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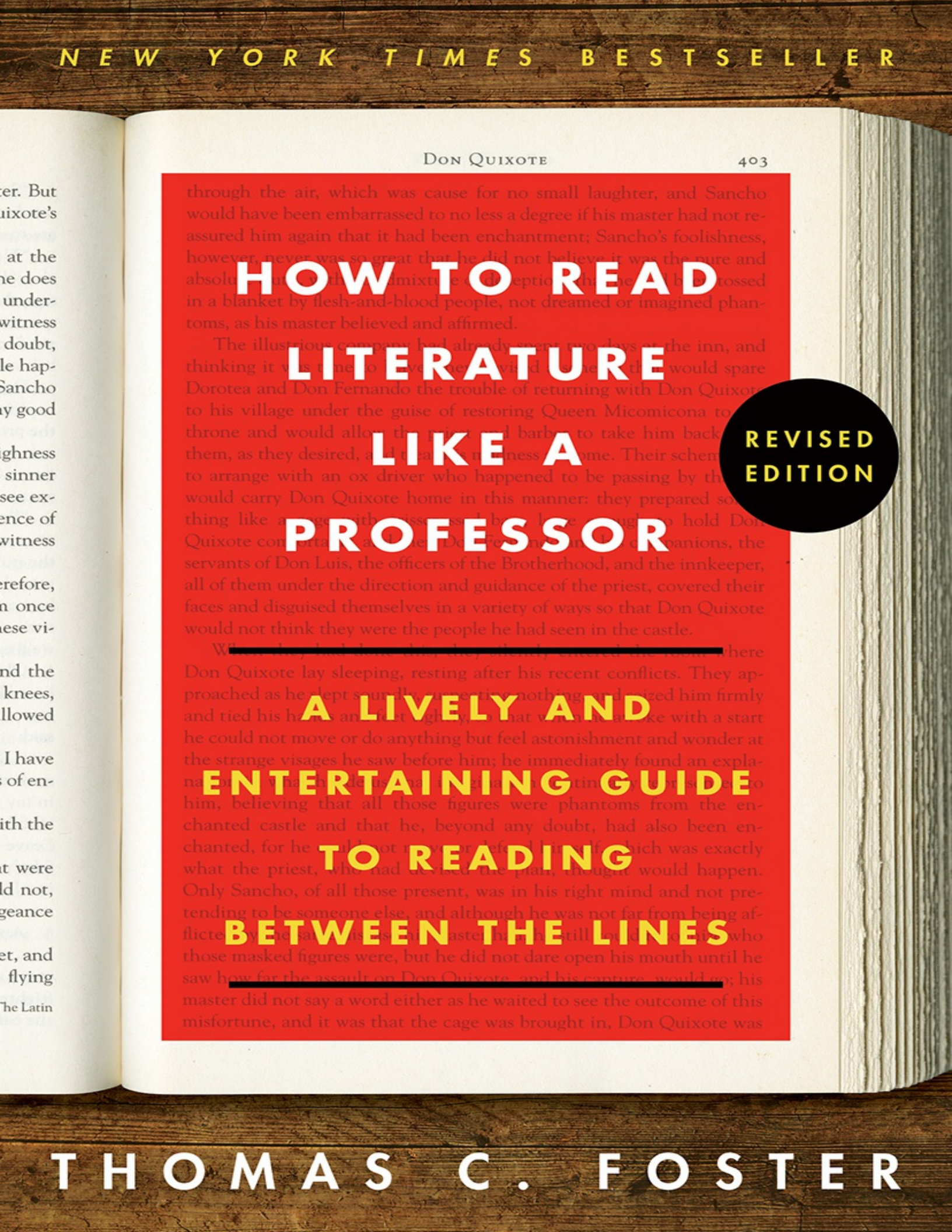

THOMAS C. FOSTER

How to Read Literature Like a Professor

A Lively and Entertaining Guide to Reading Between the Lines

THOMAS C. FOSTER

HARPER PERENNIAL

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • NEW DELHI • AUCKLAND

Dedication

For my sons, Robert and Nathan

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Preface

THE AMAZING THING ABOUT BOOKS is how they have lives of their own. Writers think they know their business when they sit down to compose a new work, and I suppose they do, right up to the moment when the last piece of punctuation gets planted on the final sentence. More often than not, that punctuation is a period. It should be a question mark, though, because what occurs from then on is anybody's guess.

