WHAT *to* READ *and* WHY

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Author’s Note

Some of the articles in this collection first appeared in the following publications, sometimes in slightly different form:

American Scholar: “Ten Things That Art Can Do”
Introduction to *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley (Restless Books, 2016)
Introduction to *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens (Penguin Classics, 2002)
Introduction to *Cousin Bette* by Honoré de Balzac (Modern Library Classics, 2002)
Introduction to *Middlemarch* by George Eliot (Harper Perennial, 2015)
Introduction to *New Grub Street* by George Gissing (Modern Library Classics, 2002)
Harper’s Magazine: “More is More” (on Roberto Bolaño, *2666*)
Michigan Quarterly Review: “Complimentary Toilet Paper: Some Thoughts on Character and Language” (on Michael Jeffrey Lee, George Saunders, John Cheever, Denis Johnson)
New York Times Book Review: “Wit’s End” (on Edward St. Aubyn, *Never Mind*; *Bad News*; *Some Hope*; *Mother’s Milk*)
Harper’s Magazine: “The Coldest Eye” (on Paul Bowles, *The Spider’s House*)
New York Review of Books: “Giddy and Malevolent” (on Patrick Hamilton, *Twenty Thousand Streets Under the Sky: A London Trilogy*, *The Slaves of Solitude*; *Hangover Square: A Story of Darkest Earl’s Court*)
Harper’s Magazine: “The Bones of Muzhiks” (on Isaac Babel, *The Complete Works of Isaac Babel*)
Lapham’s Quarterly: “Eros Between the Covers” (on Vladimir Nabokov,

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Lolita)
New Yorker: "Dark Passage" (on Gitta Sereny, *Cries Unheard*)
New York Review of Books: "The Shy Clumsy Lover" (on Andrea Canobbio, *Three Light-Years)*
Harper's Magazine: "Revisiting the Icons" (on Diane Arbus, *Revelations)*
Introduction to *Crosstown* by Helen Levitt (Powerhouse Books, 2001)
Preface to *Mr. and Mrs. Baby and Other Stories* by Mark Strand (Ecco, 2015)
Harper's Magazine: "Master of the Mundane" (on Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle: Book Three*)
Sunday Times (London): Elizabeth Taylor, *Complete Short Stories*
O Magazine: "In Praise of *Little Women*" (on Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women)*
American Benefactor: "On Jane Austen"
New York Times Book Review: "Midwestern Civ" (on Charles Baxter, *Believers*)
New York Times Book Review: "Naked Came the Stranger" (on Deborah Levy, *Swimming Home)*
Real Simple: "Friend of Our Youth" (on Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women)*
New York Review of Books: "On the Wilder Shores of Brooklyn" (on Jennifer Egan, *Manhattan Beach*)
New York Review of Books: "Courts Without Reporters" (on Rebecca West, *In Greenhouse with Cyclamens, I*)
Harper's Magazine: "Door to Door" (on Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West*)
New York Review of Books: "The Cult of Saint Franz" (on Reiner Stach, *Is That Kafka? 99 Finds*)
"What Makes a Short Story?" (contribution to *On Writing Short Stories*, edited by Tom Bailey, Oxford University Press, 2010)
Sewanee Review: "On Stanley Elkin"

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Introduction

Reading is among the most private, the most solitary things that we can do. A book is a kind of refuge to which we can go for the assurance that, as long as we are reading, we can leave the worries and cares of our everyday lives behind us and enter, however briefly, another reality, populated by other lives, a world distant in time and place from our own, or else reflective of the present moment in ways that may help us see that moment more clearly. Anyone who reads can choose to enter (or not enter) the portal that admits us to the invented or observed world that the author has created.

I've often thought that one reason I became such an early and passionate reader was that, when I was a child, reading was a way of creating a bubble I could inhabit, a dreamworld at once separate from, and part of, the real one. I was fortunate enough to grow up in a kind, loving family. But like most children, I think, I wanted to maintain a certain distance from my parents: a buffer zone between myself and the adults. It was helpful that my parents liked the fact that I was a reader, that they approved of and encouraged my secret means of transportation out of the daily reality in which I lived together with them—and into the parallel reality that books offered. I was only pretending to be a little girl growing

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up in Brooklyn, when in fact I was a privileged child in London, guided by Mary Poppins through a series of marvelous adventures. I could manage a convincing impersonation of an ordinary fourth-grader, but actually I was a pirate girl in Norway, best friends with Pippi Longstocking, well acquainted with her playful pet monkey and her obedient horse.

