

OpenTheo

Should Some Books Not Be Read? | Dhananjay Jagannathan & Tara Isabella Burton

April 13, 2021



The Veritas Forum

The Veritas Forum at Columbia presents a discussion on the moral power of literature. A conversation between Columbia Philosophy Professor Dr. Dhananjay Jagannathan and Dr. Tara Isabella Burton of The American Interest, moderated by Dr. Gregory Floyd. • Like, share, review, and subscribe to this podcast. Thank you.

Transcript

Welcome to the Veritas Forum. This is the Veritas Forum Podcast. A place where ideas and beliefs converge.

What I'm really going to be watching is which one has the resources in their worldview to be tolerant, respectful, and humble toward the people they disagree with. How do we know whether the lives that we're living are meaningful? If energy, light, gravity, and consciousness are in the street, don't be surprised if you're going to get an element of this in God. We often say that the books we read shape us.

So if books really do have this ability to shape us, should some books not be read? That's the title of today's discussion. It's a conversation between author, journalist, and theologian Tara Isabelle Burton and Columbia University Professor of Philosophy, Dhananjay Jagannathan, moderated by Dr. Gregory Floyd of Seton Hall University, a forum presented by Columbia University. So I have the honor and privilege of saying something about this question first, and also very excited to hear what your questions are about what we discussed in the moderated panel part of this discussion.

And I want to say thanks for the invitation to speak at the forum to all the sponsors and to Professor Floyd and Dr. Burton for engaging with me. So I'll be blunt. I'm going to answer the question that's on the flyer, should some books not be read? And my answer is yes.

The way that I understand that is that I think we are better off as individuals, not reading

some books, and more broadly, not encountering or engaging deeply with some instances of narrative art. So I'm going to include in their film and television, which we can see plenty of. I am quite aware that this is an unpopular view and it has quite a notorious history, and I want to clarify what I think by engaging with that history to some extent.

And my starting point for that is going to be Plato, who is the great enemy in the history of philosophy of narrative art. And part of the reason I want to use Plato is that many of you in the audience will be familiar with the Republic as part of Columbia's core curriculum or as part of other such curricula. I think that Plato was right to be suspicious of narrative art on specifically ethical grounds.

But I also think that he gets this diagnosis a bit wrong and that his political solutions are unacceptable. Not going to be advocating totalitarian suppression of art here. So what I want to do is I want to say some things about what I think Plato gets right, which is to say what's the view of Socrates and the Republic.

And mentioned some points of common ground between me and that view in increasing order of controversy. And then say what I think Plato gets wrong and sort of uses that as a starting point. So one thing that I quite firmly believe is that the ethical and the aesthetic evaluations of narrative art are inseparable from one another.

So sometimes we talk about what makes for a good book or a bad book, and we might be speaking of its moral qualities or ethical qualities. What sort of person does it make us? What sort of ideals does it embody? And about its beauty or its fittingness in a certain genre of literature. Those are the latter aesthetic evaluations.

And I think we make a mistake if we try to divide these two firmly from each other. Moreover, and more controversially, I also think that when we're trying to decide the question of what makes for a good book or a good film, the ethical evaluation is actually primary in some sense. And that's because we have examples of narrative art that are good just by just for their ethical content.

And they tend not to be the kinds of things that we think about first. So if you think about fables and other kinds of moral tales, parables, for instance, those can be good just because of their ethical content, even if they're not especially sophisticated. But I think it is impossible, and this is where I take a more controversial position.

I think it's impossible for a book to be good if it is morally corrupting. Finally, I think along with Plato that there is an important place in social life for discussing what kinds of narrative art we should promote and what we should discourage. So I think this is not just an individual question but a social question.

And that too is controversial, of course. You might think that there is this morally

corrupting potential, whether that's for individuals to decide. And I think we should talk about these questions together.