The classic example is the writer whose best book goes *thud* upon release. Think Herman Melville or F. Scott Fitzgerald. Melville must have thought, after finding large readerships for earlier novels, that the crazed search for the white whale would be a smash. It wasn't. Nor was Fitzgerald's tale of a romantic dreamer trying to rewrite his past. *The Great Gatsby* is so much subtler, so much more insightful about human nature and its historical moment, than his earlier books that it is almost inconceivable that his huge audience turned away. On the other hand, maybe that is why it turned away. Successfully predicting the coming calamity looks a lot like an excess of gloominess—until the disaster arrives. Humankind, observed Fitzgerald's contemporary T. S. Eliot, cannot bear too much reality. In any case, Fitzgerald lived only long enough to see his books largely out of print, his royalties nonexistent. It would take another generation for the world to discover how great *Gatsby* truly is, three or four times that for *Moby-Dick* to be recognized as a masterpiece.

There are also tales, of course, of unexpected bestsellers that go on and on, as well as flashes in the pan that flare up but then die out without a trace. But it's the Moby-Gatsby kind of story that compels our attention. If you want to know what the world thinks about a writer and her work, check back with us in, oh, two hundred years or so.

Not all stories of publication switchbacks are so stark. We all hope to find an audience—any audience—and we believe we have some idea who that will be. Sometimes we're right, sometimes we're all wet. What follows is a confession of sorts.

The customary acknowledgments and thanks are typically placed at the back of the book. I wish, however, to recognize one special debt of gratitude to a group whose assistance has been monumental. Indeed, without them, this revision would not have been possible. A dozen or so years ago when I was drafting the original, I was pretty clear on the audience for my book. She was a thirty-seven-year-old returning student, probably divorced, probably a nurse forced back to coursework by changes in the licensure rules of the profession. Faced with the prospect of obtaining a bachelor's degree, she chose to follow her heart this time around and pursue a degree in English. She had always been a serious reader, but she had felt that she was missing something in her experience of literature, some deep secret her teachers had known but not imparted to her.

You think I'm kidding, right? I'm not. Teaching at a branch campus of a famous university, I meet her, or her male equivalent, the guy (usually, although there are women as well) laid off from the assembly line at General Motors, again and again. And again. One of the great things about teaching at the University of Michigan–Flint, as opposed to the University of Michigan, is ceaseless contact with adult learners, many of whom hunger for more learning. I also have plenty of the typical-college-student type, but the nontraditional students have taught me a few things. First, never assume anything about background experience. I've had students who have read all of Joyce or Faulkner or Hemingway, and one who had read more Czech novels than I could ever hope to get through, as well as students who had read pretty much only Stephen King or Danielle Steel. There have been Hitchcock fanatics and devotees of Bergman and Fellini, and others who thought *Dallas* was high art. And you can never tell which will be which.

Second, explain yourself. They expect, and are sometimes more vocal about it than their younger classmates, to see how the trick is done. Whether they think I am the high priest or the high charlatan, they want to know how the magic works, how I arrive at my sometimes idiosyncratic readings.

And third, teach precepts, then stand aside. Once I show these older students how I work with texts, I get out of the way. This is not because of the wonders of my approach or my teaching; chiefly, what happens is that I validate something about their own way of reading that gives them permission to run free, and run they do. Younger students do, too, but they are often more inhibited, having spent their whole lives inside classrooms. There's nothing like being out on your own to make you intellectually self-reliant.

Are these older students all geniuses? No, although a few might be. Nor are they all closet intellectuals, although more than a few are—you know, the sort who get nicknamed "Professor" because they're seen reading books on their lunch break. But

however smart they may be, they push me and school me even as I do the same to them. So I figured there must be others out there like them. And it was for that group that I wrote this book.

Boy, was I wrong. I was right, too. I have heard from quite a lot of mature readers, some of whom fit the above descriptions, others who had been English majors in college but who had been left with the feeling that something was missing, that some key element of literary study had passed them by. I would receive the occasional e-mail from such readers. Then, about two years in, the nature of those missives changed. I started hearing from English teachers. Not often, but every once in a while. And about six months after that, I started hearing from high school students. The teachers were uniformly glowing in their praise, the students mostly so. With just enough hate mail to make it clear that this wasn't a put-up job. One student said, in one of the more printable messages, "I don't know what the big deal is. Everything in your book I learned in ninth grade." I told her I would like to shake her ninth-grade teacher's hand. And no refunds. It was also at about this time that I heard indirectly that the book was being discussed on a site for Advanced Placement English teachers.