I loved books of Greek myths, of Hans Christian Andersen fairy tales, and novels (many of them British) for children featuring some element of magic and the fantastic. When I was in the eighth grade, I spent most of a family cross-country trip reading and rereading a dog-eared paperback copy of *Seven Gothic Tales*, by Isak Dinesen, a writer who interests me now mostly because I can so clearly see what fascinated me about her work *then*. With a clarity and transparency that few things provide, least of all photographs and childhood diaries, her fanciful stories enable me to see what I was like—how I thought—as a girl. I can still recall my favorite passage, which I had nearly memorized, because I believed it to contain the most profoundly romantic, the most noble and poetic, the most stirring view of the relations between men and women—a subject about which I knew nothing, or less than nothing, at the time.

The passage comes from a story entitled "The Roads Round Pisa." Augustus, a Danish count, is traveling in Italy, where he meets a young woman disguised as a boy. He admires her confidence and forthrightness, and he realizes that he has, all his life, been looking for such a woman. Their flirtation culminates in the following conversation, heavy with suggestion as it delicately euphemizes and maneuvers its way around its real subject, which is sex:

> "Now God," she said, "when he created Adam and Eve . . . arranged it so that man takes, in these matters, the part of a guest, and woman that of a hostess. Therefore man takes love lightly, for the honor and dignity of his house is not

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> involved therein. And you can also, surely, be a guest to many people to whom you would never want to be a host. Now, tell me, Count, what does a guest want?"
>
> "I believe," said Augustus . . . , "that if we do, as I think we ought to here, leave out the crude guest, who comes to be regaled, takes what he can get and goes away, a guest wants first of all to be diverted, to get out of his daily monotony or worry. Secondly the decent guest wants to shine, to expand himself and impress his own personality upon his surroundings. And thirdly, perhaps, he wants to find some justification for his existence altogether. But since you put it so charmingly, Signora, please tell me now: What does the hostess want?"
>
> "The hostess," said the young lady, "wants to be thanked."

The hostess wants to be thanked? What does that even mean? Is *that*—to answer Freud's question—what women want? A polite expression of gratitude? What about pleasure, kindness, loyalty, respect . . . ?

And yet, decades later, I can see how this poetic discussion of the erotic, with only the most vague and delicate suggestion of the mechanics of sex, would have appealed to me at thirteen. How I longed to meet a man someday who would court me with language only a few steps removed from that of the medieval troubadours; how divine it would be to experience a seduction that would verge so closely on poetry. And how I wanted to be the sort of young woman who could travel on her own, charm a man with my courage and independence, and come up with the perfect punch line to answer his mannerly disquisition on what the sexes desire from each other.

I can still see the charm in the passage, even though it seems quaint, artificial, hopelessly old-fashioned. What's more important is that reading it functions, for me, like a kind of time machine, transporting me to the back seat of our family car, crossing the Arizona desert, being urged to *just look* at the Grand Canyon while I was somewhere else: near

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Pisa, in 1823, listening to a man and woman have the type of conversation that I hoped to have someday with a handsome (and preferably aristocratic) stranger.

All of which seems to suggest: reading is not *exactly* like being alone. We are alone with the book we are reading, but we are also in the more ethereal company of the author and the characters that author has created. There I was in the car, with my parents in the front seat, my younger brother beside me, and Isak Dinesen, Count Augustus, and the brave little cross-dresser all floating around in my consciousness.

We may find ourselves surrounded by dozens, even hundreds, of imaginary people, or deep inside the mind of the man or woman whom the narrator has designated to stand at the center of the action. We can close the book and carry these characters around with us, much the way a child can transport any number of imaginary friends from place to place. And because they are imaginary, we can always stop reading without hurting their feelings, a transaction far less complicated than most of our dealings with flesh-and-blood human beings.

