



Literature Is Not About You

Turning fiction into self-help amounts to a refusal of experience.

Drew Calvert

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Calvert bisects his reading in the article, distinguishing between reading novels in daily life and interpreting them in an academic context. He “will tend not to interpret” books unless teaching them. Do you find yourself interpreting most books you read? If so, what compels you to? If not, do you ever make an exception and intentionally interpret your reading?
2. If the novel “exercises our capacity to love,” which novels have shaped or challenged your thinking about or expressions of love the most? How so?
3. In Iris Murdoch’s essay “Against Dryness,” which Calvert cites, she argues that literature can “give us a new vocabulary of experience.” Catholicism (as with all organized religion) offers its own moral language to understand the world. What “vocabularies” have you learned from the literary and Catholic worlds? Where and how might they differ? How do they inform your worldview?
4. Calvert posits that novels make us more empathetic or “democratic.” But, practical commitments to reading novels are increasingly uncommon in our age of streaming and short-form content. The article opens by highlighting the contrast between Calvert and the woman in the laundromat. If you read consistently, how do you find your encounters with nonreaders? Can a declining reading practice be the key to democracy? And if not reading, what alternative practices might help maintain a healthy democracy?
5. In writing about Virginia Woolf, Calvert echoes her opposition to therapy and calls himself instead a “partisan of the novel.” Are you, like Calvert, invested in “the novel’s therapeutic and civic potential”? Can reading truly supplant talk therapy or psychoanalysis? Are contemporary solutions for mental health so industrial as to be ineffective?
6. As Calvert notes, William James was open to a variety of what might be called “self-help” pursuits. Is there any room for more mechanistic varieties of self-help? Are novels and self-help mutually exclusive?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Roosevelt Montás, “Why Read?,” May 2026: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/montas-roosevelt-why-read-literacy-liberal-democracy-ai-douglass>

Drew Calvert, “A Guest of the Management,” March 2025: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/calvert-mba-humanities-silicon-valley-literature>

Burke Nixon, “Universally Mistaken,” December 2025: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/nixon-emma-jane-austen-250-burke-critics>