

Fall 2017

## Literature as Counterculture

A conversation with Robert P. Waxler

Interviewed by ALLEN MENDENHALL

Robert P. Waxler is professor of English at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth and cofounder of the Changing Lives Through Literature program.

**AM: I'm grateful for this interview, Bob. As you know, I read and enjoyed your book *The Risk of Reading*. Your latest, coauthored with Martha Pennington, is titled *Why Reading Books Still Matters* and addresses themes you've undertaken in the past. One would hope that reading books wouldn't need any defense, but apparently that's not the case.**

RW: Thanks, Allen. Yes, part of the problem is the screen culture, the speed and power of it, the way it distracts and disembodies, fragments our attention, distances us from the depth of ourselves. Screens invite us to watch, to surf the current that pulls us along. By contrast, books, especially literature (which is the focus of our interest here), slow us down, offer an opportunity to be attentive, to feel the pulse of human experience, to become self-reflective. That is "the power of literature in Digital Times" (the subtitle of our book).

So when Martha and I talk about "reading books," we are not talking merely about the books silently sitting on the shelf, but something alive, something that calls to the reader, something that invites dialogue and discussion, something that can excite the deepest dimensions of our imagination, and something that, once actively engaged, can stir the human heart.

In the first part of our book, we examine the digital world, its meaning and implications, living life onscreen and online, its impact on education and literacy. Too often, we find the digital world diminished and dehumanized. Then, we counter this kind of life, exploring the value and ongoing importance of reading fiction and poetry, arguing that literature still provides us with the best chance to preserve our human identity, to build a truly democratic society, to know the depth and dignity of



Imagination it is that shapes society—moral imagination, or idyllic imagination, or diabolic imagination.

Russell Kirk

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N E W S

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ourselves.

**AM: It's important to point out that you and Martha don't deny that digital technology offers benefits and relieves burdens. But you are sober about its function, effects, and potential. You focus on its negatives, which are all too often ignored or overlooked. What are some of these?**

RW: Yes, Martha and I certainly acknowledge the benefits of digital technology and the screen culture, but we are particularly concerned with the way great books (especially literary fiction and poetry) have been pushed to the margins as the screen culture has gained control over our lives. We argue that the deep reading of significant literature is a countercultural activity, a way of preserving what we think of as the enduring human values, now threatened by the overuse of digital media.

Literature, for example, offers us an opportunity to experience the complexity and multi-dimensionality of our human identity through language and narrative; digital media, by contrast, seems to offer a much more restricted and surface sense of self, with an emphasis on visual images and flickering screens. In a similar context, "great books" offer us a journey to enrichment, a discovery of beauty and truth, as well as a serious encounter with our vulnerability, even mortality; by contrast, digital technology seems to offer endless entertainment, popular culture for consumption, the "pop and bling" of short-term sensation and perpetual now. The screen culture, with its visual images and algorithms, privileges efficiency and speed over thoroughness and dedicated time; it emphasizes quantification and measurement, cleverness and smartness, rather than knowledge and wisdom.

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We also need to consider the way we interact with our screens and the way we interact with literary books. Google, Amazon, Facebook (and so on) control our lives much the way a GPS system controls our driving from one place to another. When we use a GPS system, we do not internalize the experience—it's a disembodied experience we might say. We outsource our body and mind to the machine. As a result, if we try to take the same route without the GPS system, we often do not know where we are; we are lost.

