

What you can only learn from Literature*

In such troubled times as these, when we feel adrift, literature always gives us some coordinates to steer by. Anne Frank stated it clearly: "Ordinary people don't know how much books can mean to someone who's cooped up". Literature places a mirror in front of us and asks: Are we free?

Something happens to your body when you read Homer. An old truth that shakes you up and opens your eyes. You become Ulysses with the Trojan horse. Italo Calvino wrote: "A classic is a book which has never exhausted all it has to say to its readers." He also reminded us that the classics shape our future experience, creating models, contents, terms of comparison, systems of classification, sets of values, epitomes of beauty. Every piece of reading leaves a trace even though we don't notice it at first.

Thanks to our imagination we have made up myths and stories; we have drawn the technology of the future and we have dreamed of journeys to the stars. Poetic intuitions have been at the core of progress in science. Detailed chronicles have led us to understand the compact structure of the atom. "Literature, including the most ancient, oral, creates ideas and marks out perspectives that sink deeply into our minds and format them, *whether we like it or not*". The italics are ours; the sentence Olga Tokarczuk's.

Access to literature must be universal. There must be no boundaries.

Because literature wakes us up and shakes us, and switches our minds on. It is our fuel and our fire. We read in solitude, yet we are not alone when we read. We are tangled with the times and the characters that open up to us in the book, we empathise with fictional characters who suggest new traits when we come back from our journey. Because literature is the contradiction and the nuance that we owe to ourselves as individuals and as part of society.

Perhaps literature won't turn us into better human beings, but it will leave upon those who read the marks of the world's amplitude and diversity. Besides, sharing what we read with friends, acquaintances, classmates, book club members, or on social media, will give us the same pleasure as the act of reading itself, or even more: talking about books is a way of rewriting them. The history of literature is the history of reading; it goes beyond public book burning, censorship, and the sound and the fury of our electronic devices.

There may be not many of us, but it is not only figures that count. We form a well-articulated ecosystem: readers, writers, translators, publishers, literary critics, bookshop owners and librarians. We are bound by literature. That is why we want to bring prestige to this network and proclaim the value of books. Because what literature teaches us can only be learned by reading literature. Because literature deals with things that concern us all: courage, fear, friendship, death, love, solidarity.

Those who read know why they read. It's up to you whether you read or not.

Anyway, there is no need to worry. Even if you don't care about literature, literature will always care about you. That, too, is something we've learned from books.

Pro-Literature Manifesto, promoted by the Meettok Foundation.

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