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Summer 2015

Learning What We Don't Know

The Risk of Reading: How Literature Helps Us to Understand Ourselves and the World
by Robert P. Waxler.
Bloomsbury, 2014.
Paper, 191 pages, \$30.



ALLEN MENDENHALL

The conservative believes that the individual is foolish, although the species is wise; therefore, unlike the confident intellectual, he declines to undertake the reconstruction of society and human nature.

Russell Kirk

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I begin with a trigger warning. The following review contains references that could evoke strong feelings about the nature and purpose of literature, a manifestly

dangerous field of human creativity consisting of stories about, and representations of, highly sensitive and potentially upsetting subjects, including but not limited to racism, rape, classism, war, sex, violence, imperialism, colonialism, religious persecution, suicide, and death. Those who find discussions or descriptions of such demonstrably timeless elements of human experience unpalatable or offensive should consult medical professionals before reading this review or the book it promotes. Readers are encouraged not to engage any aspect of this review, or the book under review, that might provoke hurtful memories, grave discomfort, or existential angst.

Reading is precarious enough as it is, without having to introduce concepts or narratives about complex perennial themes, fictional renderings of plausible and fantastic events, or the contingencies of everyday life. Therefore, if you feel you must avoid material that elicits a passionate or emotional response derived from the inevitably discomfiting features of both lived and imagined experience, then you must not only bypass Robert P. Waxler's *The Risk of Reading* but also lock yourself in a closet, plug your ears with your fingers, and shout *la la la la la* until you're no longer aware of your subjective self and the sometimes painful, sometimes joyous ubiquity of reality.

NEWS

  We are pleased to announce the release of *The University Bookman on Edmund Burke*, now available for Kindle. Collecting 21 reviews, essays, and interviews from the Bookman on the life and thought of Edmund Burke, this book is only \$2.99, and purchases support our ongoing work to provide an imaginative defense of the Permanent Things. (3 Mar 2015)

  Congratulations to *Bookman* contributor Caleb Stegall, who was selected for a seat on the Kansas Supreme Court. We wish him all the best. (28 Dec 2014)

OTHER SITES OF INTEREST

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-   National Review
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-   Books & Culture
-   The New Atlantis
-   The New Criterion (and blog)
-   Intercollegiate Studies Institute
-   First Principles Journal
-   The Acton Institute
-   The New Inquiry
-   Reconciling Remus and Rome (Andrea Kirk Assaf)
-   Image (Image)

Enough of that. If you're still reading, you agree to hold harmless this reviewer, Robert Waxler, and the editors and publishers of this journal for any claims or damages resulting from serious discussions of literature. You're hereby warned: reading is *risky*—hence the title of Waxler's book.

Not just reading, but *deep* reading, is risky, according to Waxler, because it teaches us “about who we are and where we are located in the midst of complexities in the world.” Deep reading disturbs the satisfying complacency of both ignorance and certitude. It can make you unhappy, challenge your most cherished presuppositions, and force you to think rigorously and laboriously about the nature of human relations and our place in the world. A life without reading isn't so risky, at least for those who prefer not to be bothered with inconvenient narrative or exposed to different points of view. Knowing you're right without working for understanding is easy. Why get distraught? Why not simply “know” without having to exert yourself in contemplation, without exercising your imaginative powers?

My generation, the millennials, will take shameless offense at Waxler's notion that we are situated, temporal beings with definite bounds and limitations, little insignificant persons in a vast web of human history, near-nothings within a cosmic

- ☰☆ Good Letters Blog
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- ☰☆ Lapham's Quarterly
- ☰☆ Bookworm from KCRW
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- ☰☆ The Catholic Thing
- ☰☆ What's Wrong with the World?
- ☰☆ The Western Confucian
- ☰☆ The Tocqueville Forum
- ☰☆ National Humanities Institute
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- ☰☆ Ricochet
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- ☰☆ 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

PUBLISHER SITES

- ☰☆ Yale University Press

totality who are destined to suffer the fate of every living thing. This may be overstating, if not misrepresenting, Waxler's presiding themes, but the anti-egoist premise is implicit in his chapters. It is an irrefutable premise at odds with my generation's prized assumption that the knowing self is fluid and permeable, subject to the malleable constructions of choice and chance, always appropriable and appropriated—never fixed, never closed, never immutable, never assigned.

For my generation, the anything-goes-except-standards generation, slow reading—deep reading—is anathema, the kind of tedious exercise rendered unnecessary by hypertext and the rhyzomatic Internet. A studied appreciation for nuanced story and linguistic narrative has been replaced by an insatiable craving for instant gratification, by trite sound bites and fragmented data, by graspable bullet points and ready access to reduced testimony. We've got information at our hands, this generation of mine, but no wisdom or knowledge in our heads.