By contrast, when we read a book deeply, we feel a personal resonance; we embody the experience as if we are enacting the language. We listen to the voice of the narrator, but we also control, as Birkerts has pointed out, the rhythm of the reading experience, moving at our own bodily rhythm and pace. We participate in the unfolding story, making it part of us. The story, in other words, lives within us, even after we close the

- ★ National Review
  - ★ The Heritage Foundation
  - ★ Ethics and Public Policy Center
  - ★ Books & Culture
  - ★ The New Atlantis
  - ★ The New Criterion (and blog)
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  - ★ The New Inquiry
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  - ★ Good Letters Blog
  - ★ The American Spectator
  - ★ The American Conservative
  - ★ Front Porch Republic
  - ★ Anamnesis Journal
  - ★ The City (from HBU)
  - ★ Lapham's Quarterly
  - ★ Bookworm from KCRW
  - ★ G. K. Chesterton Institute
  - ★ The Catholic Thing
  - ★ What's Wrong with the World?
  - ★ The Western Confucian
  - ★ The Tocqueville Forum
  - ★ National Humanities Institute
  - ★ The Center for Vision & Values at Grove City College
  - ★ Ricochet
  - ★ Chronicles
  - ★ Arion
  - ★ Via Meadia at The American Interest
  - ★ The Distributist Review
  - ★ Journal of Catholic Legal Studies
  - ★ The Library of Law and Liberty
  - ★ Huron County Extract
  - ★ The Academy of Philosophy and Letters
  - ★ Southern Literary Review
  - ★ The Dorchester Review
  - ★ The Independent Institute
  - ★ C.S. Lewis Society of California
  - ★ Crisis Magazine
  - ★ Liberty Island
  - ★ The New York C. S. Lewis Society
  - ★ Starting Points Journal
  - ★ Australian Chesterton Society
- P U B L I S H E R S
- ★ Yale University Press
  - ★ Eerdmans
  - ★ Harvard University Press
  - ★ Catholic University Press
  - ★ Princeton University Press
  - ★ Encounter Books
  - ★ Ivan R. Dee
  - ★ Oxford University Press
  - ★ Cambridge University Press
  - ★ University of Chicago Press
  - ★ Farrar Straus Giroux
  - ★ St Augustine's Press
  - ★ Ignatius Press
  - ★ University of Missouri Press
  - ★ The University Press of Kentucky
  - ★ The Crumpled Press
  - ★ Slant Books
  - ★ Wiseblood Books
  - ★ Cluny Media

book itself. One result of all this is that we learn about ourselves, gain personal knowledge, expand our possibilities.

In addition, I would say that, in general, screen culture is fixated on the present moment and offers little sense of temporal coherence or spatial rootedness. When we rapidly move from one screen to the next, we might experience an impulse or temporary sensation, information for short-term memory, perhaps. Engaged in language unfolding in a novel, though, we experience the past and the present, anticipate the future, and we sense a location in time. We are attentive through time, and so can make the reading experience part of our long-term memory, part of our expanding human identity.

**AM: Lately I've read articles about the decline of e-book and Kindle sales and the concomitant increase in traditional book sales. Amazon is now moving to brick-and-mortar stores. I wonder if consumers are aware, at least at some level, of the conditions you've mentioned.**

RW: The print book does seem to be surviving in Digital Times, but what that actually means is somewhat difficult to gauge. The e-book offers portability and convenience, for example. You can carry several books at the same time on a small electronic device. By comparison, people seem to prefer print books when they are reading to children or want to share books with others. Students tell me that they also like e-books because they are less expensive than print books, but if they want to stay attentive and really “get into the book,” then they prefer print. Print books foster an embodied experience. You can feel the paper, flip the pages back and forth with your fingers, develop a spatial sense of where what you read earlier in the book is located. Even the smell of the book makes a difference. The screen distances the reader from the text—and, I would say, from the voice of the author as well. It fosters a disembodied experience.

It is also interesting to consider how and what people are reading. People are not reading the same kind of books they read in the past. As my co-author Martha likes to remind

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me, most people are “reading lite” rather than “reading heavy.” The reading level of books is lower, they are shorter, the level of editing is down, and self-published books are now common, often furthering the values of consumerism and popular culture rather than literary art.