Lately it's been noted that this privacy has been at least partly compromised when we read on electronic devices that are able to monitor how much of a book we read, where we stop, and what we reread. It's disconcerting to think about, and yet (especially if we are as engrossed in a book as we wish to be) it's possible to forget about these invisible watchers, who at least aren't talking on—or checking—their phones. And of course we can always read a "physical book," which will never disclose the secrets of our reading habits.

Reading and writing are solitary activities, and yet there is a social component that comes into play when we tell someone else about what we have read. An additional pleasure of reading is that you can urge and sometimes even persuade people you know and care about, and even people you don't know, to read the book you've just finished and

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admired—and that you think they would like, too. We can talk about books to our friends, our colleagues, our students. We can form and enjoy communities that we wouldn't have otherwise had. Read Proust and you have something in common with other readers of Proust: not only the thrill of experiencing a marvelous and complex work of art, but the fact that you and those others now have, as your mutual acquaintances, his enormous cast of characters. You can gossip about people you know in common. *Can you* believe *what happens to the Baron de Charlus by the end of the novel?*

Almost twenty years ago, the novelists Ron Hansen and Jim Shepard put together an anthology entitled *You've Got to Read This*, to which a group of writers contributed an introduction to a favorite short story of their own choosing. (I wrote about Isaac Babel's "Guy de Maupassant.") I've always thought that every book about reading and about books should be called *You've Got to Read This*. In fact, I might have called this book that had the wonderful Hansen-Shepard anthology not already been sitting on a bookshelf in the study in which I am writing this. I've also thought that "You've got to read this" should be the first line of every positive book review. The essay about Roberto Bolaño's great novel *2666*, first printed in *Harper's* magazine and included here, begins with a description of that impulse, of the desire to say just that, to direct magazine readers toward a great novel.

I've always been delighted when an editor asked me to write an introduction to a classic that is being reissued in a spiffy new edition with a stylish, handsome new cover. Because what I am doing, basically, is saying: *You've got to read this—and here's why.* I feel the same way about certain book reviews that, to me, are a way of telling people—strangers—about something terrific I think they should read. Drop everything. Start reading. Now.

Some of the essays collected here are introductions to republished classics. Others are reviews of books that I

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particularly admired and enjoyed. Mixed in are a few essays that attempt to grapple with the social and political conditions that inform our reading habits and the judgments we make about books. Others ("On Clarity") address problems that beginning writers may find themselves facing. Still others are less about reading in specific than about art in general, but have so much to do with what I think about literature that I have chosen to include them. It's why I decided to put "Ten Things That Art Can Do" at the beginning of the book; in my view, the ideas, thoughts, and observations in that essay inform everything else.

The essays gathered in this volume contain reading suggestions and imprecations, records of enthusiasms, pieces that start with particular books and move toward the larger subject of how and what and why we read: why books can transport and entertain and teach us, why books can give us pleasure and make us think. Ultimately, what I am writing about here are the reasons why we continue to read great books, and why we continue to care.

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1

Ten T That Art Can Do

One: Art can be beautiful.

That is all it has to do. That is the only thing we require of it. But what do we mean by beauty? Did the cave dwellers think, *Hey, that's really beautiful* when someone drew the first bison on the wall? Did anyone think, *That's beautiful* when the Serbian performance artist Marina Abramovic invited the gallery audience to cut her with razor blades—or shoot her?

Critics and philosophers have devoted their entire lives to defining beauty, while artists have pursued it from another part of the brain. Is there a meaning of *beauty* on which we can agree? Is a Netherlandish portrait beautiful? What about Vermeer's *The Love Letter*? Cézanne's apples? Perhaps it would be possible to know nothing about art, to have never seen a painting, and to look at any one of those works and think, *Well, that is really gorgeous.*

But what about those early viewers who saw Cézanne's apples as the smudgy scrawlings of an untalented child? What

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about Jackson Pollock? It took me years to see the beauty in his paintings. When I say that there is nothing so beautiful as a certain phrase in Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, or Mozart's *Così Fan Tutte*, or Miles Davis's "Flamenco Sketches," or Mary Wells's version of "You Beat Me to the Punch," what am I saying, exactly?

