

Learning from Literature

Reading is an essential skill, but it is also an enormously pleasurable pastime. **Clare Llewellyn West** offers some words of wisdom on literature as a personal development tool.

What will you be reading on the beach this year?



Holiday time is approaching – and whether your choice is action and adventure, lounging on the beach or chasing new cultural experiences, I am willing to bet that you intend to do some reading while you are away. For most people, holiday reading means nothing heavy or professional – just a few good novels.

However, I believe that sidelining fiction to the beach and the bedside table is missing its potential as a wonderful personal development tool. I am also quite sure that, were I to be faced with prolonged isolation on that mythical desert island instead of just a couple of weeks in the sun, I would be begging for a pile of books to take with me, and that they would almost all be novels.

I know that my professional colleagues are great readers – the networks are always bubbling with recommendations of their favourite self-development bibles, management guides and learning manuals – yet I hardly ever see a reference to works of fiction. Similarly, there are often references to what can be learnt from reality shows on the TV but only a few to drama or films. Is this because we believe that we can only learn from real life, or because it seems more respectable to recommend the latest management guru than your favourite novelist?

I don't know why we are so coy about fiction, but I do believe quite passionately that fiction and drama can develop our creativity, expand our view of the world and teach us more about our fellow man, and ourselves, than any number of self-improvement books, biographies or training manuals. I am not dismissing those sources, but I am saying that they will always leave us short.

Defining terms

Now that I am embarked on the stormy sea of this topic I feel I should define my terms. What do I mean by literature? Is it just classics, written by dead authors? Not in my view. I am referring to literature in its broadest sense and I would certainly not confine myself to those books that have been accepted as classics, although I would hope that most of the books I read (and I am a voracious reader of fiction) had some artistic value.

The Compact Oxford¹ dictionary defines literature as ‘written works, especially those regarded as having artistic merit’. No mention of classics or dead poets there – only the slightly vague concept of ‘merit’. Fiction is defined as ‘prose literature ... describing imaginary events and people’.

The power of narrative as a learning tool

The notion of artistic merit is tricky, of course, because it is inevitably based on a subjective judgement, but I like to think that ours is a profession well versed in dealing with subjectivity. More cunning minds than mine – cultural and judicial – have struggled to define artistic merit, but I suppose my own definition in the context of fiction would be, ‘work that conveys some metaphorical and emotional truth about the world through the competent use of language’.

To take an example from the top of the bestseller lists, Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* is a cracking tale but is generally agreed to lack artistic merit as it is not regarded as being particularly well written. However I would give it credit for telling the truth. Don’t panic. While I love a conspiracy theory as much as the next person I am not claiming that it is literally true, but I do consider there is truth in the underlying contention that Western society has manipulated Christian teaching to force women into an inferior role in society. If you read the book as a metaphor of that process it has some real merit. The book has two of the elements crucial to the power of fiction: it tells a story (however wild and far fetched) and it has some underlying truth attached to it.

Emotional engagement

Most of us now acknowledge the power of narrative as a learning tool, engaging as it does with both modes of thought: the logical linear mode and the holistic ability to work with patterns and complex associations. Those of us who consciously use stories in our work also realise that a narrative can carry a ‘truth’ that is not the literal story but the underlying myth or message. Jung knew it – and at some level so does anyone who has ever read stories to young children.

So why *do* we read stories to young children? Stories help them to develop a mastery of language and an understanding of abstract concepts long before we teach these things by formal means. Oh ... and because it is fun. Storytelling involves that essential element of learning – emotion. Stories engage us emotionally – whether it is the thrill of an unfolding mystery, the delicious terror of something frightening, the wonder of entering someone else’s head for a while and sharing their feelings and view of the world.

That last is, to me, the ultimate pleasure and the greatest learning to be had from literature. It is the most extraordinary way to enter into an understanding of people and situations you may never experience in your own life. I think in fact that art, in all its forms, is perhaps the only way we can capture real pleasure or real pain and share it fully with others.

And that takes us immediately into a whole realm of thinking which is central to many of us in our professional lives – the understanding and management of discrimination and prejudice. It is easy to be a right-on 21st century thinker and dismiss all prejudice as evil and misguided. It is much harder to understand both the impact of prejudice and its roots, but I suspect that any genuine changes in attitude need to start there.

