



The Educated Imagination

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Addressed to educators and general readers--the "consumers of literature" from all walks of life--this important new book explores the value and uses of literature in our time. Dr. Frye offers, in addition, challenging and stimulating ideas for the teaching of literature at lower school levels, designed both to promote an early interest and to lead the student to the knowledge and kaleidoscopic experience found in the study of literature.

Dr. Frye's proposals for the teaching of literature include an early emphasis on poetry, the "central and original literary form," intensive study of the Bible, as literature, and the Greek and Latin classics, as these embody all the great enduring themes of western man, and study of the great literary forms: tragedy and comedy, romance and irony.

The Educated Imagination Details

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From Reader Review The Educated Imagination for online ebook

Jeffrey says

I love this lovely series of lectures that Frye gave in 1962 - the second Massey Lectures - his notion of the educated imagination is such a robust and vigorous idea - and I am using it as the frame for my summer course - it will be the perfect short text to use to begin to unpack my survey of children's literature texts

Amber Tucker says

I found you by chance, my darling, on one of those voracious raids I make on Chapters when lucky enough to get near a city with one. I was thinking nervously of starting university in a few months, altogether doubtful of my worthiness to pursue an English degree, and this caught my eye. I knew nothing, or at least believed I did – or was afraid to believe in my grasp of anything at all. I decided it was high time I Took an Interest In Literary Theory. (My, my, aren't we a gung-ho little English major?) So I picked you up, slim volume that you are, and read you over a series of happy, early-morning book-with-coffee sessions. I kept notes while I read through you, silly notes of what was truly a mind-stretching lecture so valuably committed to paper. Immature as I was, you shaped me and deserve the truth, wonderful little book. This tribute cannot be enough, but here is a selection of what I was thinking about you.

"I am thus far hooked. I've read the first chapter through twice, and comprehended that much more for the extra reading. This is, hopefully, just what I need to reaffirm and elaborately develop my knowledge of how important literature... truly is to humankind, individual and social. It makes so much sense. 'The motive for metaphor ... is a desire to associate, and finally to identify, the human mind with that goes on outside it...!' Yes, I know he's right, because I've experienced it. I am familiar with, amorous for that sense of connection with the entire world..."

"It's such a basic statement, yet such a broad one... we use the imagination to create joy, and joy is created chiefly through the use of imagination (is basically what Frye is saying.... Note to self: look up D.H. Lawrence [after admiring an excerpt from "Song of a Man Who Has Come Through"]).

"This is helping me find new ways to view life and literature in their primary relation to each other... I've always had this sense that most of the 'great' stories are hopeless ones, and that if I lived a blessed and optimistic life, it seemed less and less likely that I could become a 'person of literature.' But how could I bear to live in a world of no happy endings at all – of sad, inevitable pattern?

"Now I'm beginning to see, perhaps, another way. We write of our dark times, and of the hope that we may rise above them to be happy again.... the cycle Frye mentions is still happening, "of how man once lived in a golden age .. how that world is lost, and how we may some day be able to get it back again."

"Funny how the stories a child invents are *imaginary*, while from a writer the same creations are deemed *imaginative*. Of course, when you think about it, the latter implies far more intention. If a child's games or tales hold symbolic elements that are also within literary convention ... The writer designs, specifically for the purpose of – what? Well, I guess that's what I'm reading this for.... Ah, and now he's connecting religion, science, politics –>allegories –>literature. Très passionnant, à moi.

"So now I've got a good deal ahead of me. Yay. My ultimate goal? To decipher *Finnegan's Wake*. Without

Leslie says

Not my type of book but it was interesting to discuss

Dylan Grant says

I only had two problems with this brilliantly insightful book. The first is not the book's fault but mine: I had read this book in bits and pieces during my travelling back to my hometown from college. This wasn't smart, as this very short and very intellectually rigorous book is truly meant to be very carefully and perhaps even all at once, since it is one cohesive argument all throughout.