Unraveling the word *beauty* can get us so ensnarled that it's no wonder that for a time, critics and academics and even some artists agreed that it was probably better not to use it at all. For all I know—I haven't kept up—this taboo still exists. And, really, who can blame anyone for not wanting to sling around this vague, loaded, indefinable, and antiquated term in the learned journals? Though it does seem a little strange to ban the word from the conversations of people for whom it is a matter of life and death.

The Greeks, at least, had some ideas: order, harmony, structure. But all of that had gotten a radical shaking up even by the time of, let's say, Hieronymus Bosch. If we think the *Apollo Belvedere* is beautiful, what do we say about the naked bottom and legs of a man emerging from a strawberry and scurrying around Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*?

Obviously, content is only a fraction of what matters. There's beauty of conception and beauty of execution, which is, to oversimplify, part of what makes Cézanne's apples different from the apples we doodle on our notepad or the scribblings of a child. Conception and execution are major factors in the narratives on the page and screen that I tend to remember as beautiful. For example, I find great beauty in the scene in Mavis Gallant's story "The Ice Wagon Going down the Street," in which the self-deluded and heartbreakingly sad office worker at the League of Nations in post–World War II Geneva is asked to take home a mousy co-worker who has gotten drunk at a costume party. What happens (nothing happens) may well be the most important event in their lives. Yet one of them thinks that the nothing

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that happened was about the two of them not having sex, while the other thinks that “nothing happened” meant that she didn’t commit suicide, as she seems to have considered doing.

There is a startling and deeply melancholy scene in the great Hungarian writer Dezso Kosztolanyi’s novel *Skylark*. An elderly couple’s beloved, burdensome, unmarried thirty-five-year-old daughter has gone away on vacation, freeing them for a week of unaccustomed pleasures and shattering realizations about their domestic life. On her return, they go to greet her at the station. Dressed in an unflattering rain cape and a silly hat, and carrying a scruffy pigeon, her new pet, in a cage, she is even homelier than they remember, just as she is even more intensely the love of their life and their jailer. Suddenly they notice that autumn has arrived. “A desolate boredom settled over everything. The warm days are over.” Why should that seem beautiful?

And why should I be so taken with the moment in Mike Leigh’s film *Life Is Sweet* when Timothy Spall, as the sublimely geeky Aubrey, opens a restaurant, a bistro called the Regret Rien, fashioned on an Edith Piaf theme. “Très exclusive.” On opening night, no customers come, and Aubrey, who has been drinking wine as he waits for the nonexistent onslaught of diners, trashes the place and winds up passed out on the floor, stripped down to a pair of unnervingly creepy Speedos. Why do I love the marvelous scene in Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather* in which Sonny speaks out of turn and the Tattaglia family knows that the Corleones are vulnerable and can be attacked? And why do I think there is beauty in every moment of Michael K. Williams’s portrayal of Omar Little in David Simon’s TV series *The Wire*?

There is little that could be considered conventionally pretty about watching Gallant’s filing clerk, dressed as a hobo, nearly fall down in a Geneva street, or Kosztolanyi’s woman arrive, with her pigeon, at a rural Hungarian train

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station, or Leigh's chef—a man with heartbreakingly hilarious pretensions to coolness and sophistication—charging around his empty bistro, overturning elaborately set tables, or a Mafia don's meeting with his enemies and his unruly son, or a scar-faced Baltimore hit man sticking up a drug dealer. But how, I wonder, can we not feel the beauty of these scenes?

Each of us has heard—and probably, in a charitable moment, thought—that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but each of us secretly believes that we are the one with the eye for beauty. Why *do* I see these melancholy scenes, these dark moments, as beautiful? It's a question to which there is no real answer, except to mention truth, another difficult and complicated thing, and to add that we *do* feel we know beauty when we see it. We could quote Emily Dickinson's famous definition of poetry as applying also to beauty:

"If I read a book and it makes me so cold no fire can ever warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way." Or, less gloriously, we have Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's ruling that hard-core pornography is difficult to define, but "I know it when I see it."

Two: Art can shock us.

