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# THE CALL *of* STORIES



*Teaching and the Moral Imagination*

ROBERT COLES

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## The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination

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# **The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination**

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## **The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination** Robert Coles

The Call of Stories presents a study of how listening to stories promotes learning and self-discovery.

### **The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination Details**

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## **From Reader Review The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination for online ebook**

### **Erica says**

Robert Coles, psychologist and professor, compiled stories about how he used stories -novels, short stories and poetry- to reach his patients and his students. Lovers of reading will appreciate this book. There will be many sentences that will resonate with you. If you feel like the stories that you read become a part of you, then you will appreciate Coles' book.

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### **KimberlyRose says**

(I think Robert Coles travels in the same circles as Ms. Gretchen from Happiness at Home... ugh.) For my liking, there was entirely too much time spent in the POV of upper middle-class white America: lawyers, business types, etc. and almost all (all?) the literature referred to were stories I find absolutely dull, underwhelming, uninspiring. The writer's voice never comes off as snobby or elitist, though; he speaks from where he is coming from. Which is honesty. And he shows a lot of empathy (I'm thinking of one stunning quote about how the "terrible silences of an emotionally abandoned early life" affects the responses of a person) which modified my dislikes.

Despite those big turn-offs, this book had its fascinating bits. Some of the early examples (the young boy; the woman in the hospital) really touched me: the way Coles humbly learned from them by truly listening to their stories, respecting them, allowing their stories to flow into him, affecting his POV, was beautiful. And the way Coles showed how books saved people by connecting them to themselves, to the world, was vital. As one man in Coles's book said, "I'll say one thing though: without those books I'd be locked up someplace, either a jail or a mental hospital."

A good companion read would be something by Joseph Campbell, since Coles seemed to be dancing around the same issue: bliss. Ya gotta follow it or life fall apart. And our bliss is often discovered by analyzing our reaction to stories.

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### **Courtney says**

Confession: I maxed out my library renewals and didn't want a fine so didn't \*quite\* finish. But it was close.

I love the premise of this book: how can the stories we're drawn to read (and reread) reveal our true natures in ways we can't otherwise express? I struggled with Coles's methodology, as I have before when reading other books by him; I'm just not buying it that he has page long quotations from patients to famous authors when the conversations he had on these topics seem to have been organic and unplanned. But there's much to think about here.

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## **Katie Vanbeek says**

Incredibly interesting take on story telling and literature through the lens of a teacher/psychiatrist. Coles creates a homage of sorts to powerful writers of past and present and explores the intersections where story, healing, and place-sharing intersect. In numerous candid conversations with medical students and patients alike, Coles demonstrates how our ability to imagine and place ourselves in a story besides our own greatly aides our ability to engage and help others (medically, spiritually, therapeutically, etc). If you teach, are a lover of story, or are curious about morality and imagination- this won't disappoint.

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## **Martin says**

This book gave me a long list of titles that I would either like to read for the first time--Tillie Olson's *Tell Me a Riddle*, William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*; or titles that I would like to revisit--*The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, *The Brothers Karamazov*...

Still, there were times reading this book when I felt as acutely from the wrong side of the tracks as I ever have. Coles is doubtless a wonderful teacher and doctor, but his is a rarified world indeed, full of Harvard students on their way to illustrious careers in medicine or finance, students who are more than willing to write extensive heartfelt reflections on the books he assigns. They reflect on the struggle to live conscientiously as they tread the path of noblesse oblige toward their future riches. Yet there's a cynical part of me that suspects some of them will have become high class cads by now--managers of hedge funds or some such form of legalized theft.

And I have to confess that as a high school English teacher, I felt a certain amount of envy--something not usually high on my list of vices, but boy did this book stimulate THAT latent talent. Coles not only gets to meet and talk extensively with William Carlos Williams and Enrico Fermi (in Fermi's dying days), but his students--whom I've already bad-mouthing, probably unfairly--actually want to read literature and write about it. In my much more common experience of teaching high school English, where I'm dying for students to engage in literature the way Coles's students have, I find myself instead worn down by years of, "How long does it have to be?" and "Do you want us to double-space?"