In the years since, I have been blessed to have contact with teachers and students from around the country. There have been all sorts of inquiries, from "What did you mean by *X*?" to "Can I apply this notion to that book that you didn't discuss?" to "Can you look over my thesis sentence (or my whole paper)?" The first two are great, the latter less so, since it puts me in an awkward ethical position. Even so, it is flattering that students trust a complete stranger enough to ask such questions.

I have also had plenty of direct interaction. I go into several classrooms a year to talk with classes about the book and how they're using it. These visits are a lot of fun and almost always involve a great question or two. Needless to say, the in-person visits are largely limited to places I can drive in a few hours, although I did once go as far afield as Fort Thomas, Kentucky. I have also, thanks to the wonders of the digital age, been able to engage with students electronically. Diane Burrowes, the queen of academic marketing at HarperCollins, stays up nights thinking of new and strange ways to get me, or at least a digital version thereof, into classrooms from New Jersey and Virginia to Flagstaff, Arizona. And of course the development of platforms like Skype has made such visits almost commonplace.

What has struck me most in the ensuing years is the endless inventiveness of secondary English teachers in general and AP teachers in particular. They have figured out ways to use this book that would never have occurred to me if I taught for a thousand years. In one class, each student is assigned as the keeper of a chapter; if Sam is in charge of rain and snow, he makes a poster explaining the significant elements of the chapter, and whenever the reading involves precipitation, Sam is prepared to discuss its implications. I suspect Sam got a raw deal and has to work harder than almost anyone else, but maybe he likes being busy. In another class, students work in groups to make short movies, and every movie must incorporate at least one concept from the book. At the end of the year, they have a mock-Oscar ceremony, complete with tuxedos and statuettes (used sports trophies, I'm told). Now that's just brilliant. What I like best about many of the schemes is the degree of student autonomy built into them. I suspect that one of the appealing elements of the book is that it lacks the apparatus of a textbook, which allows teachers to make of it what they will—and they make many different things of it. In turn, many of them pass that open-endedness along to their students, permitting them to be creative with the text and their own insights.

Is that the key to the book's popularity among teachers? I don't know. I was amazed when I first heard that it was being adopted for courses, my thoughts revolving around the utter absence of academic trappings (things like notes, glosses, and questions at the end of chapters, which, by the way, I've always hated) and the scattershot organization. I grouped the discussions in a way that felt right to me, but that's not the same as making sense for classroom use. Indeed, I am not sure what would make sense in a classroom setting, since I have never, and would never, use the book in a course. How's that for a confession? It is not an excess of modesty, a thing of which I have never been accused, that prevents my using it. The reason is more practical. This book contains most of my literary insights and all my jokes. If I assigned it, I would have nothing left to do. The goal of education, as I see it, is to bring students to the point where they no longer need you—in essence, to put yourself out of a job . . . but that retirement would be a little more sudden than I'd prefer.

So when I heard that teachers were assigning the book as summer reading, I was more than a little astonished. That it has found a home in high schools is testament to the creativity and intelligence of secondary teachers of English. They're working at a time when, we're told, no one reads anymore, yet they somehow manage to inspire a love of reading among their students. They work incredibly hard, grading work by as many as 150 students at a time, a load that just thinking about would make most university professors woozy. They get far too little respect and not nearly enough pay for doing a remarkable job. One of my more waggish colleagues, noting my frequent visits to secondary classes, says that I could have my pick of any high school teaching job in America. He's wrong, of course. I couldn't keep up with the people already there.

To the English teachers who have made *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* a success, I can offer only my profound

gratitude. That this book is even in print, much less in the process of being revised, is all your fault. I can't thank each of you individually, but I would like to thank some representative members of the tribe: Joyce Haner (now retired) of Okemos High School (Michigan), for many late-night discussions at, of all places, softball team parties, as well as for being my first welcomer among Michigan teachers; Amy Anderson and Bill Spruytte of Lapeer East High School (Michigan); Stacey Turczyn of Powers Catholic High School in Flint; and Gini Wozny of Academy of the Redwoods in Eureka, California, all of whom sent their—and their students'—recommendations and suggestions for the new edition. Literally dozens of others have offered suggestions in person or via e-mail over the years, and to each of you, many, many thanks. What you do is far more important than any book.

