



The Uses of Literature

Italo Calvino , Patrick Creagh (Translator)

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Italian novelist and short story writer Calvino has been accused of making protons, quarks and living cells talk as if they were people, but here he defends his approach as a kind of animism attuned to the way the universe works. His fascination with myth is evident in pieces on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the separate odysseys that make up Homer's *Odyssey*. Three intertwined essays on French utopian socialist Fourier present him as a precursor of Women's Lib, a satirist and visionary thinker whose scheme for a society in which each person's desires could be satisfied deserves to be taken seriously. In other pieces, Calvino brings a fresh, unpredictable approach to why we should reread the classics, how cinema and comic strips influence writers, and the cartoon universe of Saul Steinberg. His message is that writers need to establish erotic communion with the humdrum objects of everyday reality.

The Uses of Literature Details

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A says

This was a bit academic for me, but I read it a long time ago.

Zöe Yu says

Having read Invisible Cities, I had a high hope of his essays, and he didn't let me down. His insights about literature involves politics, but hasn't been carried away too much. One could praise how brilliant he is in Literature and Politics, or his discussion about Fourier, but never would say he only cares about politics and lack of poetic sensibility (probably I would say that to Günter Grass...sorry)

He tries to "psychoanalyze" himself in the form of autobiography, which makes a lot of sense.

Essay? Prose? He is born to be a writer.

Marc says

It's hard to appreciate essays about books which one has yet to read; thus, I enjoyed the pieces about literature and writing as a whole more than I did the selections about specific titles. But all of it was interesting. Calvino is my favorite author and his insights into literature are as wide-ranging and devoted as his fiction. Plus, I came across a number of words I'd never heard: mastodonic, gnosiology, and eudaemonism.

Wilfriedhoujebek says

Recently I ordered a copy of Moby Dick and I am anticipating reading it for the 1st time very soon and I thought: let's read Calvino again on "why to read the classics". I read the rest of the book afterwards. Very few people can write with such intelligence, style, originality, humour and an eye for the absurd as Calvino could and while I don't have much interest for many of the 19th century French novelist Calvino writes about the man never bores. The general essays are best. The opening essay on cybernetics and literature is an all-time favourite. Calvino is a classic himself and why do we read the classics? Because it is better to have read them than it is to haven't read them. YES!

Jeremy says

As usual, Calvino does not disappoint. The writing is intelligent, and always dynamic, and he has this playful sensibility which really comes through in his non fiction work. "Why read the classics?" I found especially resonant and gratifying since I'm in grad school at St. John's. He just brings such a fresh, lively perspective to everything he writes about, heck, he almost made me want to read Dickens again in 'the novel as spectacle' Note: a lot of the pieces from section II can also be found in his collection "Why read the classics?" which is

also great

Yasmeen says

Starting school's-over-so-more-time-to-read reading with a guy that loves books so much is pretty great. Calvino has a lot of interesting things to say about books; *The Hypothetical Bookshelf* and *Why Read the Classics?* are two of my favourites in the collection, although there other really good moments. It's really nice to read stuff by a writer who knows the importance of the reader, and isn't pretentious and superior about his opinions.

I will admit that I tuned out a little in the second half, mostly because I haven't read Stendhal or Balzac or Fourier, all of whom occupy a significant portion of it. Nevertheless it's readable even in most of the parts where I knew nothing about the texts he refers to. The first half though, which is about books more generally speaking, is generally easier to relate to. Probably 3.5 overall.

So, worth the read (but *If On A Winter's Night a Traveler* conveys literary love better in my opinion).

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Thomas says

Includes the marvelous essay 'Why Read the Classics.' A wonderful perspective, especially held up against, say, Harold Bloom's more fixed and heavy view of what used to be the canon.

Also includes a great essay on the good and bad uses of politics in literature.

Nina CW says

"To read a great book for the first time in one's maturity is an extraordinary pleasure, different from (though one cannot say greater or lesser than) the pleasure of having read it in one's youth."

I love the way Calvino describes the act of reading, calling literature a "voyage of discovery" where books can "conceal themselves in the folds of memory, camouflaging themselves as the collective or individual unconscious." Calvino believed in the importance of literature and the ability for it to influence masses. He believed in approaching books without preconceived notions or bias, as you never know when one can change your life. He challenges us to take a look at literature with eyes of wonder and with expectations that we will learn and grow from it. Though books withstand the test of time and remain the same, we are always growing and changing, so reading and rereading our favorite books at different times of our life can bring whole new meanings and perspectives for us.

Paloma says

In these essays - selected from various papers & symposiums over the course of the 1960s/70s - Calvino examines the intersections of literature with philosophy, science, psychology, and politics. He's blazingly insightful, incredibly well-read, and has an intensely logical, *mathematical* way of dissecting literature.

My favorites:

Why Read the Classics? - various definitions of what makes a piece of literature a "classic", and the role of such classics in a reader's life. "A classic," goes one such definition, "is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say."