I'm sure Coles would be saddened to read this response to his work, especially since I agree with his belief in the power of literature to inform the conscience. But I had to overcome a lot of resentment to get there! My apologies, professor. Perhaps I should take your class!

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## **Carl says**

Robert Coles's parents programmed him, in a sense, to be a lover and teller of stories, not necessarily of his own, as in a writer of fiction, but of others. They did not attempt any particular brand of brainwashing; they simply, to he and his brother's consternation and embarrassment, sat there in the middle of the living room each evening reading the classics to one another. As a consequence, Coles has spent his life not only reading short stories and novels, but in teaching their stories to students as well as collecting and telling the stories of his patients and students.

Robert Coles is a child psychiatrist on the faculty at Harvard medical School. In *The Call of Stories*, he

reflects on the experiences he has had telling those many stories, and the lessons he and his students have learned from them. He begins by crediting two physicians for directing him to the importance of patients' stories. One of his first psychiatric mentors admonished him: "The people who come to see us bring us their stories. They hope they tell them well enough so that we understand the truth of their lives. They hope we know how to interpret their stories correctly. We have to remember that what we hear is their story." Because Coles had an interest both in medicine and in writing, he got himself introduced to the pre-eminent writer-physician of his age, William Carlos Williams, who worked in the day as a physician in Paterson, New Jersey, and spent his evenings writing poetry that helped a generation of poets develop a new direction. As Robert Coles was accompanying him on his house calls to patients one day, Williams made the comment: "Their story, yours, mine --- it's what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them."

From these powerful influences, his parents and his early physician mentors, Coles himself moved on to the using of stories to teach students, first in the medical school, but eventually in almost all of the graduate schools at Harvard University. In *The Call of Stories*, he describes those experiences, what his students told him, and what he learned in the process. And he describes his experiences, not in an academic way, but through the voices and stories of his favorite authors as well as those of his mentors, his friends, and his students. *The Call of Stories*, thus, ends up not only being about stories, but is itself a collection of wonderful stories well told by a master storyteller.

So what did Robert Coles learn from a lifetime of reading and teaching stories. He came to understand that stories can provide a compass to people, and students in particular, who find themselves struggling with the moral challenges of life. He learned:

----"Novels and stories are renderings of life; they can not only keep us company, but admonish us, point us in new directions, or give us the courage to stay a given course. They can offer us kinsmen, kinswomen, comrades, advisers---offer us other eyes through which we might see, other ears with which we might make soundings...there can be a moment of recognition, of serious pause, of tough, self-scrutiny."

----"...the wonderful mimetic power a novel or a story can have---its capacity to work its way well into one's thinking life, yes, but also one's reveries or idle thoughts, even one's moods and dreams...So it goes, the immediacy that a story can possess, as it connects so persuasively with human experience...a person's moral conduct responding to the moral imagination of writers and the moral imperative of fellow human beings in need."

----and that stories do not provide "... 'solutions' or 'resolutions' but a broadening and even heightening of our struggles---with new protagonists and antagonists introduced, with new sources of concern or apprehension or hope, as one's mental life accommodates itself to a series of arrivals: guests who have a way of staying, but not necessarily staying put."

Late in the book Coles asks where the impulse to tell stories might come from, and asserts that it comes from a man standing there confronting the world around him and asking "How shall I comprehend the life that is in me and around me. To do so, stories were constructed---and told, and remembered, and handed down over time, over the generations. "

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## **Mont says**

This doctor practices literature. Robert Coles has taught a “Literature and Medicine” class at Harvard Medical School for decades, and he also teaches classes at Harvard Law School on “Literature and Law.” He occasionally does something similar at Harvard’s schools of business and government. Before teaching, Coles spent 20 years in the field as a child psychiatrist to the poor and writer telling their stories in his famous “Children in Crisis” series for which he was awarded a Pulitzer.