The changes to this edition are modest but, I hope, significant. Most significant, to my troubled mind, is that I was able to remove or correct two or three howling blunders. No, I won't tell you what they were. It's bad enough I've had to live with them, so I certainly won't broadcast my folly. And there are quite a few fit-and-finish issues I was able to resolve, little matters of grammar and orthography—needless repetitions of words or phrases, an unhappy word choice here or there, the usual niggling matters that make it so hard to read one's own work and that make one think, "Surely I could have done better than *that*." But there are also matters of substance. The chapter on sonnet shape was generally deemed not to fit the rest of the volume. It's about form and structure, really, when the rest of the book is about figurative meaning and the way meaning deflects from one object or action or event at the surface level to something else on another. If, like me, you always liked that chapter, fear not. I'm planning a discussion of poetry, quite possibly in e-book form, so that chapter may reappear in a couple of years. The chapters on illness, heart and otherwise, have been shortened and run together; it felt as if the text was straining for length there.

In their place, I added a chapter on characterization and on why being buddies with protagonists is so bad for the health of second fiddles. There's also a new discussion on public versus private symbols. One of the central precepts of the book is that there is a universal grammar of figurative imagery, that in fact images and symbols gain much of their power from repetition and reinterpretation. Naturally, however, writers are always inventing new metaphors and symbols that sometimes recur throughout their work, or that show up once and are never heard from again. In either case, we need a strategy for dealing with these anomalies, so I try to oblige.

I have also included, as a path toward increased analytical confidence, a meditation on taking charge of one's own reading experience, of understanding the reader's importance in the creation of literary meaning. It's surprising to me how, even as they actively create readings of their own, students and other readers can still maintain an essentially passive view of experiencing texts. It's high time they gave themselves more credit.

Of course, literature is a moving target, and thousands upon thousands of books have been published in the decade or so since the book appeared. While there is no need to overhaul the references and examples from edition to edition, I have used a few illustrations from more recent publications. There have been some terrific developments in poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction in the last few years, even for those of us who are not enthralled by teenage vampires or Jane Austen's novels beset by monsters and parasitic adaptations. *Mr. Darcy's Second Cousin's Wife Gets a Hangnail* . That sort of thing. Against those trends, however, we can set the appearance of talented newcomers as well as work by established masters in the various genres, writers as diverse and interesting as Zadie Smith, Monica Ali, Jess Walter, Colum McCann, Colm Tóibín, Margaret Atwood, Thomas Pynchon, Emma Donoghue, Lloyd Jones, Adam Foulds, Orhan Pamuk, Téa Obreht, and Audrey Niffenegger. And that's just the fiction writers. There have been startling new finds and painful losses. We sometimes hear of the death of literature or of this or that genre (the novel is a favorite whipping boy), but literature doesn't die, just as it doesn't "progress" or "decay." It expands, it increases. When we feel that it has become stagnant or stale, that usually just means we ourselves are not paying sufficient attention. Whether it's the untold story of a famous writer's wife or the racial newcomers to a changing Britain or America or a boy in a lifeboat with a tiger or a tiger in a Balkan village or a man on a wire between the Twin Towers, new tales, as well as old tales with new wrinkles, continue to be told. Makes you want to keep getting up in the morning just to see what happens next.

While we're on the subject of thanksgiving, I would like to express my gratitude to a critically important population. Every time I meet with students, I am inspired. In the course of my work, naturally I deal with college students, both undergraduate and graduate, on a frequent basis, and those interactions have been rich, full, frustrating, uplifting, disappointing, and sometimes downright miraculous. English majors form a large portion of that group, but thanks to the wonders of general education requirements, I have had a great deal of contact with majors in other fields (biologists are a special favorite), and they inevitably bring different skill sets, different attitudes, and different questions to the table. They make me pay attention.

I have also, for the last ten years or so, had frequent contact with high school students, an experience I wish everyone could have—not merely high-school-age young people, but teenagers in their capacity as students. A great deal has been written and said about this group, most of it negative—they don't read, can't write, don't care about the world around them, don't know anything about history or science or politics or, well, you name it. In other words, the same things that have been said about teenagers since I was one. And for a long time before that. I'm pretty sure that one day we will unearth a clay tablet or a papyrus scroll with those exact sentiments expressed. I'm sure some of it is true, that some of it has always been true. But here's what I know, from my dealings in person and via e-mail, about high school students. They are thoughtful, interested and interesting, curious, rebellious, forward-looking, ambitious, and hardworking. When faced with the choice, many opt for the heavier workload and higher demands of AP classes, even though they could slide through something easier. They are readers. Many read—and some read a huge amount—beyond the syllabus. They write. More than a few aspire to write professionally. When told that it is nearly impossible to make a living as a writer and likely to get even harder, they still aspire to be writers. I know this from all the questions I field and the conversations we have together. And as long as there are young people who are interested in language, in story, in poetry, in writing, there will be literature. It may move into digital realms, it may return to handmade manuscripts, it may take form in graphic novels or on screens, but it will continue to be created. And read.