There is also a tendency to read faster when using e-books, to read on the surface rather than move deeply into the flow of the reading experience, and to multitask while reading, with one hand free to do other things, distracting the reader from the depth of the story unfolding through the language of the book itself. In fact, the e-book seems to reduce the imaginative act of reading—what makes reading difficult but especially rewarding when successful. Unlike the physicality and

sensuous quality of print books, the e-book often diminishes the attentive focus necessary to fully absorb the details that transport us into the meaningful pleasure of great books.

Part of the problem is that the screen culture has become the mainstream culture, favoring the visual over the textual, privileging images over words. Reading online, and through screens, affects the way we behave, and so the way we read now. Quick absorption of information rather than slow and thoughtful processing is typical of the current behavior, often celebrated as smartness and efficient thinking. The e-book as a device encourages such behavior, at times despite itself.

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In general, e-reading on electronic devices is worthwhile if you are reading for bits of information, but if you are attempting to gain knowledge, seeking wisdom to “know thyself,” then print books, especially literary narrative and poetry, continue to have the advantage. As Max Bruinsma once put it, “screens are for watching, paper for reading.”

**AM: Do you think the quality of writing for magazines and news media has degenerated as well? Would this decline, if it exists, be a symptom of what we’re talking about?**

RW: “Writing-lite” is the flip side of “reading-lite”—that is, in one sense, writing is reading, and reading is writing—so it follows that if reading is degenerating, then writing is degenerating as well. Furthermore, writing for most magazines and news media has always been writing to provide fleeting information to readers, not necessarily to engage in significant dialogue that might lead to a grasp of long-term knowledge and truth. Most magazines and news media outlets in Digital Times do not make long-form attempts to capture an enduring truth. They offer short articles, easily consumed, ephemeral, almost empty texts. Admittedly, this is not a new problem, but it has been exasperated by screens and electronic devices. Walter Benjamin was talking about it a century or so ago: “The value of information does not survive the moment in which it is news. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time.” Writing for most magazines and news media has now become an exercise in the process of forgetting—an offer, quick and easy, a form of distraction, entertainment to be consumed.

Much writing today is governed by the same screen-culture behavior we have been discussing; it is not writing for discovery, but for entertainment, the “pop and bling” lifestyle (as Martha likes to put it), the shiny object that ushers in the emptiness of celebrity, the glitter without human meaning or purpose. There are a few magazines that still honor the long-form in print, but they are the rare exceptions. At times, they offer something well-earned, something original to think about. By contrast, cable news networks seem primarily

interested in creating “hives” of readers/listeners, simply offering the same images over and over again to an audience already supporting the ideology of the network. They count on their followers to agree, not necessarily to think.

Writing online obviously is targeting readers online, and both writing and reading are changed by the digital screen. Sound files and video clips, even commercial advertising, often interrupt the flow of the text, for example, making reading and writing fragmented and jumpy. Short words, short sentences, short paragraphs, tweets struggling against visual effects, hyperlinks, bells and whistles—all point to the diminution of language as if the goal is an empty text. Visualized and computerized news and magazines with flash (pop and bling) easily trump the complexity and density of print and long-form articles, in general. As print fades, giving way to digital screens and shortened attention spans, writing loses its complexity, its attempt at discovery and enduring values, its traditional journey into the mysterious depth of human knowledge.

**AM: What’s the solution, or solutions, to this problem, if any?**

RW: Human beings are born with an innate desire to learn, and that learning process includes not only the acquisition of practical skills, information about how to survive and make a living, but also what Socrates claimed as the real goal of learning, the fundamental quest for human knowledge and the good life: to know the self. Socrates was more interested in the “who” than the “what,” something deeper and more holistic than what we usually experience with digital gadgets and social media. It should not be surprising that Socrates came up with his ideas without any help from smartphones or the Internet.

Digital technology moves us further and further away from the Socratic sense of what it means to be human and what it is that we really desire to learn. In fact, digital technology seems, too often, to insist that we have no depth, no interior self, no possibility for imaginative and humane coherence, that we are nothing but material goods, what can be measured and quantified. At times, the technology likes to tell us what we desire before we even have a chance to focus our attention on it.

