

**A Talk Given by Vita Wells at a  
Celebration of Books, Reading, Writing,  
Libraries and Independent Booksellers  
19 May 2012**

*Offered in Conjunction with the Art Exhibition  
"Seeing Through It and Seeing It Through"  
Oakopolis Gallery, Oakland, CA  
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Thank you for coming, particularly in the middle of a beautiful Saturday afternoon. I appreciate your coming out to celebrate reading and writing books, and to celebrate independent booksellers and libraries. What better cause?

I want to thank Oakopolis for hosting this exhibition, as well as the good people at University Press Books in Berkeley for cosponsoring this event. Your participation is an honor and a pleasure.

This is a short talk about my work and the thinking behind it. I'll say something about why I work with books, and read some selections from others' writings that speak directly to the distinctive relationship between a reader and a text. It's this relationship that animates my work. I'll pay homage to Virginia Woolf, an author with whom I carried on a most lengthy, intimate and far-ranging conversation during the last decade, and will comment on the pieces here inspired by that conversation. Next I'll join a chorus in singing praise of independent booksellers and libraries, reminding us of the vital roles they play in our lives, and why they deserve and need our

support. I'll close with celebrating books as a place we will continue to go as we seek meaning in our lives.

I work with books because they are the most powerful, most meaningful medium available to me. As physical objects, books are unlike any of the other material objects with which we surround ourselves in our day-to-day lives. Books are singular in the power their mere physical presence possesses. Who here doesn't experience that distinctive quickening in their heart when they walk into a library or bookstore? It's not like walking into an antique furniture store, a fine restaurant, a jewelry store.... Those are all lovely spaces, with wonderful things there, but there's a particular sense of possibility, of promise, that only books communicate.

As they so often seem to do, scientists have confirmed something we already knew: Books change us. It turns out that when we read, our neurological activity and structure, and our psychology, are affected in a way similar to how they are by our having experiences out in the world. This is why books are powerful. Engaging with a book is like engaging with another person.

I'll read now some selections from authors that speak directly to this point.

Jerome Bruner was a psychologist whose 1987 seminal essay "Life As Narrative" played a formative role in the development of narrative as an important field of study. I read from Bruner's 2002 book *Making Stories—Law, Literature, Life*.

Narrative, including fictional narrative, gives shape to things in the real world and often bestows on them a title to reality...Narratives of the imagination...[create] realities so compelling that they shape our experience not only of the worlds the fiction portrays but of the real world. Great fiction proceeds by making the familiar and the ordinary strange again...by 'alienating' the reader from the tyranny of the compellingly familiar. It offers alternative worlds that put the actual one in a new light. Literature's chief instrument in creating this magic is, of course, language: its tropes and devices that carry our meaning-making beyond banality into the realm of the possible...Great fiction is subversive in spirit. (pp. 8-10)

Narrative fiction creates possible worlds—but they are worlds extrapolated from the world we know, however much they may soar beyond it. The art of the possible is a perilous art. It must take heed of life as we know it, yet alienate us from it sufficiently to tempt us into thinking of alternatives beyond it. It challenges as it comforts. In the end, it has the power to change our habits of conceiving what is real, what is canonical. It can even undermine the law's dictates about what constitutes a canonical reality. *The Grapes of Wrath* changed the legitimacy of a neglected American dust bowl just as surely as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* undermined the acceptability of slavery—and not only by stirring popular indignation. John Steinbeck's novel, like Harriet Beecher Stowe's, opened the issue of whether life had to be that way. That is the seed of subversion. (p. 94)

David Loy is a philosopher and professor of Buddhist studies and comparative religion. I read from his 2010 book *The World Is Made of Stories*.

A story is *an account of something*...[Stories] teach us what is real, what is valuable, and what is possible...The world is made of our accounts of it because we never grasp the world as it is in itself, apart from stories about it. The limits of my stories are the limits of my world... When our accounts of the world become different, the world becomes different. (pp. 3 - 5)

Stories are not abstractions from life but how we engage with it... The question is not so much "What do I learn from stories?" as "What stories do I want to live?" ... The mind needs stories as much as the body needs food. There are junk stories and more nourishing ones. The food we eat becomes our bodies, assimilated stories form our identities. (pp. 25- 26)

Paul Elie is a writer and senior editor at the publishing house Farrer, Straus & Giroux. In his 2003 book *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, he explores the role literature played in the lives of four American Catholics who sought, in turn, to effect others' lives by way of their writing—the monastic Thomas Merton, authors Walker Percy and Flannery O'Conner, and activist Dorothy Day. Elie writes in his introduction and conclusion:

Their work, once the pride of a socially aspirant Catholic populace, is now a point of entry for readers of all kinds—curious, perplexed, indifferent, or altogether hostile to religious experience. Set as it is on the border between life and art, between faith and doubt, it describes that experience with rare clarity and power. What is more—and this, perhaps, is what makes it persuasive—it dramatizes that experience in such a way that the reader enters into it personally through a kind of radical identification with the protagonist. At its best, it is writing that one reads with one's whole life, testing the work against one's own life, and vice versa...Certain books, certain writers, reach us at the center of ourselves, and we come to them in fear and trembling, in hope and expectation—reading so as to change, and perhaps to save, our lives. (pp. xiii-xiv)

In their different ways, the four writers this book is about sought the truth personally—in charity, in prayer, in art, in philosophy. Their writing was the most personal way of all, for in the act of reading and writing one stranger and another go forth to meet in an encounter of the profoundest sort. (p. 472)

This is why I read. And when I make art, this is why I work with books.

Turning now to my work...

Virginia Woolf was the author I approached most deeply during my 40's. In conjunction with a show I had in Carmel earlier this year I wrote a

paper about perception and how perception plays in my work. In it I wrote this about several of my pieces that emerged from reading Virginia Woolf:

[These pieces] speak to reading's generative potential. These are celebratory works, my response to taking stories deep into myself, to having intimate conversations with characters and authors, and to participating in the exquisite, heart-rending and fecund interior of life by virtue of gifted authors.

Earlier I referred to Jerome Bruner's attributing to fiction "the power to change our habits of conceiving what is real." Maryanne Wolf, Director of the Center for Reading and Language Research at Tufts University, writes more explicitly: "[Reading] enables us to try on, identify with, and ultimately enter for a brief time the wholly different perspective of another person's consciousness... We never come back the same, [and] we are no longer limited by the confines of our own thinking. Wherever they were set, our original boundaries are challenged, teased, and gradually placed somewhere new. An expanding sense of 'other' changes who we are, and...what we imagine we can be."

These three celebratory pieces honor the potential of reading to escort us toward life-affirming possibility. (["The Subjectivity and Instability of Perception"](#), quoting from *Proust and the Squid*, pp. 7-8, 2007)

This was, in fact, my experience reading Virginia Woolf, her novels, journals, letters and more. I'm grateful for that extended conversation.

I turn now to a 2006 essay about books, booksellers and the web by John Updike. He opens with this:

Booksellers, you are the salt of the book world. You are on the front line where, while the author cowers in his opium den, you encounter ... the rare and mysterious Americans who are willing to plunk down \$25 for a book. Bookstores are lonely forts, spilling light onto the sidewalk. They civilize their neighborhoods.

Updike goes on to describe some of the perils to booksellers and authors posed by the web. He concludes with this:

The printed, bound and paid-for book was — still is, for the moment — more exacting, more demanding [than the web], of its producer and consumer both. It is the site of an encounter, in silence, of two minds, one following in the other's steps but invited to imagine, to argue, to concur on a level of reflection beyond that of personal encounter.... Book readers and writers are approaching the condition of holdouts, surly hermits who refuse to come out and play in the electronic sunshine of the post-Gutenberg village.

Updike closes his essay with a call to arms:

So, booksellers, defend your lonely forts. ... For some of us, books are intrinsic to our sense of personal identity.

In addition to the people from University Press Books, do there happen to be any other booksellers here?

I thank you!

And I urge all here to join ranks with them in defending their lonely forts—that is: buy books from independent booksellers. A world populated by bookstores is a better world for all of us.

As for libraries, especially our embattled public libraries... In “All Hail the PUBLIC Library,” a marvelous essay on [truth-out.org](http://truth-out.org), David Morris not only reminds us why public libraries are vital to democracy, and recounts how high the return on investment is when public libraries are considered merely on economic grounds (as seems the fashion these days); he also offers some historical, philosophical and cultural context for this great institution.

Morris writes, “In an age of greed and selfishness, the public library stands as an enduring monument to the values of cooperation and sharing. In an age where global corporations stride the earth, the public library remains firmly rooted in the local community. In an age of widespread cynicism and distrust of government, the 100 percent tax supported public library has virtually unanimous and enthusiastic support.” Until it comes to municipal budgets, that is. In sobering contrast with our current experience, Morris notes that “not a single library closed its doors during the Great Depression.”

In reading about public libraries, it’s heartening to observe how vast is their supporting chorus. Bill Moyers sings a common refrain, calling the public library “the essence of the well-informed public, the pillar of the social contract,” and observes that the closing of a library “is like a death in the family.” Extraordinarily important resources that they are in our communities, I urge all here to patronize and support your local libraries.

I now return to the paper I cited earlier, my exploration of perception, and close with its closing:

I conclude with “Still Standing,” a piece that celebrates [finding and following a thread of life-affirming possibility] ... by way of reading books. ... Bedraggled, wind-blown, parched though we may be, we lovers of books will continue to read books as a way of making meaning in our lives.

We are, in fact, still standing.



*Still Standing, group of nine figures*