

Paolo Pitari

Robert P. Waxler, *The Risk of Reading: How Literature Helps Us to Understand Ourselves and the World*

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1 I specifically requested to review this book out of personal interest in works that offer ethical bases for dedication to literature. This interest was reinforced after learning a few biographical things about the author. Robert P. Waxler is an English professor at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth and, most importantly, he is co-founder of the Changing Lives Through Literature (CLTL) program. CLTL is “essentially a reading group that meets over a period of weeks and that is attended by an instructor, probation officer, judge, and students” (CLTL website); it is a bibliotherapy program that offers alternative probation sentences to offenders. Basically, individuals on probation can enroll and, if they show up to class, do their homework, and complete the course, their probation may be reduced. In other (rough) cases, they might run into penalizations. The program was founded on the idea –constantly repeated in *The Risk of Reading (RoR)* –that literature *does* affect lives for the good, and it has been proven to save the government tens of thousands of dollars and reduce recidivism. How cool is that?

2 Which is why I find my discomfort with the book personally troubling. Its main concern is the fate of literature in the digital age. Its main worry that “we are losing our sense of the central importance of linguistic narrative,” and that, consequentially, “we no longer seem to engage deeply with others or ourselves; [that] we are beginning to move, in other words, from ‘a reading brain’ to ‘a digital brain’” (1). *RoR* endorses the value of deep reading and sustains that “through deep reading... we learn about who we are and where we are located in the midst of the complexities of the world” (1); that we can question and doubt our fixed assumptions and recognize the complexity and “the mystery of human experience” (2). This, it is held, is of even greater importance now, in the digital age, when digital culture “has hollowed out the human self, privileging surfaces (the shallows) and celebrating the digital image (to be consumed like a commodity as fast as possible)” (3).

‘A digital image captures a certain limited measurement of reality within a standardized system that removes any of the original source’s unique qualities’ (Lanier 134). One of the central assumptions of this book is that language, especially language shaped into narrative, helps to restore those unique qualities, the qualities that make us all human. This book argues that language is a way into the interior of ourselves as well as a way out into the human community that surrounds us. It is the best way we have to discover our singularity (our individual self) and our commonality (our social self), our strangeness and our familiarity. Grappling with linguistic narrative allows us to connect to the past and to the future. Entering the depths of literary narrative, we risk ourselves, but we are also offered the opportunity to encounter unknown connections between our own self and the world that stretches before us. Language is a gift to us as unique individuals; it gives us the human world to consider, if we dare to. In this regard, literature offers an ethical engagement for those willing to take the risk. (4)

3 The problem is that *RoR* doesn’t go anywhere beyond this statement and, unfortunately, little basis is provided for this assumption: i.e. the book simply states: digital=bad / literature=good. This will not convince anyone who may think otherwise and it will not strengthen the opinion of whoever agrees. Waxler’s assumption is the basic assumption of anyone who’d be interested enough to get his hands on this book, and it doesn’t offer any extra knowledge to such a person. After the first introductory chapter in which the book’s purpose is stated, we are given a series of examples of narratives with the power to Change Our Lives. These are: *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*. Each chapter summarizes a particular narrative in order to show how deep, complex, ethical, human etc. the issues confronted by those characters and that story, through that narrative, are. And that’s it. And

this, again, is a problem. For two reasons. One is that we don't read books of literary criticism to be told that narrative is important. We start with that assumption and read the book to try and go deeper. The other is that the book ends up restating the premises over and over again without furthering its argument.

4 I don't really know whom this book is for. Maybe it's introductory reading for people who enroll in CLTL. People who've never approached literature before, people whose interest needs to be sparked. If that's the case, and if it works, then nothing but respect for Robert P. Waxler. That sounds like the greatest thing in the world.

References

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