

WHY BOOKS [STILL] MATTER

by Alison Meyers

In her essay “Staying Alive,” the poet Mary Oliver writes,

Adults can change their circumstances; children cannot. Children are powerless, and in difficult situations they are the victims of every sorrow and mischance and rage around them, for children feel all of these things but without any of the ability that adults have to change them. Whatever can take a child beyond such circumstances, therefore, is an alleviation and a blessing.

I quickly found for myself two such blessings—the natural world, and the world of writing: literature. These were the gates through which I vanished from a difficult place. In the first of these—the natural world—I felt at ease; nature was full of beauty and interest and mystery, also good and bad luck, but never misuse. The second world—the world of literature—offered me, besides the pleasures of form, the sustenance of empathy (the first step of what Keats called negative capability) and I ran for it. I relaxed in it. I stood willingly and gladly in the characters of everything—other people, trees, clouds. And this is what I learned: that the world’s otherness is antidote to confusion, that standing within this otherness—the beauty and the mystery of the world, out in the fields or deep inside books—can re-dignify the worst-stung heart.

I recently attended a memorial service for a friend whose passing was unexpected, heart breaking. The text chosen for the program book was Mary Oliver’s “When Death Comes.” There are so many extraordinary lines in this poem, it’s hard to privilege one over another, but I think my favorite stanza is:

*When it's over, I want to say all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.*

What if Mary Oliver had never read a book? What if she’d never been inspired, by nature and literature, to write poems? Those of us grieving that day would not have had the solace of internalizing, deeply and together, as in one breath, that our friend had lived an exceptional life. I don’t believe we could have celebrated, in quite the way we did—in the way that continues to sustain us—that our friend had taken the world into his arms. In the poem we recognized him, and found a lesson, a map, for our own uncertain journeys.

*When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse
to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;*

*I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?*

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I grew up in the small hamlet of Readfield, Maine, population 900. Our one-room public library was housed in a ramshackle community building where my Brownie Troop met. I didn't love being Brownie, though I coveted the badge-filled sash my oldest sister proudly wore over her crisp, white Girl Scout blouse. What did quicken my heartbeat was my weekly post-meeting trip to the room next door. I loved the ritual of returning last week's book on time, finding my next read, often at the suggestion of the volunteer librarian, having my name added to, and the due date stamped on, the circulation card.

Another childhood memory: One winter afternoon my mother found me weeping. I was reading *The Yearling*, by Marjorie Rawlings. Shielded from the harsh cold outside, snug in a room warmed by a hissing radiator, I had been transported to the hardscrabble existence of the Florida backwoods in the 1870s, to the difficulty and sadness of sacrificing a beloved pet—a wild animal not designed to live in captivity—to the practicality of preserving a corn crop that would sustain a family through *their* winter months.

What is love? Is it unconditional for animals, conditional for humans? Does growing up necessitate loss? Is it possible to forgive? Existential questions my 10-year-old mind began to grapple with. But what I remember most vividly is my mother's response to my tears. I thought she might scold me for alarming her—but, no, she enfolded me in great tenderness. Tenderness from a harried mother of four who rarely displayed—I suppose had little time for—such vulnerability. She, too, was a reader, and as a motherless child, often left on her own while older siblings toiled in the Fairbanks Scale factory, found in the novels of Louis L'Amour adventure, romance, and the possibility of good triumphing over evil. It was the shared experience of literature, of being immersed in, enraptured by, learning from, a new world of experience that allowed me to know that my mother loved me.

