like the saints, enter into its battered beauty, knowing that God’s good will triumph even in the midst of all this, and not in some imaginary land-without-sin that is not our own.

Another important element to notice in St. John Paul II’s *Letter to Artists* is that he defends the centrality of not just *any* art, but *true* art. There are mountains of books that are not true art: some books serve only as distractions to pass the time, their details forgotten once the plot has spun to its conclusion; other books only titillate prurient interests or glamorize the basest elements of evil; yet others may use a thinly veiled story as propaganda or to moralize. None of these are true art. This, of course, begs the question of how a legitimately curious reader, cautiously opening the door to challenging books, can know how to discern the difference between literature that is worthwhile—that is “true art” as John Paul II characterizes it—and that which is not. In today’s context it can be difficult to know where to begin. Just as a constant diet of chicken nuggets desensitizes the tongue to the nuances of fresh and more complex foods, a constant mental diet of social media, blogs, and viral sound bites desensitizes the brain to the intricacies of more sophisticated literary art. This can lead to the tendency to err too much on the side of caution, avoiding any literature that presents fraught topics or seems dauntingly complex.

Three questions may help readers discern which literature is worthy of their time and effort. First, is the book recommended by tradition? Is it a “classic” in the broadest sense possible? Have great literary thinkers throughout history acknowledged the worth and the artistry of this book? This can be a difficult question when books which have traditionally been considered valuable and worth reading are being dismissed and replaced with other, often more contemporary books of questionable quality. G.K. Chesterton, in his book *Orthodoxy*, explains the problematic error of this trend, particularly when it is enacted as a way of “democratizing” the literary canon:

Tradition means giving a vote to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead...Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about. All democrats object to men being disqualified by the accident of birth; tradition objects to their being disqualified by the accident of death. Democracy tells us not to neglect a good man’s opinion, even if he is our groom; tradition asks us not to neglect a good man’s opinion, even if he is our father. (Chapter 4)

At the same time, it is important to keep the door open to contemporary books that may not yet have had the chance to face the test of history. A second key question to ask, then, when faced with a more modern book is: Does this book illuminate the human in some important way? Does it echo the central questions that enduring classics have asked for millennia: What is it to be human? What are a human person’s most fundamental needs? How do we live in a fallen world? How do we cope with death? What gives life meaning?

Finally, whether historic or contemporary, a reader must ask a third question: does this book’s style

and craft reach levels that might be characterized as excellent or skillful? In Catholic or Christian circles there is often the tendency to excuse lackluster art as “passable” literature on the basis of its virtuous or religious themes. **Flannery O’Connor**, one of the consummate American Catholic writers of 20th century, frequently took issue with this and quipped: “The Catholic novelist doesn’t have to be a saint; he doesn’t even have to be a Catholic; he does, unfortunately, have to be a novelist.” She pointed out repeatedly in her writings and her speeches that the artistic quality of a book—its integrity as art *per se* and its literary value—must be separated from the author’s faith and virtue (or lack thereof). Here she describes excellence in craft for a Catholic author approaching a sacramental topic:

When I write a novel in which the central action is a baptism, I am very well aware that for the majority of my readers baptism is a meaningless rite, and so in my novel I have to see that this baptism carries enough awe and mystery to jar the reader into some kind of emotional recognition of its significance. To this end I have to bend the whole novel—its language, its structure, its action. I have to make the reader feel, in his bones, if nowhere else, that something is going on there that counts.

The fictional novel (or short-story, or drama) is a unique creation, distinct from catechesis and apologetics, and as such we evaluate it on different grounds. O’Connor explains: “For the fiction writer himself the whole story is the meaning, because it is an experience, not an abstraction.” There is, to be sure, a time and place for direct value statements; fictional literature, she points out, is not that place. In fiction—in a consummately Catholic way—meaning becomes incarnate via the complex tapestry of character, plot, theme, language, and setting. Books that accomplish this feat, even if the characters or author are less than saintly, reach the level of meaningful literary art, and are worth a thoughtful read.

Having established that a book is worthwhile, the question then becomes *how* to read—must we, to remain “safe” from any corrupting influence the book or author may hold, stand above the book as a critical judge? Not necessarily. **C.S. Lewis** emphasizes humility as a key element of good reading:

The first demand a work of art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way. (There is no good asking first whether the work before you deserves such a surrender, for until you have surrendered you cannot possibly find out.)