The second problem is not my own but rather a problem with Northrop Frye's vision. I know it is probably arrogant of me to criticize a scholar of the finest calibre and I am fully aware that Northrop Frye is infinitely smarter than me, but when has arrogance ever stopped me from doing anything? One of the important foundations of Northrop's argument is that there is a sort of pre-rational, mystical, and almost animistic view of the world that Literature seeks to return us to. The argument goes that in the past people felt that there was a deep connection between the outer world that we perceive and the "world" of our experience. However, really, the outer world is objective and impersonal and the inner world is totally subjective. There is no real harmony between the two, says Northrop. Now, perhaps it is the superstitious poet/madman in me that says this, but I do not think that this is the case. I think that this mystical inner/outer unitive vision that ancient people had was reality, and humanity's feverish obsession with literature shows not our desire to connect to our primitive but misguided selves but rather it shows our longing to return to reality. This is a small, tiny grievance with Northrop and his argument is brilliant nonetheless. I just feel we should give the part of ourselves that Northrop calls "primitive" but which is actually "intuitive" or "mystical" more credit.

Northrop, and most of us, believe that we are egos with very involving but completely subjective (and therefore, meaningless) inner lives. We exist in an outer world that is objectively meaningless and full of essentially dead, impersonal things. This belief is itself the product of modern man's sick imagination which literature can both heal and reveal.

As for that one beef I have with Northrop, everything else in this book is completely brilliant. Northrop's writing is incredibly lucid and easy to understand even as he talks about the most profound and obscure topics. Northrop succeeds completely in arguing his case that the study of literature is as critical as studying math and science. Northrop's argument is even more important in the 21st century where people are willing to completely brush aside Literature, and the rest of the humanities, for the sake of the STEM fields.

Overall, a commendable book (because he has succeeded at a noble task) that is worth re-reading again and again (I know I will be doing that myself, and I look forward to it!). I recommend this to every breathing human being.

Leonardo Bruno says

Esplêndido! Não é apenas uma aula de literatura — ou teoria literária —, mas uma aula sobre a humanidade mesma.

Shannon (Giraffe Days) says

Northrop Frye is a famous Canadian English literature professor who wrote quite a few books on literary theory, among other achievements. Several buildings at the University of Toronto have been named after him, and he's still a voice to be reckoned with in the field, though he died in 1991. In 1962 he took part in the CBC Massey Lectures with six lectures on "The Educated Imagination". This book is his six lectures, and if you're hoping for a review as intelligent as this book is, you've come to the wrong person.

Frye tackles many questions which revolve around the importance of studying literature and an analysis of literature, studying it, and having an imagination. He posits three kinds of language within a language - that of ordinary conversation and self-expression; of conveying information in a practical sense; and of the imagination, i.e. literature. That's overly simplified and there's no doubt a better way of summing it up, but that's what I've come up with. Naturally, arguments build one upon the other, and I would be setting myself a horrendous task to try to describe them in brief. It's just not possible, as the lectures cover a great deal. You'd be better to read the book itself.

Of all the lectures, I appreciated the last one the most, probably because it spoke to me the most. At one point he discusses freedom, and says "Nobody is capable of free speech unless he knows how to use language, and such knowledge is not a gift: it has to be learned and worked at." (p93) There can be no free speech in a mob, he says, only babble and grousing. What he doesn't say, but what he's saying, is that it's incredibly important for the lower classes to be well educated. With education comes not just the ability to express yourself articulately but to really see the world around you, and understand it. This is something that draws me to education, especially for the working class.

The other thing I loved about this lecture was how he validates having and using our imaginations, not relegating them to the realm of fantasy or child's play. He reveals how we use our imaginations constantly, how necessary the imagination is to everything, and how "literature speaks the language of the imagination, and the study of literature is supposed to train and improve the imagination." (p82) Which I absolutely agree with; the lectures give very good insight into how important the imagination - and an educated imagination - is to us.

At times his arguments read a little dated, but one in particular stands out, especially as it connects to the study of Dickens, which was what I was reading at the time, and helps me to understand why novels like *A Week of This* (Nathan Whitlock), which I read recently, don't have the same effect. "To bring anything really to life in literature," Frye says, "we can't be lifelike: we have to be literature-like." (p53) This is what he calls "writing badly", which Dickens does - it doesn't mean that he's a bad writer, but that he exaggerates and creates larger-than-life characters that feel more real than if they had been represented realistically. Reading *Great Expectations* you come across a great many of these characters, from Estella to Miss Havisham to the convict. Even Joe and Mrs Joe. They're almost like caricatures of themselves.