Although he does not come right out and say so explicitly, Waxler seems to have my generation in mind. He portrays himself as “someone who grew up with books but now finds himself surrounded by screens, consumer sensation, data streams, [and] the spectacle of electronic circuitry

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- ≡☆ University of Missouri Press
- ≡☆ The University Press of Kentucky
- ≡☆ The Crumpled Press
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masquerading as public transparency.” A child today cannot avoid these technological distractions. Waxler’s not an old fogey intent on bemoaning new media for the sake of the cozy familiar or Luddite quixotism; rather, he’s worried about what is happening to reading as much as to readers when the rhetorical medium incentivizes rank inattentiveness and scattered interest.

Reading properly, in Waxler’s view, teaches us how much we do not know, not how much we know, about our mysterious universe and human interaction. Consequently and paradoxically, he maintains, reading improves and expands our tacit knowledge about the quotidian things that shape our lives and inform our decisions, the subtle things we might overlook or misapprehend if we aren’t attentive. And we’re not attentive, most of the time—at least that’s what Waxler appears to mean by his emphasis on “the distraction of each flickering instant” in which “information and data pull us away from ourselves, set themselves up as sovereign, as if they are all-knowing gods.”

Having paid homage to deep reading in his introductory chapter, Waxler puts his deep reading, or the fruits of his deep reading, on display. He examines nine texts in as many chapters: *Genesis* (the creation account), *Frankenstein*, *Alice in*

Wonderland, *Heart of Darkness*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Fight Club*, and *The Sense of an Ending*. Then there's a brief concluding chapter on the future of linguistic narrative—not a prediction or prophecy but a call to pensive action. These books have it all—sex, violence, death, sin, rebellion. They are *risky*.

Waxler encourages us to face our vulnerabilities and insecurities by reading deeply and widely, ever mindful of the nuances and possibilities of language and story. His subjects proceed chronologically, *Genesis* being the oldest text and *The Sense of Ending*, which was published just four years ago, the most recent. These subjects have little in common save for the high regard in which they're held by a critical mass of readers. It's premature to say whether some of these books are canonical—as in classics—but all of them are difficult and stirring: candidates for canonicity if they can prove their fitness over time.

All you need to know about Waxler's thesis resides in his title—and subtitle. He submits that his subjects are “risky” or “dangerous”—terms laced with sarcasm and irony—because they help us to make sense of other people and our surroundings, which together amount to culture and experience. Understanding our concrete phenomenal

surroundings, via literature, enables us to make sense of what Whitman called the “Me Myself,” or the “I” that was, for Descartes, the starting-point of metaphysics and epistemology—or so Waxler would have us believe.

Waxler’s thesis may be right—who can deny such broad claims?—but it doesn’t always play out as agreeably as it might in his analyses. Too much summary and synopsis presupposes a reader who hasn’t undertaken the primary text. Waxler’s local points are more interesting than his general conclusions about the worth of reading well and wisely—conclusions that, it must be said, are sufficiently apparent to go without saying, although they form the only discernable through-line in this exposition of disparate authors, texts, and time periods, and thus serve a vital function.

Waxler is not attempting to imbue his readers with cultural literacy; rather, he’s trying to teach them how to read deliberately. He echoes Kenneth Burke by suggesting that literature is equipment for living. We shouldn’t fail to recognize the skill with which Waxler dissects texts. The problem is that such dissection removes the strangeness of the reading experience, deprives the unseasoned reader of his chance to luxuriate in the sublime power of language and story. Waxler’s critical commentary simply cannot do what the

literary works themselves do: provoke, inspire, move, awe, stimulate, anger, shock, and hurt. Therefore, a sense of repetition and banality settles over Waxler's arguments: the biblical account of creation teaches truths regardless of whether it "happened"; Mary Shelley raises unanswerable questions about restraints on human ambition; Lewis Carroll's Alice finds meaning in a meaningless world; Joseph Conrad's Marlow and Kurtz help us "locate our own ongoing journey that defines us, each in our own way"; Hemingway's portrayal of Santiago at sea instills understanding about "the truth of the achievement, the accomplishment, and the loss"; and so on. You get the gist: readers are vicarious participants in the stories they read; thus, the stories are instructive about the self. Again, unoriginal—but also undeniable.

Conservatives will be surprised at the manner in which Waxler enlists men of the left to make some traditionalist-seeming points. He mentions Lacan and Foucault—known in conservative circles for French Theory, poststructuralism, jargon, pseudoscience, and psychobabble, among other things—for the proposition that literature transmits virtues and values that constructively guide human activity and orient moral learning. Such references implicitly warn about the risk and short-sightedness of closing individuals within ideological boxes that can be stored away without consequence—or

perhaps they demonstrate how creative thinkers can use just about anyone to make the points they want to make.

By all means read Waxler's book. But, *sooth to sayne*, if you really want a risk, if you really want to live dangerously, which is to say, as a self-aware, contemplative being, then you should—trigger warning, trigger warning!—read the books Waxler discusses rather than Waxler himself. I'm confident the risky Waxler would urge the same course. He's just that dangerous. 🚩🌟

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