So I think where Plato makes a mistake is that he thinks of our engagement with narrative art too simply as a matter of imitating what we find therein and absorbing certain kinds of values and then reproducing those values in our action. I'm not saying this is the only thing he thinks, but this is the basis of Socrates critique in the Republic. And I think that one way in which this goes wrong is that it draws our attention to the idea that there's certain ethical facts and that literature can acquaint us with them.

So for instance, heroic literature equates us with the idea that courage is a valuable part of human life. And readers of the Iliad in Plato's Greek context might have been able to absorb that value. And Plato thinks that because Achilles is a really whiny character, actually what people learn from reading Homer is that it's okay to be whiny even when life is unfair.

And so the ethical facts are wrong in Homer and so we should reject Homer. That's a very crude picture of the argument in the Republic that I think it's not so inaccurate. I'm interested instead in thinking about this question through the lens of a different set of our capacities, not our capacity for learning ethical facts, but our capacities for what I think of as the moral imagination.

And I think this is where literature affects us most profoundly. So these capacities include our ability to imagine possibilities for action, but also imagining different structures for social life in the very way that Plato does in the Republic. Also more personally or individually, the different contours or configurations that our personal relationships can have, the range of possibilities of expressing our emotions and understanding the emotions of others, and our very general ability to reflect on our selves and our position as human beings.

And I think the moral imagination in that very capacious sense is really what's important. And that's not going to be a matter of merely imitating and then reproducing certain kinds of values that we learn or absorb from literature, winningly or on winningly. I also want to be clear about this.

I think Plato, like many sensorial people, thinks of this problem as primarily a political one. So we have a group of people in the political community who decide which books or which dramas are good, and based on their content and what supports the right kind of political project we should have. And I think we should think about ideals in the way that Plato thinks we should, but not think about that primarily as thinking of there's a favored set of ideals for our political community that are going to keep us safe.

So we read the good books that promote our values. I don't agree with that. Nevertheless, I do firmly think that there are some books that are going to fall afoul of

my standard of ones that are going to contract our capacities for the moral imagination rather than expand them.

And because I think that the view that I'm supporting here is going to depart from a lot of modern literary approaches to narrative art. And those are the kinds of approaches that we tend to find in the academy. I don't mean to speak for all my colleagues, but I think this is a dominant approach in literature departments, for instance, and more broadly in the humanities.

And the kind of approach that instructors, of course, is like our first year, core curriculum course in literature humanities, which I'm one, that's the dominant approach among instructors. So here are some ways that it might seem to really be a distance from what goes on generally speaking. So one thing you might think is that my view or the view that I'm sketching out and defending here commits what's called the biographical fallacy.

So the idea would be, okay, so we evaluate the artwork based on what we think about the author. And I'm actually in awe in favor of that, I think we should set the author aside. And instead, when we're thinking about the ethical power of literature, we should think about the relationship between the text as a material, as a cultural object and the reader or the community of readers that are exposed to it.

Another mistake I might seem to be making is that I might seem to be committing the intentional fallacy. This is another term that is discussed in literary criticism. And that's the idea that what we should do when we evaluate literature is consider what message the author was trying to communicate to their readers and evaluate that message.

And I actually think that my view can survive even the rejection of the intentional fallacy with the idea that we should be concerned with author intentions. I think it's important to think about what a text might be communicating. But the primary locus of evaluation that I'm interested in is in this relationship between text and reader.

And that's consistent with thinking that there are many kinds of acts of communication that are possible that are there to text makes possible. I'll close by mentioning two more sort of very potentially controversial aspects of what I'm saying. So one thing you might think is, if I make the ethical evaluation of literature so central, am I not saying that literary critics need help from people like me, from people who do ethics or moral philosophy? And wouldn't that violate the principle that different disciplines have different objects and they can relate to those objects separately? I'm going to say yes.

So here's where I'm actually going to take a little controversial stand. We can't do good literary criticism without at least reflecting on ethics. But that's not surprising because I also think that my discipline moral philosophy can't be carried out without the help of disciplines like sociology and anthropology.