We all inevitably come to a work with perspectives shaped by our circumstances; humility while reading doesn’t mean erasing these. It may, however, mean loosening our grip on certain preconceptions we cling to a bit too tightly, or setting aside the judge-and-jury part of ourselves that stands always ready to convict a work that suggests opinions contrary to our own. To accept the work as it is, we may even be challenged to visit or inhabit realms which are less comfortable for us. At the same time, the surrender suggested by Lewis comes with a commonsense caveat: if, due to a particular vulnerability, a reader can tell that a certain work of literature might be spiritually harmful due to some still-smarting trauma, with proper self-knowledge and discernment, a reader can elect to set aside that particular book. Perhaps the book may prove worthwhile for the individual with the passage of time. And yet, it bears repeating that the need to avoid a particular work for a season or for a lifetime does not, however, invalidate the importance of this literature for *others*.

Confidence is a second key element of good reading; this is important because sometimes a misguided sense of humility convinces readers that there are certain books too lofty, or too hard, for them to approach. Lack of knowledge or literary expertise need not be a barrier to reading, however. A good general education paired with a quick internet search can give enough bare-bones historical or cultural details to equip us for an initial reading of many tough literary classics. Confidence also helps turn down the persistent cultural murmur that attributes “bias” to each and every identifying characteristic

about us, and helps us trust that our own life, with its God-given particularities, is a legitimate starting place from which we can appreciate, consider, and evaluate art. “Anyone who reads,” muses Wallace Stegner in his novel *Crossing to Safety*, “is to some extent a citizen of the world.” We all have space to grow, of course, but the humbly confident reader knows it’s okay to begin the reading journey with the perspective and knowledge we are equipped with right now.

A third and final element of good reading is honesty, particularly honesty about our own woundedness. **Stratford Caldecott** elaborates on the value of our wounds:

A wound, if you think about it, is an occasion when what is within us is exposed, when the life-blood is poured out and becomes accessible to others. In Christ’s case, what is within him is love, the Holy Spirit. The places where human sins inflicted pain on him are the very places where, because that pain was accepted on our behalf and for our sake, Christ’s love was most fully expressed.

Wounds in our own lives can come from other-inflicted trauma, or from personal shortcomings that led us astray. So often we can be tempted to paper over these wounds, because if, as Caldecott explains, wounds expose our most vital selves to others, they make us vulnerable. The parts of ourselves that wounds reveal may be less flattering—or even downright hideous—and we clamor to turn our own eyes and those of others away. In books worth reading, we meet broken, scarred characters living in the midst of the messy world where there are no simple solutions. If we are honest, such characters have the potential to reflect rays of ourselves back at us, and with the safety of a bit of paper-enforced distance, we can watch someone wrangle with their wounds. While some may spiral down into self-destruction, some may come out on top—more empathetic, wise, or brave. Even Christ’s wounds weren’t edited away from his glorified body; they remain, sacrificial scars that tell a tale of love. Perhaps our own wounds are similar raw material for greatness.

If we are to be a pilgrim people whose hearts encompass the whole world, we can’t circle our wagons and set up camp in “safe spaces,” listening only to voices that agree with our own. Certainly, we can take the time to scan opposing media outlets now and then, but even more fruitful may be the practice of picking up a book, perhaps a classic novel of historical relevance, or a more contemporary book, recommended for its craft and literary heft by a trusted source. Many will struggle with what they find between the covers of such books. Whether it is a dense writing style, an unfamiliar time period, or even scandalous characters, there are many stumbling blocks to trip a reader between the beginning and “The End.” However, honest, confident contemplation of such literature, tempered with a dash of humility, may equip us with a surprising new appreciation of humanity’s common challenges and a new ability to listen, learn from, and engage with those who seem to dwell on the other side of insurmountable divides.

This article is adapted from the Well-Read Mom’s “Criteria for Book Choices,” crafted collaboratively by Carla Galdo and Colleen Hutt, with assistance from the ideas of Marcie Stokman, Alison Solove, and the other women of the Well-Read Mom Leadership Team.

Well-Read Mom is a national book discussion group that accompanies women in the reading of great books and spiritual classics to encourage personal growth, friendship, and meaningful conversations, in order to explore the human condition and reorient women to what is good, beautiful, and true. Find out more information about Well-Read Mom, and how to join, at www.wellreadmom.com.