Coles discusses many different books and morals that he extracts from them to inspire the ethical imagination of doctors, lawyers, and bankers. He discusses so many books in passing that it is a challenging for me to identify and summarize his main points. Morals are important to Coles, who is a devout but progressive Catholic and defender of social justice traditions in the RCC. He was a friend of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement as well as a teacher of Catholic writers and the Catholic imagination.

My favorite anecdote is of Coles’ own parents who read aloud to each other the entire evening during his childhood in Massachusetts. His father was a reserved English atheist and his mother a devout Midwesterner, but they came together over George Eliot, Dickens, Hardy, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, and all the major American writers. They read so often that they managed to read together aloud “Anna Karenina” three times while Coles was growing up. *“Your mother and I feel rescued by these books, we read them gratefully,”* his father told him.

His parents’ ritual struck me as the most memorable part of this book, and I think it one of the most intimate relationships I have ever heard reported. It is also the primary reason why I wanted to share this review. Now, just read two stories and call me in the morning.

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## **Anna Smithberger says**

I admit, my reading of this was colored by how little time I gave myself to finish it in time for class discussion, but it didn't really get me interested. This is partially because the point felt very obvious to me, and partially because I don't tend to be interested in reading about doctors treating patients. It isn't my genre and I just wasn't very fussed about the whole thing. Maybe if I hadn't skimmed as much as I did it would have been a different story, but eh... It was okay.

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## **Kambiz says**

This book is for all those literature lovers out there. I think any of us wants to honor the literature we grew up with, could come up with such a book. A delightful read.

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## **Jan Priddy says**

It's been a long time since I read this book, but it made a huge impression on me. My writing to this point in my life had been almost exclusively essay and Cole convinced me that I needed to rethink what story I was telling with the stories I tell.

In 1990 I was beginning my career as an English teacher. It is only the stories that change our lives.

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### **Erica says**

Coles reminds us of the importance of story -- and how it shapes and reflects our lives as much as entertains us. He uses his own experience, both as a teacher and medical student (and eventually a doctor) to show the power of story -- how it can be used with someone struggling with issues in their own lives to understand and put their trials into context, and to connect with the larger world.

He writes:

“...so it has been for many of us – going back, way back, to the earliest of times, when men and women and children looked at one another, at the land, at the sky, at rivers and oceans, at mountains and deserts, at animals and plants, and wondered, as it is in our nature to do: what is all this that I see and hear and find unfolding before me? How shall I comprehend the life that is in me and around me? To do so, stories were constructed – and told, and remembered, and handed down over time, over the generations.”

Amen!

If you can read this without revisiting Dostoyevsky and Tillie Olsen, you're made of steel!

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### **Ryan says**

More than anything, a love letter to books and literature, but more specifically, a book about the ways in which literature ("stories") can be its own teacher in our life. Robert Coles is a doctor and a therapist, and has taught literature courses to med students at Harvard for decades. He implores future doctors, and mental health practitioners, to take their patients' stories seriously, and to view them less as medical or mental health riddles to be "figured out" and analyzed, and more as unique individuals with stories to tell. Stories that relate themselves back to 18th century Russia as easily as mid-twentieth century Connecticut, or Flannery 'O Connor's South. Not exactly the book I was expecting or wanting, but a lovely read regardless. At the very least, it gave me a nice reading list!

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### **Elia says**

I have owned copies of this book for over 30 years and have been giving it away, particularly, to doctor friends of mine because of the stories and the message within the stories. Dr. Coles may be a psychiatrist by training but he is able to tell a story with deeply felt emotion and empathy for the individuals in his accounts of struggles and pain. His literary skills enhance and elevate what may seem like an ordinary tale to one of extraordinary dimensions.

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## **Jen says**

Read this based a quote someone posted on twitter (can't remember who or what the quote was), but didn't recognize any quotes while reading and kept reading, hoping I'd get to something worthwhile. The book gave me a couple of ideas for teaching, but overall, disappointing. What bugged me most were the conversations the author recalled with various patients and student -- no one actually speaks the way he recalls these dialogues. Was hoping it'd be inspiring but wasn't.