I don't mean *shock* as in bad news or brutal murder or horrific catastrophe or embarrassing scandal. I don't mean *shock* as they did on a reality show that ran some years ago, a series entitled *Work of Art: The Next Great Artist*, modeled after *Top Chef*. In one episode, the contestants competed to make "shocking art." Among the judges was the photographer Andres Serrano, once considered shocking by, among others, the late Senator Jesse Helms, who was shocked that a government arts grant should go to a person who had

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photographed a crucifix submerged in a vial of urine. (Did Andres Serrano think, *Beautiful!* when those contact sheets came back?) On the show, Serrano spoke about the difficulty of making art that shocks at this particular political and historical moment. And in fact I wasn't shocked enough to remember which artist contestant won.

In any case, I mean something less aesthetic and moral and more neurological: the shock that travels along our nerves and leaps across our synapses when we look at a Titian portrait or read a Dickinson poem. We understand it, and we don't. It's irreducible; it can't be summarized or described; we feel something we can't describe. I often think of that feeling as resembling those moments in dreams when we fall off a cliff and then discover we can fly. Dropping, then soaring. We can no more explain or paraphrase or categorize our response than we can explain why a Chinese scroll can transport us out of a gallery or museum and return us, moments later, jet-lagged, giddy with the aftereffects of travel through time and space. The effect of those tiny art shocks is cumulative and enduring. Enough of them can change our consciousness, perhaps even our metabolism. Dieters, take notice.

I've always hoped that someone would fund a research project to measure the changes that occur in our brain waves when we lose ourselves in a book. What if it turned out that these changes have a beneficial effect on our health, not unlike the benefits we have been told can be obtained from exercise and a daily glass of red wine? What if reading were proved to be even healthier than exercise? Imagine the sudden spike in reading everywhere as the health and longevity conscious allowed their gym memberships to lapse and headed to the library and the bookstore?

Three: Can art make you a better

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person?

Not long ago, I read a Facebook post that suggested that Shakespeare was a sadist for subjecting us to something as gloomy as *King Lear*. And I thought of how a doctor's assistant once told me that the only books and films she likes are those that are cheerful and uplifting, because there's enough doom and gloom in the world without looking for more. She said she hardly ever reads fiction, because it's so depressing. She prefers books on philosophy. "What kind of philosophy?" I asked. She said, "Well, actually, I like books that tell you how to be a better person."

Art will not necessarily make you a better person. When I was a child, my favorite aunt was a great fan of Wagner, and though my mother and father teased her for going to see fat women in braids and Viking helmets sing for five hours at a time, she secretly indoctrinated me into her cult of Wagner. I can still picture the cover of her record of *Tristan und Isolde*. Later, of course, I discovered that Wagner was extremely anti-Semitic and a favorite of the Nazis and so forth, facts that had little bearing on my falling out of love with Wagner as an adult. Recently I learned from a documentary something that everyone else has probably known about forever: the manic intensity of Hitler's passion for Wagnerian opera, how he felt his whole life had changed after seeing a performance of *Rienzi*, whose hero, a medieval Roman tribune, leads his people to rise up against their oppressive rulers. Hitler would say of that performance, "It was in that hour that it all began," and claim that Nazism could not be understood without understanding Wagner.

Hitler had notoriously terrible taste in visual art, a predilection for the cream-puff nudes of kitschy French painters like Bouguereau. There is a famous story about Hitler's visit to Berlin's National Gallery in the 1920s. Enraged to discover that Germany did not possess any work by

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Michelangelo, his favorite artist, Hitler was mildly consoled to find a painting by Caravaggio—Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio—whom Hitler thought was the same person as Michelangelo Buonarroti. Next, he became enchanted by Correggio's highly erotic depiction of *Leda and the Swan*, though, when his guide discovered him, transfixed before the painting, Hitler insisted that he was only admiring the subtle play of light and shadow. Finally, and most revealingly, he sought out Rembrandt's *Man with the Golden Helmet*, an image that, Hitler claimed, proved Rembrandt was a true Aryan who, despite the many works he'd done in the Jewish Quarter, had no real interest in the Jews after all. Hitler's henchmen had better taste—refined enough to know what they wanted when they looted the museums and private collections of Europe and carried off countless masterpieces. But Hitler had originally wanted to be an artist, and during his final days in the bunker, he puttered over an architectural model showing his plan for remaking the Austrian city of Linz.