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A fact: The world's refugee population is at its highest on record: sixty-eight million people, one per cent of the global population, have been forcibly displaced [[Gia Toletino, "Ocean Vuong's Life Sentences," *The New Yorker*, June 3, 2019](#)]. Out of and into this reality emerges Ocean Vuong's collection of poems, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, and his debut novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, a first-person epistle to the narrator's mother, who was forced to leave school in war torn Vietnam at age five and can neither

read nor write. Ocean, himself, couldn't speak English when he started school in Hartford, CT, and couldn't read at grade level until age eleven [Ibid]; yet here are these masterpieces—luminous, raw, and healing. Jia Tolentino writes, “as he began to write poetry, he **wrenched himself into the existence that would separate him from his family even as he honored them** [emphasis mine]. Vuong uses language to conjure wholeness from a situation that language has already broken, and will continue to break; loss and survival are always twinned.”

Language. Reading. Writing. How these acts, made solid in the container of books, not only enrich and teach us as readers, but, as illustrated by the lives of two individuals as generationally, culturally, geographically, and linguistically divided as Mary Oliver and Ocean Vuong's, are acts of self-realization. In the acts of writing and reading books, we locate our humanity.

Autumn. Somewhere over Michigan, a colony of monarch butterflies, numbering more than fifteen thousand, are beginning their yearly migration south. In the span of two months, from September to November, they will move, one wing beat at a time, from southern Canada and the United States to portions of central Mexico, where they will spend the winter.

They perch among us, on windowsills, and chain-link fences, clotheslines still blurred from the just-hung weight of clothes, the hood of a faded-blue Chevy, their wings folding slowly, as if being put away, before snapping, once into flight.

It only takes a single night of frost to kill off a generation. To live, then, is a matter of time, of timing.

[Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, NY, Penguin Press, 2019 Page 4]

In my role as executive director of Writers & Books, I'm often on the road meeting with community leaders and prospective funders. Recently, as I parted company with an especially warm, engaging corporate executive, we got onto the subject of favorite authors, and virtually simultaneously, exclaimed, “Jane Austen!” We discovered that we shared an annual ritual of re-reading *Pride and Prejudice*, and reached immediate consensus that the BBC version is, without question, the best film adaptation of “the world's perfect novel.” And here's what we also instantly learned, never having laid eyes on one another until that meeting: that we love humor, smart dialogue, irony, and social commentary; that we consider a British woman writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, circumscribed by all manner of social and historical barriers, a feminist and the genius progenitor of literary realism. All this communicated by acknowledging a shared passion for a book.

And what about books as objects, artifacts—the heft of bound pages, smell of ink, typeface, cover, shape— a book’s very **thingness**? For many years, I worked in bookstores and owned an indie bookstore, and enjoyed the daily privilege and pleasure of discussing, sometimes arguing about, books. A loyal customer and fanatic reader, Doug, posited that in our technological age, within 10 years, microchips would replace the printed book. I passionately argued that nothing could supplant the visceral experience of holding a book in one’s hands, could substitute for the excitement of literally turning pages. Our debate took place in the 1980s, long before the advent of e-books, Wikipedia, and Google. We placed a bet. The loser would treat the winner to a Broadway show.



Doug, you owe me a Broadway show!

My friend Vieve Francis, author of several collections of poems, including *Forest Primeval*, which I urge you to read if you haven't, writes of her pedagogical work at Dartmouth College:

My primary interest is in poetics, particularly in how poetry is made and the value of such deliberate creative practice. I want to know how poetry serves us collectively and as individuals in ways that meet this era, this moment; however, in order to gain that understanding contexts cannot be ignored, nor can history be set aside. I insist upon a reconsideration of the erroneous assumptions and common mythologies around poetry that allow only for the immediate and the intuitive as a measure of what is authentic. Instead I focus on the possibilities within work drawn from the counterintuitive, and how craft alongside context may underscore intent.

I'd like to extend Vieve's statement to include all genres of literary writing—fiction, essays, creative nonfiction, memoir, scholarly texts, and hybrid work that blurs the boundaries. For me, this is a summing up of how books help us locate ourselves, define ourselves, bring us into relation with history and cultures; and propel us into possibility, awareness, imagination, and human connection. And, o, the redemption to be found in deeply beautiful language.