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Understanding different attitudes

Through literature we enter the mindset of people whose upbringing and imposed values can be totally different from our own. Whether you read historical or contemporary novels, you can begin to understand at quite a profound level the way culture can impose a perspective. That in turn teaches us about the quantum leap that is sometimes needed to overturn prejudice, and reminds us that we too may be limiting our view of the world because of prejudices outside our own awareness.

The bricks and mortar story

But instead of writing about storytelling let me pause here and tell you a story. There is a house in London – it is known as Dennis Severs’ House and the address is 18 Folgate Street, Spitalfields. Severs himself is now dead, but he impressed his personality so firmly on the place that his name remains attached to it. Severs was a boy from small town California who was drawn to the romance and history of London and who was genuinely disappointed when he arrived in the late 60s to find historic buildings being pulled down and modern structures put in their place.

He bought a derelict house in one of the oldest parts of London and became a ‘time traveller’. He lived in the house without electricity or modern comforts in much the same way as its inhabitants might have done in the early 18th century. He created the fictional Jervis family and allowed the ‘evidence’ of their presence, including half-eaten meals, chamber pots and discarded clothes, to fill the house.

Into other worlds

Science fiction and fantasy has the powerful ability to overturn our world picture and make us ask ‘What if...?’ This can develop our creativity and make us more open-minded. The range is extraordinary; from a lightweight read like the *Discworld* novels of the brilliant wordslinger Terry Pratchett, through the extraordinary elaboration and narrative force of Iain M Banks, to the literary heavyweight Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. And if you are hooked on Harry Potter then try *The Dark Is Rising Sequence* by Susan Cooper, *His Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman and the *Wind on Fire* trilogies by William Nicholson – all dark, challenging and well written.

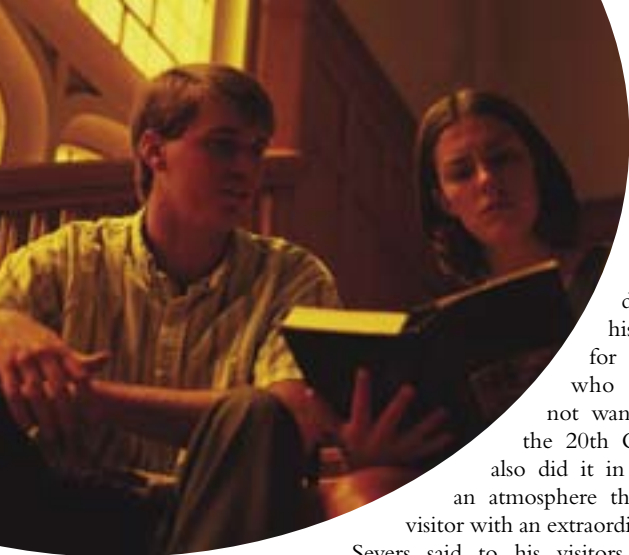
The historic mindset

L.P. Hartley said that ‘the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there’.² Fiction can give us powerful access to that foreign land. Three of my favourite authors have the extraordinary ability to take us inside the mind of people whose whole experience is not just a world away from our own, but a time warp distant.

One of my earliest loves was the work of Rosemary Sutcliffe which could take me effortlessly into the mind and the life of a child living hundreds of years before. I am sure that my abiding interest in history can be laid firmly at her door.

George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* is a supreme example of a classic that enables us to study a world where attitudes to women’s roles were utterly different from our own. It is all the stronger for being written by a woman who broke so many of the conventions of her own society.

A contemporary author with the same power is Barry Unsworth. *Sacred Hunger* is a brilliant exploration of the slave trade that not only evokes that world, but also takes us into the psyche of people whose mindset was so distant from our own.



Why did he do it? Firstly, for his own enjoyment, for he was a man who genuinely did not want to be part of the 20th Century. But he also did it in order to create an atmosphere that provided the visitor with an extraordinary experience.

Severs said to his visitors, 'I'm going to bombard your senses. I will get the 20th century out of your eyes, ears and everything.' The *feeling* of being in another century was what mattered to him, not historical accuracy. He felt that people would learn what life in the past was like from the sights, smells and atmosphere of his house. In the words of an obituary, 'Severs was a true original, an artist of perverse genius who created a three-dimensional historical novel out of bricks and mortar and timber and the objects he picked up for a song on countless stalls'.⁴

Severs believed that the house represented the role of the senses and the imagination in understanding anything. And that is what distinguishes *18 Folgate Street* from any number of historically accurate but sterile reconstructions. Fiction teaches us in the same way by invoking the senses and emotion and by triggering our imagination.