It's true, or I want to believe it's true, that there is something humanizing about the intimacy a book creates between the author and the reader, between the reader and the character, something humanizing about experiencing the vision and work of another human being. We are so accustomed to speaking about "the humanities" that we no longer think about why these fields of inquiry and study are called that. One of the things that most disturbs me about the way in which children may come to prefer electronic devices and video games to books is that they no longer know or intuit that an individual person has created the thing that is the source of their pleasure. Rather, they come to understand, consciously or subconsciously, that a corporation has provided them with entertainment and happiness. Thank you, Google. Thank you, Apple.

Years ago, I used to comfort myself with the thought that reading a novel by an author from any of the countries in

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what George W. Bush termed the Axis of Evil could persuade us that the men and women and children who inhabit these so-called evil lands are—beneath the surface created by custom and culture—very much like us and our friends and loved ones. That is, no more or less good, no more or less evil. But how much will that realization influence our actions?

While writing a book about *The Diary of Anne Frank*, I met a group of inspiring young people who worked for the Anne Frank Foundation and were convinced that Anne's diary could turn other young people away from the path of prejudice and violence. In their company, I, too, was convinced. I wanted to be convinced. But some crabby, skeptical inner voice couldn't help playing devil's advocate—asking who, high on the chemical rush of violence, on the brink of committing a hate crime or perpetrating a genocidal massacre, would be stopped by the memory of a young girl's diary?

In any case, it is neither the responsibility nor the purpose of art to make us better human beings. And it's no wonder that art that takes on this solemn task so often winds up being didactic, preachy, cloying, and less effective than art with a less exalted notion of its purpose. Careers and talents have been ruined when an artist was intoxicated and ultimately silenced by an exaggerated sense of importance. Among the more famous and tragic examples of this was Nikolai Gogol; the misery he experienced in trying to write a sequel to *Dead Souls* was intensified by his belief that the second volume of his masterpiece was destined to save Russia.

In one of his letters, Chekhov said:

> You scold me for objectivity, calling it indifference to good and evil, lack of ideals and ideas, and so forth. When I am writing about horse thieves, you want me to say that it is evil to steal horses. However, everyone knows this already without my having to say so. Let the members of the jury pass their judgment. My job is merely to show what sort of

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> people these horse thieves are. Here is what I write: we are dealing with horse thieves here, so bear in mind that they are not beggars but well-fed men, that they are members of a cult, and that for them stealing horses is not just thieving but a passion. Certainly, it might be nice to combine art with preaching, but for me personally this is exceptionally difficult and technically next to impossible. After all, if I want to describe horse thieves in seven hundred lines, I have to talk and think and feel as they talk and think and feel; otherwise, if I let myself get subjective, my characters will fall apart and the story will not be as concise as all very short stories need to be. When I am writing, I rely on my readers, and I trust them to fill in any subjective elements that might be missing.

Four: Though art cannot teach us how to be better human beings, it can help us understand what it means to be human beings.

If you were to read every novel and story ever written, you would have a pretty good—if not entirely complete—sense of the range of qualities and ideas and emotions that characterize our species. Stare at a Rembrandt or a Rodin or a Helen Levitt photograph long enough and afterward people look different: lovelier and more complex, if not necessarily more explicable to themselves or us.

Art—and here I am speaking not of music or abstract painting but of the narrative and figurative, of literature and portraiture—can describe certain experiences that seem to be common to human beings: birth, death, procreation, falling in and out of love. It can show us that we share these experiences with other human beings. In depicting the emotions and longings and acts that we might not choose to discuss with our families or our neighbors, art can diminish

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our loneliness and solitude. Books in which the characters express negative emotions—or even commit crimes—can console those who have experienced similar emotions or have committed—or merely considered committing—a crime.

Five: Art can move us.

Surely it must be possible to walk into the cathedral of Chartres or Borromini's Chapel of Saint Ivo, or to stand in front of Caravaggio's *Crucifixion of Saint Peter*, and feel nothing. But it might require some effort. To say that we try to avoid art that is depressing or disturbing is a backhanded compliment to its power to affect us.