When you meet such a character as Micawber in Dickens, you don't feel that there must have been a man

Dickens knew who was exactly like this: you feel that there's a bit of Micawber in almost everybody you know, including yourself. Our impressions of human life are picked up one by one, and remain for most of us loose and disorganized. But we constantly find things in literature that suddenly co-ordinate and bring into focus a great many such impressions, and this is part of what Aristotle means by the typical or universal human event. (p35)

Frye is a great proponent of classical literature and the necessity for studying the ancients, and then Shakespeare and Milton, and so on, as well as poetry. He has some good arguments that, re-worded, could work on the typical high school student. I'm not absolutely sure how much I agree, with his reasoning at least, but it's true that our culture and society is founded on such works and continues to influence them without our even realising or noticing - to be able to clearly *see* our world in such a way would take a lifetime of study. I don't think that the common way of throwing *Macbeth* in the faces of fifteen-year-olds works at all; in fact, it has a detrimental effect. The problem is that most English teachers don't get or like Shakespeare either - it's a cycle.

While Frye is a terrible name-dropper and obviously knows - knew - his shit, he sometimes reads like a stuffy academic who annoyingly links everything back to the Bible. That's not a bad thing, except it comes across as a bit narrow - you get caught up in his arguments, which are well-expressed in general, and suckered into his way of thinking. The margins are littered with my comments and thoughts and counter-questions - this is a book you need to read armed with a pencil. There are lots of great quotes, and it's very readable, even if you don't have a background in English Lit. I recommend it to teachers and readers and the general populace alike, because it is very interesting and presents a solid argument for the validity of studying English lit - and writing literature in the first place - which I wish our politicians would appreciate.

Jenny says

I was impelled to finally finish this book because of its relevance to ideas raised by David Hicks in Norms and Nobility. The Educated Imagination's beautiful twofold thesis is that: 1)it is vital for education to include thorough training of the imagination and 2)literature is the thing that trains the imagination. For a literary critic, Frye writes simply and poetically, and I was surprised by how quick and good to read and soul-filling this book is.

The first page asks the question which Frye spends the rest of the book answering: "What good is the study of literature? Does it help us to think more clearly, or feel more sensitively, or live a better life than we could without it?" His answer, ultimately, is that literature is essential for all of these things--because imagination is essential for thinking clearly, feeling sensitively, and living the good life. And imagination, Frye insists, is trained primarily by literature (although he also says that studying the other arts and learning languages are the two essential ancillary pursuits).

Why exactly is imagination essential? Because, Frye says (echoing Chesterton and Lewis and so many others), only through exercising imagination can we get over ourselves, see through others' eyes, invent things, realize ideals, and truly be free. We have to exercise imagination in order to empathize with the people we are called to serve. Only through imagination can we really see another's perspective. Imagination leads scientists to their hypotheses as well as poets to their imagery. Imagination gives us the ability to aim for a political, social, or educational ideal that is not currently happening in front of our immediate senses. And imagination helps us take what is happening in front of us and apply it in other situations and areas of our lives. [Some of these examples are my own applications of Frye's observations.]

And how does literature train our imagination? By exercising it, teaching it categories with which to understand the world, and giving it vastly broader experiences than any person in real life can hope to attain. "No matter how much experience we may gather in life, we can never in life get the dimension of experience that the imagination gives to us. Only the arts and sciences can do that, and of these, only literature gives us the sweep and range of human imagination as it sees itself."

Frye ends by saying that "the art of listening to stories" is the most important element of educating the imagination. Teachers who wish to train their students' imaginations well (and, he adds, you will either be training them to have good imaginations or bad ones--there is no neutral ground) will firstly make sure that their students know the whole narrative of the Bible thoroughly. Secondly, students must learn Greek and Roman mythology.

Although Frye says much about how imagination is needed to love one's neighbor, he does not make the final connection to the imagination's relationship to loving God. My chief disappointment with this book is Frye's silence regarding imagination's vital position in faith. In my own life, imagination plays its most critical role as at least a part of "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen," and I closed the book wishing that Frye had applied his brilliant insights to this area of imagination as well.