So what I'm saying is that literary critics should not abandon their moral or ethical sensibilities. And they would be aided in their activity of evaluating literature by reflecting on those moral sensibilities, the ones that they bring to the text and also the kind of ethical interactions that happen when people engage with literature. And that suggests I think a picture of cooperation between different disciplines rather than antagonism.

Okay, and the final point I want to make is, doesn't this whole picture, this very sensorious approach to literature, doesn't it just go against the spirit of humanistic inquiry or the humanities as a whole? So you might think, you know, if there's one slogan for the humanities, it's a line from a play by the Roman playwright, comic playwright Terence, the self-torch for us to play on the Hey-Out onto maruminos. And there's a famous line says, "I'm human." So nothing human is alien to me. And that was one of the slogans that Michel de Montan put in the roof beams of his famous tower library.

So this idea that all human things are valuable just because they're human and are, you know, should engage our concern for that reason. And I agree, my view is absolutely not humanist. Instead, it is what I would call naturalist.

So it starts in the idea that what's valuable in human life is a matter of our human nature, our capacities, and that narrative art has a role in the expression of those capacities in a good life as a part of what we might call culture. But instead of thinking about culture as something autonomous, we think about culture and cultural products as how our nature expresses itself in certain times and places. So cultural products don't stand outside ethical evaluation, even if they stand at some removed from our own cultural and historical context.

So this enterprise of adopting this ethical stance towards literature because it's so important because cultural, these literary products and narrative art generally can do harm to us as well as good for us. This whole stance towards narrative art is very, very complicated. And you have to undertake it in a spirit of humility and not recommending that people go out and decide what are the bad books and say, I'm not going to go anywhere near that.

But I think just because we want to say that because we want to make space for cultural pluralism or relativity in some ways, understanding that texts have lives and then they have after lives, for instance, through the history of readers that come to them, we can acknowledge all of that and still say at the bottom of it that human beings as such are very deeply affected by these cultural products and shaped by them. And we should acknowledge their ethical power. So that's the picture that I support and I want to lay out especially what I take to be controversial in it.

Thank you so much. I wish that we had a kind of full-throated wildian among us to sort of disagree with you more forcefully. I am sort of a half-throated wildian here, so I will both

agree and disagree.

So if the question were put to me, should some books not be written? In many ways, I would find that an easier question to answer. I would say absolutely there are books that should not be written. That's not the question we're discussing today or at least not in the first part of this conversation.

Just as my view on should some books not be read is that there are books that are extremely, extremely dangerous to read that are even potentially corrosive, but that ultimately the risks outweigh the benefits. And moreover, that the sort of precise ways in which bad books can be morally corrosive, the best correction for such moral corrosion in a way is actually the act of loving attentive reading. So a bit of background, I'm a 19th century specialist and so that's very much the field I work in.

And it's not necessarily the most optimistic in a certain way about the power of literature, or rather it conceives of the power of the writer as something beautiful and seductive and also extremely dangerous, even diabolical. I think often, for example, the yellow book in the picture of Dorian Gray that sort of destroys Dorian's sense of self by infecting his brain with dangerous images, the book being implicitly, he's Muller against nature, which I did my doctorate on and I think I if there was corrosion, I'm supposed to have suffered from it. And what strikes me as so fascinating in these 19th century texts that I has very much affected my own view is the way in which the relationship between the storyteller, the writer, the sort of even the dandy creating a work of art out of his own life is a form of diabolical vampirism in which this sort of powerful storyteller exercises a degree of narrative power over a sort of poor defenseless reader who, as if they've been infected by some sort of evil spell, becomes kind of possessed by what they read.

And the way in which a lot of these writers, including the one I want to talk about most, sorry, Kierkegaard, the Danish writer and the illusion, the way in which they talk about this phenomenon as being a kind of a particular kind of erotic possession that when someone tells a story, they are able to sort of stand in this godlike position as a kind of miniature god themselves, creating a world, creating a world for someone in order to exercise power over them. And the position of irony and disengagement to tell a story and not to be sort of wedded to it, to be in that position of creative mastery is a sort of particular kind of harmful irony. And I love this line of Kierkegaard to the concept of irony.