Perhaps, at some point, each one of us experiences his or her own version of the Stendhal syndrome, the psychosomatic response (which can involve fainting, a rapid heartbeat, vertigo, and hallucinations) to the power of art, a disease first identified with and endemic to Florence, where even today a few cases are diagnosed every year.

For years, I suffered from an inability to hear Mozart performed in public without bursting into tears. The quality of the performance made no difference at all, as I discovered when hearing a middle school string orchestra play a simplified excerpt from the "Jupiter" Symphony. Once, after a crowd of youths had nearly rioted and almost broken down the heavy wooden doors before they were admitted to the Basilica di Santa Maria in Aracoeli, where a crowd of exquisitely dressed Romans had assembled to hear Mozart's Requiem, I started sobbing out loud. At moments, I've wondered whether these feelings would have been less intense if Mozart had been rich, successful, and sure of himself, like Handel, whose work I also love.

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Six: Can art make us smarter?

My sons were in school when a study was published proving that students at Stanford scored better on standardized tests after listening to Mozart than did the control group, which hadn't listened to Mozart. I prided myself on not being the kind of parent who made her kids play *Don Giovanni* on the way to take their SATs, though—confession—I did suggest that one of my sons put some Mozart on his Walkman (the forerunner of the iPod). Having taken so little advantage of the available information about the relationship between classical music and test taking, I was relieved when a more recent study questioned the results of the earlier research, though I'd liked the idea of Mozart, dead in his pauper's grave, revived to help American students score on standardized testing.

Clearly, more research is needed. Is a Wallace Stevens poem an exercise for the brain? Will a half hour spent in front of a Velázquez help you ace the math exam? Will reading Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* make you realize—as any reader or judge or prospective juror or citizen of a democracy or any form of government should know—that two different conclusions can be drawn from the same set of facts? Will James's novella make it easier for its readers to tolerate ambiguity?

Art can be informative, though it is always a mistake to equate intelligence with the amount of information one possesses. Read *War and Peace* and you learn something about the Napoleonic Wars. Look at a portrait by Bronzino and you find out how a certain class of people dressed in the sixteenth century. Read Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* for an education in, among other things, the workings of a glove-making factory. Read Gabriel García Márquez to discover an earlier meaning of "banana republic," and Roberto Bolaño's *2666* to learn about the murders of hundreds (or perhaps thousands)

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of women that have been taking place for decades along the U.S.–Mexico border. A film such as Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* or Michael Haneke's *Caché* or Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others* can help us understand why people, at certain historical moments, make certain moral choices. And Otis Redding's version of "Try a Little Tenderness" can step in to answer Freud's question about what women want, or at least one of the things they want—in addition to equal rights and equal pay.

Art can make you smarter, if by *smart* we mean more aware, responsive, cognizant, quicker, and so forth. Art can make you more aware of the ways in which history, social class, race, gender, and good and bad luck affect us. Art is the cerebral, spiritual, and emotional equivalent of the toners we splash on our faces to improve our complexions. Art opens our heart and brain cells. Put Mozart on your iPod and you will do better on the exam, especially if you've studied.

Seven: Art is a time travel machine.

There is no better way, including the Ouija board and the séance, to get in touch with people who have been dead for hundreds of years. If you want to know how a seventeenth-century Dutchman saw light, look at a Vermeer. If you want to know how it felt to be a bored housewife in a nineteenth-century French town, read *Madame Bovary*. If you want a preview of an alternate or possible future, read Philip K. Dick. If you want to see how this country looked fifty years ago, study Robert Frank's photos, or to see what Rome was like for a certain group of people in the 1960s, watch *La Dolce Vita*. If you want to know how it felt to live in a slaveholding society—that is to say, this country before the Civil War—*Huckleberry Finn* can tell you more than the most incisive, comprehensive, and meticulously researched history book ever written.

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FIRST EDITION

Cover design by Robin Bilardello

Cover photograph © Images By Kenny/Shutterstock

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

Digital Edition JULY 2018 ISBN: 978-0-06-239788-1

Print ISBN: 978-0-06-239786-7

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