A couple of years ago, I gave a talk and reading in Grand Rapids. Students from a local district came to the event to get me to sign books. Not the book that had just been published, but the one they had been assigned the previous year in tenth grade. This book. Now, lest you misunderstand, this event was after the school year, so there was no extra credit on offer. They were there because they loved their English class, which really means they loved the teacher who made the class great, and because the book was written by someone who was (a) in Michigan, (b) coming to their town, and (c) not dead. That last part made me a rarity in their school reading. The books were used. Hard used, lots of underlinings and broken spines and dog-eared covers. A couple seemed to have met a bulldozer. Several of the kids said a variation of the following statement, which I get with some frequency, "My heart sank when I saw that a book on reading was assigned, but it turned out to be pretty cool/not so bad/all right." And they thanked me. *They* thanked me. I nearly wept.

Faced with all that, how could I be anything but grateful?

Introduction

How'd He Do That?

MR. LINDER? THAT MILQUETOAST?

Right. Mr. Lindner the milquetoast. So what did you think the devil would look like? If he were red with a tail, horns, and cloven hooves, any fool could say no.

The class and I are discussing Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), one of the great plays of the American theater. The incredulous questions have come, as they often do, in response to my innocent suggestion that Mr. Lindner is the devil. The Youngers, an African American family in Chicago, have made a down payment on a house in an all-white neighborhood. Mr. Lindner, a meekly apologetic little man, has been dispatched from the neighborhood association, check in hand, to buy out the family's claim on the house. At first, Walter Lee Younger, the protagonist, confidently turns down the offer, believing that the family's money (in the form of a life insurance payment after his father's recent death) is secure. Shortly afterward, however, he discovers that two-thirds of that money has been stolen. All of a sudden the previously insulting offer comes to look like his financial salvation.

Bargains with the devil go back a long way in Western culture. In all the versions of the Faust legend, which is the dominant form of this type of story, the hero is offered something he desperately wants—power or knowledge or a fastball that will beat the Yankees—and all he has to give up is his soul. This pattern holds from the Elizabethan Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* through the nineteenth-century Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* to the twentieth century's Stephen Vincent Benét's "The Devil and Daniel Webster" and *Damn Yankees*. In Hansberry's version, when Mr. Lindner makes his offer, he doesn't demand Walter Lee's soul; in fact, he doesn't even know that he's demanding it. He is, though. Walter Lee can be rescued from the monetary crisis he has brought upon the family; all he has to do is admit that he's not the equal of the white residents who don't want him moving in, that his pride and self-respect, his *identity,* can be bought. If that's not selling your soul, then what is it?

The chief difference between Hansberry's version of the Faustian bargain and others is that Walter Lee ultimately resists the satanic temptation. Previous versions have been either tragic or comic depending on whether the devil successfully collects the soul at the end of the work. Here, the protagonist psychologically makes the deal but then looks at himself and at the true cost and recovers in time to reject the devil's—Mr. Lindner's—offer. The resulting play, for all its tears and anguish, is structurally comic—the tragic downfall threatened but avoided—and Walter Lee grows to heroic stature in wrestling with his own demons as well as the external one, Lindner, and coming through without falling.

A moment occurs in this exchange between professor and student when each of us adopts a look. My look says, "What, you don't get it?" Theirs says, "We don't get it. And we think you're making it up." We're having a communication problem. Basically, we've all read the same story, but we haven't used the same analytical apparatus. If you've ever spent time in a literature classroom as a student or a professor, you know this moment. It may seem at times as if the professor is either inventing interpretations out of thin air or else performing parlor tricks, a sort of analytical sleight of hand.

Actually, neither of these is the case; rather, the professor, as the slightly more experienced reader, has acquired over the years the use of a certain "language of reading," something to which the students are only beginning to be introduced. What I'm talking about is a grammar of literature, a set of conventions and patterns, codes and rules, that we learn to employ in dealing with a piece of writing. Every language has a grammar, a set of rules that govern usage and meaning, and literary language is no different. It's all more or less arbitrary, of course, just like language itself. Take the word "arbitrary" as an example: it doesn't mean anything inherently; rather, at some point in our past we agreed that it would mean what it does, and it does so only in English (those sounds would be so much gibberish in Japanese or Finnish). So too with art: we decided to agree that