The iron mist is the vampire who sucked the blood of the lover. And while doing so has fanned him cool, lulled him to sleep and tormented him with troubled dreams. The most, I think, best example of these, this that you as a phenomenon is found in a section of Kierkegaard's either or sort of book within a book, within a book called the Seducer's Diary, where the narrator, this Seducer Johannes, as he's known, wants to seduce this

woman, Cordelia, this young girl, he sees her on the street, he decides he's going to seduce her, and through these series of love letters, he, the language he writes is, he poethesizes himself into a girl.

He makes her believe that she's part of this myth, she's an enchanted princess in a wood, and he manipulates her through these texts through the beauty of his language into basically doing what he wants before abandoning her. And this idea that creation is something where we can kind of disengage this perspective of ironic remove, work our way into the minds of others, exert power over them, I think is the model of 19th century, dangerous literature that I actually, I do subscribe to. So then the question that you might be asking is, well, if she thinks all this about how books are dangerous, like why is she saying, read them anyway? And here is where I depart from the 19th century model, or rather from this particular model.

I think that the very qualities that we as human beings sort of need to face this kind of vision of power and power vectors and how we might exert mastery over one another is best responded to through the very virtues that reading and encountering other human beings in a text allows us to do. So I want to sort of present us with a theoretical case here. The worst possible book one might read.

An evil genius, the Kiera Guardian's seducer, has created a book specifically designed to pollute us in some way, to be morally corrosive, to infect us, to turn us all into Cordelia or Dorian Gray, and this is someone who is an extremely skilled writer at the prose level, who's an extremely convincing writer, and they have created this, this hypothetical yellow book. Should we read this? What I want to say is very carefully, but yes, and the reason is to subscribe to the notion that this book could exist as an unadulterated evil book is not actually possible because it would demand a vision of humanity to which I don't describe, which is a sort of fully bad person. In this book, I don't think even in the hypothetical example that I'm giving, where you have someone brilliant and who desires to sort of do us harm, the book itself could not be fully bad, in part because this book can only operate upon us in dialogue with a much wider and much more various set of traditions.

There's of course the literary expectations both we bring to it and that any book must sort of be in dialogue with the vast tapestry of literary relations. There is indeed the language itself and the way in which language serves to, is not the provenance of any one individual. We are indeed in and through language.

There is no book, there is no yellow book that can have a certain degree of power over us fully because we as human beings aren't that powerful. There is no story that we can tell that is sort of fully a story that allows us to become in a sense miniature cause. We are always contingent beings in and through one another, in and through the language by which we shape ourselves and shape other people.

And because of that, we cannot be, there is no book that cannot have that have at least sort of, for how I might say a spark of goodness, a spark of real humanity. Rather when we read the virtues that we are sort of called upon to cultivate, are the faculty of attention, what it means to go outside ourselves and to focus on something that is strange to us, that is unfamiliar, alien even. And by directing our attentive gaze, the imaginative and receptive powers and rational powers that we have towards an object, we are embracing our vulnerability to other people.

We are embracing our vulnerability to what is outside us and to another human being. And indeed, the whole sort of vast network of other human beings always present in a text and in language itself. I think that there is perhaps, and I think this is fair, a bit of humanism in this, and I don't know that I wouldn't necessarily thought of myself as a humanist, but I think that the degree to which we encounter another human being in a book, even a bad book, is the kind of cultivation of our ability to be with one another.

That is so vital. Secondly, I think that there is another level of humanism in this that I have been thinking about as I prepared this over the past few days, which is I think that I have a fundamental optimism in our inherent response to the good. I think the danger of a bad book, let's say, is that it makes us feel strongly and drawn towards the wrong things.