Conclusion

I was going to round off this article with a list of my favourite books, but then I would have to choose a few key titles – rather, I think the whole point of this article is that it is the whole range of 'leisure' reading that contributes to our learning. Instead, I thought I would share my current reading pile and what I hope to get out of it.

I am just finishing *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami – which tells a story of adolescent love, delight and despair, and is a riveting demonstration of common human experience alongside an exhibition of deep cultural differences. After that I will go for something lighter, *The Full Cupboard of Life* by Alexander McCall Smith. It is one of the *No 1 Ladies Detective Agency* series. I know it will tell a good tale and amuse me but also give me pause for thought and provide further insights into a rich set of positive cultural values. The rest of my pile includes *Small Island* by Andrea Levy, which I suspect will shift my understanding of what it means to be marked as an outsider. Then there is *The Amateur Marriage* by Anne Tyler, which I know will be engaging, astounding and insightful. Finally for sheer fun and extravagant creativity *The Well of Lost Plots*, the third in Jasper Fforde's *Eyre Affair* series. I am also intending to re-read *Unless* by Carol Shields; so far as I am concerned, this extraordinary study of what it means to be a woman and a parent is quite simply the best book I have read in recent years.

I am sure that I will learn from them all, and I know I will have a great deal of pleasure in the process, and don't we all believe that learning should generally be a pleasure? So whatever you do when you go on holiday, pack a few good books and make the most of the opportunity to stretch your mind and your emotions. 📖

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The Shakespeare phenomenon

The exception to the no fiction here please rule is Shakespeare – possibly because of his unrivalled position in the literary pantheon, maybe because of his profound insights into human nature and perhaps because he is safely dead.

Shakespeare is used as a learning tool in situations ranging from top flight management schools to old people's homes and community projects for disaffected youngsters. His settings and situations are historically distant and in some cases fantasies, but the magic key, when turned, is that his world is populated by characters with real and compelling problems, reactions and thoughts.

We may not believe in ghosts but we know that the reaction of Hamlet to his dead father and Macbeth to his murdered colleague represent real psychological truths. We may dismiss the intricacies and wild coincidences of a plot that tears Romeo and Juliet from one another but we do recognise the passionate truth of first love and adolescent absolutism. We may have no interest in English history but we are compelled by the way the young Henry V takes on his new role, and matures before our eyes into an inspirational leader.

Book list

- Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, Corgi Adult, 2004.
- Terry Pratchett, The Discworld series.
Visit www.terrypratchettbooks.com to find out more.
- Iain M Banks, *Consider Phlebas*, Orbit, 1992.
- Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Vintage, 1996.
- Susan Cooper, *The Dark Is Rising Sequence*, Puffin, 2004.
- Philip Pullman, *His Dark Materials*, Scholastic, 2001.
- William Nicholson, *The Wind Singer*, Egmont, 2003.
- Rosemary Sutcliffe, *The Eagle of the Ninth*, Oxford University Press, 2000.
- George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Penguin Classics), Penguin Books Ltd, 2003.
- Barry Unsworth, *Sacred Hunger*, Penguin Books Ltd, 1993.
- Haruki Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*, Vintage, 2001.
- Alexander McCall Smith, *The Full Cupboard of Life*, Abacus, 2004.
- Andrea Levy, *Small Island*, Review, 2004.
- Anne Tyler, *The Amateur Marriage*, Vintage, 2004.
- Jasper Fforde, *The Well of Lost Plots*, New English Library, 2004.
- Carol Shields, *Unless*, Fourth Estate Ltd, 2002.
- Almost anything by William Shakespeare, Jane Austen or Charles Dickens

References

1. The Compact Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd Edition, Oxford University Press, 2002.
2. LP Hartley, *The Go-Between*, Penguin Books Ltd, 2000.
3. Dennis Severs' House, 18 Folgate Street, Spitalfields, London. To take a virtual tour visit www.dennissevershouse.co.uk
4. Gavin Stamp, 'Obituary', *The Guardian*, 10 January 2000.