Ehsan Movahed says

فردی که به نظر من در این کتاب به خوبی به بیان آن پرداخته است، فری. فری در این کتاب به خوبی به بیان آن پرداخته است. فری در این کتاب به خوبی به بیان آن پرداخته است.

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Tim Weakley says

"É muito comum pensar no estudo da Literatura, ou mesmo no estudo de uma língua, como uma espécie de métier elegante, uma questão de ser bom em gramática ou de manter as leituras em dia. Estou tentando mostrar que o assunto é um pouco mais sério do que isso. Não vejo separação possível entre o estudo da língua ou da literatura e a questão da liberdade de expressão, que todos sabemos ser fundamental para nossa sociedade. O âmbito da fala corriqueira, na minha visão, é um campo de batalha entre duas formas de discurso social: o discurso de uma turba e o discurso de uma sociedade livre. O da turba representa o clichê, a ideia pré-fabricada e o falatório automático, e leva-nos inevitavelmente da ilusão à histeria. (...) Liberdade de expressão, ademais, não é resmungar e reclamar que o país está um caos, e que todo político é corrupto, mentiroso, etc, etc. O resmungo nunca vai além de clichês dessa espécie, e o cinismo vago que eles exprimem é a atitude de quem anda procurando alguma turba a que se juntar. Liberdade nada tem a ver com a falta de exercício: ela é produto do exercício. Não se é livre para ir e vir a menos que se tenha aprendido a andar, e não se é livre para tocar piano a menos que se pratique. Ninguém é capaz de manifestar liberdade de expressão a menos que saiba usar a linguagem, e este conhecimento não é uma dádiva: precisa ser aprendido e trabalhado."

Jon Shaw says

An excellent Primer to Northrop Frye's ideas. But his mastery of Rhetoric makes me wonder at how smoothly he leads the reader into some fairly heretical ideas.

All in all I'm with him though, much more so than with Marshal McLuhan.

Carol says

Do you ever read a book, but can't recall how or why it landed on your TBR list? That is *not* the case with this book. Karen Glass in a blog post, *The Best Books of 2008*, introduced me to this book on December 31, 2008. Based on the other authors she referenced — Chinua Achebe, Andrea Levy, Wendell Berry, Jan Karon, George Eliot, P.G. Wodehouse, and Cormac McCarthy — and on her glowing summary, I moved *The Educated Imagination* to the top of my TBR.

I should rave over this book. I'm disappointed with myself that I don't. Truth is, I have partially read it four times. Because the line of thinking builds on previous chapters, I've started from the beginning each time. The book, only 156 pages, is one that requires contemplation. The effort was rewarding enough for me to keep trying. For nine years it's glared at me and taunted my infidelity. It required tough love and a deadline: if I didn't finish it by 8/31/17 I was giving the book away.

While I copied several quotes, I continue to struggle to give a short synopsis of his thoughts on literature. This time I read it slowly and carefully, but the main points could not find purchase on my slippery receptors.

Here are some gems I gathered:

If you say this talk is dry and dull, you're using figures associating it with bread and bread knives.

Art begins as soon as "I don't like this" turns into "this is not the way I could imagine it."

Literature keeps presenting the most vicious things to us as entertainment, but what it appeals to is not any pleasure in these things, but the exhilaration of standing apart from them and being able to see them for what they are because they aren't really happening.

I could paint this on a wooden sign and hang it up in my house:

It seems to be very difficult for many people to understand the reality and intensity of literary experience.

I nodded my head in vigorous assent:

You keep associating your literary experiences together: you're always being reminded of some other story you read or movie you saw or character that impressed you.

I kept turning pages and finding my marks on the pages. Like my experience with Dickens' *Hard Time*, I didn't recognize I'd already finished this until I arrived at the last few pages. Oy.

Marc-Antoine says

An insightful criticism of literature, had me nodding in agreement, saying humph out loud, or just plainly disagreeing, but what it did well was have me engaged.

TK421 says

Simply put: AMAZING!! Although I have been a life-long reader, this slim book has shed some light on the dark areas of my mind that need to be exercised, put on a firm regime of mental calisthenics, which begins now with a reintroduction of my Bible, poetry of all ages, and the classics of Latin and Greek.

If you are looking to challenge yourself, read this book and form a new plan of attack for your literary consumption.