And I think that there is one way of looking at that says, our ability to respond to beauty is independent of any moral truth about ourselves. It's just the sort of fact about us, and we could respond to good beauty, and we could respond to bad beauty, and those things, that response might be equally activated and equally in equal circumstances as long as something is effective. I don't believe that.

I think we do absolutely respond positively to things that are bad for us, that are even capital B, bad. But I do have, perhaps, optimistically the conviction that what we respond to in something is always leading us towards something good. We might respond sort of, no, our response might be perverted in some way.

We may be looking towards a good and led towards a lesser good or a false good or a false image of that good. But that fundamentally, if we are drawn to the good at the kind of most fundamental level of our being, as I do think we are, then I think that we must recognize, while being critical about our own responses to beauty, to texts, still think that there is something even in the worst book, even in this hypothetical yellow book, worthwhile, that if we respond to it might be but a shadow of what we are ultimately called towards. So that's where I'm coming from.

It struck me as Dr. Burton was talking, I was put in mind of a different 19th century author, Dostoevsky, who was a famous novel, Demons, in which he sort of reimagines demonic possession in light of the ideas of the age. The way ideas can sort of take root in our minds and really direct what we do with our time and energy and money, much

the way we read about possession in ancient religious texts. So the question is an old one when Professor Jaganathan was talking, I was put in mind of the other sort of source of this, the apology of Socrates written by Plato, of course, where Plato is charged with corrupting the youth.

His speech is judged by the city to be somehow corrosive or corruptive. So this is a long tradition that we stand in the wake of as we begin our discussion tonight. So I think, and I'll open the floor, maybe to Dr. Burton first, but I'll pose the question to both of you, you've just conceded, there's no debate that literature has moral power.

So maybe we can revisit that, but let's assume that for now, that art in general literature in particular, perhaps, or maybe in a distinct way, involves us in moral engagement, that we can't escape that in some way if we're reading carefully and attentively. So my question is to start off, what do we bring to a text? Right, because there are no bad texts for someone who can't read the language they're written in. Right? Sacred texts and evil texts don't sort of contain magic.

Right? There's something in the concourse of reading, of interacting with them that does us good or that does us harm. Right? I believe one of the oldest images for the Bible is it's a mirror. You sort of see yourself there for better or for worse.

So I guess the broad question that I'd open with is, what does it say about us if texts are bad? Is it always that they're bad for us? Do we bring things to them that make them harmful? Do we know ahead of time that a text is bad or is it only kind of visible in retrospect as it leads us to undertake actions we come to see and hide inside us harmful to us in some way? I think for me at least the sight of reading is, is fun or the act of reading rather is fundamentally and a sort of extremely personal and intimate encounter. And I think that in reading what we become is or what we become all the more aware of is this is I think a truth that is sort of true of us more generally just quite how contingent we are. We are already beings, you know, we are readers of the world around us.

We are readers and listeners to the language that we speak such that I think when there is a kind of complete personal nature to the encounter, I'm willing to say that there may be books that are more dangerous to some than are others. I certainly have my said of let's say things to which I am susceptible to morally that perhaps other people, more virtuous than I am in some regards or all regards might not be susceptible. And I think it's sort of then becomes on me to say, you know, this book, you know, I think this book, Valor, I have a weakness for, you know, a certain kind of nostalgic beauty and texts.

And I know that if I'm reading whether it's Stiffon's Vague or anything else that because I have a sort of moral, a moral weakness, let's say, it's that much more incumbent on me to guard against it to be even a little suspicious of myself and my own reactions, even as kind of asking myself the question, you know, what what am I longing for here? What is it

that I'm longing for? There's that sort of language of Zen soup and the homesickness for a vanished world. And then the question I might ask myself is, you know, what am I actually homesick for in this, you know, account of 19th century Vienna that I'm swooning over perhaps a little too willing to gloss over, you know, the politics of it because I like the way Stiffon's Vague writes. And it seemed precisely in the questions of how am I vulnerable to this? How am I making myself vulnerable to this? And what am I looking for in this that I think a more complex conversation that can be had than one that simply says, you know, this novel glorifies this or this novel glorifies an era that should not be glorified or even this novel sort of makes me nostalgic in a way that I just personally shouldn't be because I need to guard against that.