Cybernetics and Ghosts - thoughts about linguistics, storytelling, artificial intelligence, and the potential to mechanize the production of literature.

Levels of Reality in Literature

Definitions of Territories: Eroticism - about the treatment of sexual themes in the modern novel

Definitions of Territories: Fantasy

Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature

The Odysseys Within the Odyssey - a short essay on folktale patterns, memory, identity, and restorative journeying in Homer's epic

I didn't necessarily agree with everything he said (e.g. when thinking about mechanizing literature, what's with his apparent desire to erase the figure of the author and reduce humanity's role to one of passive consumption? why would this be beneficial?)... but I certainly found him very thought-provoking.

(I admit to only having skimmed most essays in the latter half of the book, as they're all in-depth studies of books I haven't read (yet?), and I didn't feel I'd get as much out of them.)

carolyn says

I've obviously been neglecting this book. It's a collection of essays so it's easy to stop and start. Why to Read the Classics was a great essay. I will give this more attention. It certainly deserves it...

Andrew says

Waaaahhhh... Calvino is/remains so amazing all the time. This is my first foray into his nonfiction, after reading the majority of his novels in high school and college. Everything about these essays is so lucid, so intelligent, and so obviously linked with his elegant, mathematical fiction style. These essays in the vein of Sontag, Barthes, and Benjamin further confirm my belief that he created the most consistently impressive prose of the 20th Century that I've encountered.

Isla McKetta says

Although I feel like I've read some of these essays before, Calvino is always a welcome kick in the ass to

remind me what I love about reading and writing. Some of my favorites were "Cybernetics and Ghosts," "Literature as Projection of Desire," and "Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature." And the humble postscript essay "By Way of an Autobiography" is a lesson to all writers in how to talk about yourself and your work.

the gift says

this is a very good selection of essays by Calvino, the reason it is a four is my unfamiliarity with certain works and authors he examines in final essays, so it is part one preferred. even there, a certain amount of reading is helpful, if only to decide whether his claims make sense, but overall there is great pleasure in his explorations.

Mark Valentine says

The best essay in this collection is the title one. It is in the center of the book and it is the linchpin. Calvino had the perspicacity to remind why it matters to read the best of the best.

The rest of the essays I came in and out on and had different levels of engagement. But being a Calvino enthusiast, I highly recommend getting a copy of this for reading and for your library.

Aaron Cockle says

Essay on 'Cinema & the Novel: Problems of Narrative' is especially good, and can be found on Google Books. Important reading for cartoonists (Calvino is good for cartoonists to read in general I think). Discusses Robbe-Grillet, the nouveau-roman, Godard's 'essay films', inherent inferiority complexes, etc. Mentions comic strips at the end and the bearing they have had on his work, how 'a true study of the genre as an art in itself has still to see the light', which remains a fairly accurate assessment..

sarah says

Italo Calvino is my Number One MySpace Friend. It's an illustrious position to hold and one that I do not take lightly. These essays make my brain mushy in the best possible way. I think I want to have his posthumous literary metaphorical babies. Never mind N'Sync, where can I get a poster of Calv?

Really, though, any one of these essays is worth the price of admission alone.

Ariya says

After hammering with the literary criticism textbooks for a while, reading about literature from another perspective is like getting some new fresh air, especially from Calvino whom I always resonate with intelligence and witty. The book gives me a tingling hope, with the reassurance, that literature still matters

and has a potential standpoint. Each chapter illustrates the certain points with the latest issues in 20th century; literary criticism from a writer's POV, genre, the question about whom the writer should write for, the importance of reading classics, politics in writing literature, realities in literature, the crossing fields among literature, science and philosophy and most intense part is the elaboration of the classic works in part II and the part Calvino psychoanalysed himself. So grateful for having a chance to read a piece of writing from someone who is dedicated and passionate, and still very critical and poignant.

Michael Finocchiaro says

Italo Calvino was a watershed for me in reading fiction in my 20s. I had always read a lot and even critically, but somehow Calvino's fiction which was more mathematical and structured in some ways than the more fluid literature I had read before changed my perspective. This collection of essays about literature does indeed make you want to reread his entire catalog to understand even more deeply the ideas he was trying to pass along. He reflects on who the author is writing for, why the classics are classic and still relevant - many timeless topics that continue to drive literary analysis and inspire readers and writers alike. To be read before or after *Invisible Cities* :)

Wm says

The essays in Part I are more interesting than the ones in Part II. Otherwise it would have been four stars. And the advantage of the book as a whole is that all the essays are fairly short and they are written within the context of conversations and publications in Italy (and France and England) in the 1960s and '70s. Or in other words, this Calvino very much playing the role of public intellectual.

So if you are interested in reading work that's responding to the throes of literary theory, especially that coming out of France, then you should definitely pick this up. Read the ones that grab you, skim or skip the others. I personally found it interesting as a type of highly specialized receptions studies to see Calvino bouncing off of Barthes or Frye or others, reacting near the time of publication of certain works of literary theory that are now hoary or crystalized or laminated.