Martha and I believe that encounters with great literature can provide at least a glimpse of what Socrates and other traditional thinkers advocate.

Digital technology is clearly an important part of the world today, but literature, and the humanities in

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general, offers a counterweight to the rampant speed and power that digital devices insist on. Our schools, for example, should create a balanced curriculum, giving much more emphasis than they usually do to fiction and poetry, to books without the use of digital devices, to the kind of activity that acknowledges that something in ourselves, deep down, connects to other human

beings, makes us human.

Literature is not a magic bullet, a single solution to the complex issues of our Digital Times, but literature is essential to human life and education. Without it, we are diminished, hollowed out, increasingly becoming nodes on an electronic grid. Books make us human.

Books, and the culture of books that gives a place to literature and language (rather than screens and images), should be recognized as a central part of our critical heritage and a superior resource for learning. The visual experience is very powerful in human beings, but we seem now to be drawn obsessively to the visual, to the flashing, colorful computer screen, the pop and bling lifestyle. We need to be more attentive to language, especially literary language. Unlike the language of the media, of politics, of advertising, which seeks to control and manipulate others, literary language encourages empathy and compassion, various perspectives, multi-dimensional possibilities, and a variety of individual interpretations.

Martha and I are convinced that in today's world, people need space and time in schools and in public places where they shut off their electronic gadgets, where they quietly read works of great literature, and where they discuss that literature in the presence of other human beings, face-to-face. Like No-Fly Zones, there should be No Wi-Fi Zones, countercultural spaces where literature and language help to maintain the traditional sense of what it means to live a good life and to preserve our humanity.

**AM: How would you define great literature? Can technology be used as a force in its service, or are we moving inexorably toward some post-literary future?**

RW: Martha and I believe that human story shaped through language significantly contributes to our individual identities and, at the same time, creates connections to the community that we interact with. Story evokes story, builds community, and we locate ourselves through the stories that we hear and tell. Language and story, when working well, are like a covenant between us and others, heart-felt and deep, helping to give us purpose and direction. Great literature has much of the same quality.

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The kind of literature we are talking about is not just for entertainment, but for discovery, not for consumption but for questing and questioning. It has an aesthetic authority and personal resonance, appealing in its vibrant language and rhythm. You can read the same work a hundred times, and each time you will be surprised by it, find something new in it, be startled by it, wonder how you missed the meaning of this detail or that one.

Unlike commercial and most genre fiction, great literature cannot be consumed, and it will not consume you. Yet great literature can be considered dangerous, at times risky, taking the reader on a quest into unknown territory, offering a glimpse of the unfamiliar. Through the quality of the language—metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony—this kind of literature has the capacity to make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar, to evoke memory, to read us as we read it. Unlike popular and commercial literature, great literature demands our time and attention. It draws us to what cannot be measured or defined—not commercialized or quantified. It is implicit rather than explicit, not asserting solutions to problems, but offering significant questions that need to be pondered. That is part of its pleasure and joy.

An encounter with the richly textured aesthetic language of books is as challenging as it is fulfilling. It helps keep us human, in part at least because, at its best, it moves us beyond cultural and political differences, makes us more empathetic and more willing to acknowledge our shared vulnerability and mortality.

It does seem as if we are moving toward some kind of post-literary future. But Martha and I do not think this is inevitable. Each generation produces great readers, curious minds that desire to join the adventure of reading great books. There will always be people who believe in books, as long as books are there for them to be called. Mobile devices and other electronic gadgets could serve books, too, I suppose—mainly by pointing out why reading books still matters. 🚩

Allen Mendenhall is associate dean at Faulkner University Thomas Goode Jones School of Law and executive director of the Blackstone & Burke Center for Law & Liberty. Visit his website at [AllenMendenhall.com](http://AllenMendenhall.com).

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**On Beyond Think Tanks**

Gerald J. Russello

Fall 2013

