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Gesch, S. (2019). The Significance of Story: A Review of On Reading Well. Retrieved from https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/1110

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The Significance of Story: A Review of *On Reading Well*

Abstract

"In reading Prior's book, I was given a fresh view on books I'd already read, and was encouraged even more to read those I hadn't, despite the abounding spoilers."

Posting about the book *On Reading Well* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/the-significance-of-story-a-review-of-on-reading-well/>

Keywords

In All Things, book review, *On Reading Well*, life, books, Karen Swallow Prior

Disciplines

Christianity | English Language and Literature

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt University.

in things

October 3, 2019

The Significance of Story: A Review of *On Reading Well*

Shelbi Gesch

Title: *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*

Author: Karen Swallow Prior

Publisher: Brazos Press

Publishing Date: September 4, 2018

Pages: 272 (Hardcover)

ISBN: 978-1587433962

“There was a boy named Eustace Clarence Scrubb,” C.S. Lewis writes in the opening to *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, “and he almost deserved it.”

Eustace read “books of information,” books that “had a lot to say about exports and imports and governments, but they were weak on dragons.” Though Eustace and I differ in many ways, I deeply identify with Eustace’s unfortunate reading choices. Like Eustace, I tend to prefer books of information to books of fiction. My husband occasionally accuses me of having grown up reading “all the wrong books,” as Eustace had. In fact, I hadn’t even read through the Narnia Chronicles series completely until after I married him, a person who *had* read “the right books” and introduced many of them to me.

Because of this history of unfortunate book choices (at least in the opinions of Lewis and my husband), I approached Karen Swallow Prior’s *On Reading Well* with a bit of trepidation. Glancing over the table of contents, I counted up the books I’d read and the ones I hadn’t, just to see what I was up against. Six out of thirteen. The “hadn’t read yet” category won by one book. But, despite my initial hesitance, I found *On Reading Well* to be refreshingly accessible. Prior explains in her introduction that though

“spoilers abound,” the book is designed for those who have yet to read the books she writes about, as well as for those who have already read them. I found this to be true. In reading Prior’s book, I was given a fresh view on books I’d already read, and was encouraged even more to read those I hadn’t, despite the abounding spoilers.

Most English teachers will advise you not to skip the introduction of a book, and that advice applies here as well. In it, Prior lays out the both the intention and design of the book: an examination of how reading shapes us, and how reading well not only builds the good habits that diligent reading in a world full of electronic distractions fosters, but also develops virtue. *On Reading Well* is organized into three parts. The cardinal virtues—prudence, temperance, justice and courage—form part one. Part two examines the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. Part three looks into the heavenly virtues of chastity, diligence, patience, kindness, and humility. Each virtue is paired with a book or short stories which exemplify it, whether positively or negatively.

The books and stories covered range from classic literature, such as Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* (illustrating the virtue of justice) and Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* (on patience, perhaps unsurprisingly), to more contemporary selections such as Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (on hope) and Flannery O’Connor’s short stories “All that Rises Must Converge,” and “Revelation” (both of which are used to examine the virtue of humility). More than simply giving its readers a “to-read” list with short synopses of books arranged by their symbolic virtue, Prior gives her readers a guided tour into the works she covers, illustrating what it is to read more deeply, beyond plot and character into the meaning and significance of story.

Though this is a book which deals with the theme of virtue in literature, Prior’s look into *The Great Gatsby* in particular takes her readers beyond simple moralism. Rather than giving her readers a recounting of Gatsby’s moral failings with a dismissal of “there but for the grace of God go I,” Prior calls us to look deeper into Gatsby’s striving for a better life: his greed, which is the opposite of temperance, into his futile attempts to fill the emptiness that is the natural result of a life without meaning—ultimately, a life without God. Along this journey into the story, Prior does the work of a literature professor in pointing out the symbolism connecting Gatsby’s obsession with Daisy and Gatsby’s library full of pristine, unread books. The value of both to Gatsby, Prior writes, is in “what they symbolize, not what they are.” In grasping for more wealth and more of the woman he cannot possess to prove himself worthy and fill his emptiness, the character of Gatsby illustrates to readers a reminder of where true temperance comes from—from the God who gives us worth not in what belongs to us, but to Whom we belong.

In a world increasingly full of digital distraction where people are constantly reading in short bursts scrolling by on screens, *On Reading Well* is a timely reminder of the importance of reading deeply, deliberately, slowly, and with discernment. Reading well is more than reading the right books; it is reading with an awareness that what we read shapes us, and reading with the intention to let the stories we read form us into more Christlike people.