And I'm therefore I think I bring quite a lot and as a result sort of have a kind of a very specific moral duty to ask myself certain questions before and during the reading of any text. One thing I want to say is that it's very hard to come up with examples of what the yellow book might be. And this makes me less confident in my position and more attempted by Dr. Burton's in some moments.

But I'll give you an example in part because there's the poster of Don Quixote and Sancho Ponce behind Professor Floyd. Of course, Don Quixote is a book that's all about how literature, a certain kind of literature, idealistic literature can distort our worldview and sort of what also get us in touch with ideals that are against the spirit of the age in important ways. And when I teach Don Quixote, one of the things I want to give my students permission to do is to react to all the violence that it contains, which I think is easy to gloss over.

And I do that by pointing them to a remark of Nabokov's in his lectures on Don Quixote or the lectures on Cervantes that he gave, I think sometimes the 30s at Harvard where he says that Don Quixote is this book of unremitting cruelty and that it performs a kind of cruelty to its reader. And one reaction we could have is to say, you know, we see all these, you know, in the clash between Don Quixote's ideals and the harsh world that he lives in, we see that ideals don't have any hope again, you know, in fighting against the world, ultimately. And of course, the ending of the book is him coming back to a census at the end of his life and all the torment that he encounters seems to be for not.

And of course, there's a much more common reaction of people just to say, no, there's so much, you know, of wonder, a kind of wonder at human possibility in the book that, you know, even in these encounters that are cruel, there is a kind of marvelous look at every day life and the possibilities that it contains. And, you know, of course, there's supposed to be humor in all the violence and we might have trouble accessing that sometimes, but that's something we can even appreciate at a distance. So what would it be for Don Quixote to be bad for us? Well, it would be for us to walk away thinking that, you know, it's okay to beat people around the head because you don't like them or you've imagined that there's something other than what you expect or something like

that.

And, you know, only a very childish reader could, I think, come away from the book thinking that. I actually don't know why Nabokov said what he said. He wasn't the childish reader of literature, of course, he was a brilliant writer in his own right.

But, you know, the fact of observing the different reactions, the different sorts of readers have to text is part of our duty, I think. And so there's, you know, there's the naive active reading, this is sort of flipping through the pages and seeing what happens in a book, especially an exciting one. And then there's reflection on our own reactions and that is always going to draw in.

Well, how are my reactions, be different from those of someone else and we find ourselves as part of a community of readers and especially with these books that have had this readership for 400 years as the song "The Otay" has, the community is very big indeed and there are all these retellings of the story. And of course, that book itself is also about how we're always retelling stories even as we tell them for the first time. So, but I think we would miss something if we dismissed Nabokov too quickly.

We said, "Oh, Nabokov, you're missing the point. You know, you're supposed to laugh at all the violence." And I think there is a corrosive possibility. I think if Cervantes were less artful, if he were more hostile to humanity, he could have really made it the unremittingly cruel book that Nabokov describes.

I actually don't think that on Kael'the we find is that book, but I can imagine my way to thinking that. And it seems like not such a remote possibility when I think, well, here these things, we can get as many people have pointed out about film television, we can get desensitized to violence. I think literature can do that too.

I don't think that's a matter of us seeing what Don Quixote does and then trying to do it in our own lives because we are not Don Quixote, most of us. But it's not how we react to literature, but I do think there are. That is a possibility.

Once you see something represented, it has a kind of moral actuality for you that can be corrosive and dangerous and that's what I would hold on to the idea that there are not, there's not a yellow book out there, but there are books with little shades of yellow in them. So your last set of comments kind of brings me to the question I wanted to ask you directly and then I'll ask Dr. Burton if she agrees with your assessment that the aesthetic and the ethical are indistinguishable or I should say inseparable because where I want to begin asking is they certainly are distinguishable. And that becomes very clear if we think about the opposite.