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## **Will Fonseca says**

Coles's book came to me at a welcome time as I've been thinking about teaching and literature a lot lately. (I suspect that this was deliberate on the part of the person who lent it to me.) In advocating for the priority of storytelling in psychiatry, general medicine, and, especially, teaching, Coles implicitly brings up questions I remember thinking about often as an undergrad: what is the role of the university? Is it to produce public knowledge through research or to craft well-adjusted, socially productive graduates? How ought we value and teach literature? When we teach it, should we prioritize reasoned argument and usage of the analytical tools students acquire in high school English classes, or should we place a greater priority on literature's ability to help the reader grow morally, spiritually, etc.?

On the last question, Coles advocates for the latter. His thesis is that stories are good and that professions like teaching, psychiatry, and general medicine would be well-served to pay greater attention to them, rather than getting lost in the echo chambers of their own terminologies. I found this a bit tiresome because while it's a convincing point, it's not a very controversial one, and 200 pages of a non-controversial thesis very quickly becomes its own kind of echo chamber. David Brooks falls victim to this often, I think, in his NYTimes columns: he asks interesting questions and then settles on a boring, not-terribly nuanced half-answer.

Meanwhile, everyone applauds him for asking challenging questions. There was a very popular professor at Georgetown who did the same: he was well known for his speeches around campus on weighty topics, because he had mastered the art of gently grazing complex questions without going through the difficult moral work of taking a nuanced stand in support of one answer or another. (Unsurprisingly, he was a very effective fundraiser.)

Coles advocates for literature's morally instructive ability and suggests that that ability be utilized more often in college classrooms, yet he does not address, let alone critique, the arguments that literary theorists have made against prioritizing literature's moral value in college classrooms. I and many others believe that a novel's moral merit ought, for the most part, be left out of English classrooms. I believe that the role of the university, aside from producing public knowledge (which is a nod to the 19th century German research university model), is to cultivate in its students the ability to reason and access knowledge in their own lives and in society. Literature has a role in this, but that role is not its ability to get readers to fall in love with Heathcliff's loneliness.

Which is not to say that readers should not fall in love with Heathcliff's loneliness. (It is hard not to.) But they should mostly fall in love with it on their own time.

What literature's academic role should be then is not easy to concisely identify. Here's a shot: 1) a piece of literature is academically good insofar as it allows for reasoned debate about that piece of literature. I steal this idea from Gerald Graf, the Chicago English scholar and former MLA president, who wrote in "Disliking

Books at an Early Age" that Huck Finn only became interesting to him once his teacher asked his class if the book should have ended earlier than it did. Armed with a question, which could be answered in either the affirmative or the negative, he re-read the text, considered the evidence, concluded one way based on that evidence, and put together an evidence-based argument to support his conclusion. A similar thing happened to me in college when a professor asked if the Merchant of Venice is an anti-semitic play, and, yes, I was convinced, it is. Any charitable reading of Shylock's subversive speeches be damned. So I re-read the play with the exciting prospect of proving my point, and that's when the play came alive. Sure, I get the same chills as everyone else when I watch Al Pacino give the "hath not a Jew eyes?" speech, but a teacher's job is not to give a student chills.

Frankly, the question of how we ought to teach literature in classrooms is difficult. Maybe teachers should make sure their students get chills. Maybe there's a role for that, especially in high school English classes. Coles's book was a bit unsatisfying to me in that he brought up these literary theory questions without going into the fun, complex depths of their answers.

Of course then there is the point that Coles's purpose was not to write an academic thesis on teaching English. (Or on how to practice psychiatry or law... I unfairly stick to English here as it is what I found myself considering as I read.) Rather he learned something valuable in his time as a doctor and teacher, which is that stories matter, perhaps a bit more than we think that they do. I should be satisfied with this entirely welcome perspective, yet, for some reason, I am left peeved by its placidity.

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