We can think about ethical texts that are very bad literature or movies or art or cinema. I won't name any because we're being recording, but we can think of the sort of sea level

Christian movie industry or Christian music industry perhaps as an example of songs, movies, narratives that may contain points we agree with, content we find inspiring when delivered from a pulpit, but when it's set to the wrong kind of music or in the wrong narrative frame it suddenly feels like it doesn't succeed in some way. So clearly if that's the case we can distinguish between aesthetic and ethical elements in great books in particular.

So why not then say something like we can distinguish good books from harmful books on aesthetic grounds alone. Why does the ethical piece, I kind of want you to make a stronger case for why the ethical dimensions of a text are sort of inseparable or at least are account of the text is somehow lacking if they're not considered in addition to the stylistic and other sorts of narrative elements we can identify and isolate from the ethical ones. Yeah, good.

One of the dimensions that I'm interested in is thinking about what we should make of realism in literature and I think this is a helpful way in. So we think of the novel that is celebrated because of its relentless attention to the material reality of life and that's something that people have said about certain kinds of 19th century novels and the kind of literary critics go on saying about certain kinds of novels that are written here and now that they draw our attention to certain aspects of life maybe in times and places that we haven't ourselves inhabited and aim to describe them and that's sort of that's their primary mode of operation and I think one thing we could think is well when we say that is what we're saying merely that we have a kind of journalistic record of what in fact happens in certain times and places I think we cannot mean that and that's because the very act of writing fiction in particular involves understanding how to make the real come through from the page to the minds of the reader and that involves certain kinds of idealizations right even even the notion of a character or a plot is an idealization that's a matter of structure and community of various kinds and so we're already involved in you know the way that the real is manifested to us is through certain kinds of idealizations so I think the debate about realism versus idealism in the novel has you know I think that's getting at something important but it can't be the full story those terms sort of need to be unpacked in an important way and I think what that gets us to see is that you know if there's any ethical content you know it's in it's in those idealizations themselves and that means that you know we can't say of a book well it's good because it's so realistic where what we mean is it describes accurately what happens in certain times and places it's not really what realism comes to and I think that that's where we see how the aesthetic dimensions and the ethical dimensions are fused together one really providing the kind of image for that you know the realistic and the idealistic dimensions are kind of fused together in some important way so that's one aspect I'll flip it around and you know of course structure and plot can have aesthetic dimensions too so we might say of some piece of narrative art that has a very satisfying resolution to some of its central problems or tensions or something like that so you know

there's a certain way in a book a book is elegant if it ties off its loose end in the right way well what does in the right way mean can we give a purely formal description of that well interestingly the the victorians themselves you know did not did not think of of a form in that way so there's a very long tradition of of thinking that the appropriateness of form is itself a matter of responding to certain kinds of human needs you know whether that's of the characters who are being described in their situations but also of the readers again and that there there is a sort of ethical relationship implicated in that even in that very purely formal vocabulary so you know the idea of a resolution of a plot again it might seem like we're dealing with something purely aesthetic but we dig a little bit deeper and we see i think there are some ethical elements there so what i mean you know the reason that i think this in the first place is for very abstract philosophical reasons about the nature of value and i don't think there is a dimension of aesthetic value that that exists apart this is something that i i'm firmly resolutely against a certain kind of modern approach to to think about value in human life very much alive with ancient and medieval ways of thinking about it um but there aren't these different you know there might might be different aspects of goodness that we can tease a partner to talk about them but not in the nature of the thing itself um so you know especially because i'm focusing in on the activity of meaning making that happens when readers read texts that activity is is saturated with with both aesthetic and ethical dimensions and i think that's the sort of in the nature in the nature of things um but i gave a couple of examples of ways that these values kind of come together in in the actual practice of literary criticism if i could follow briefly before trying to Dr. Burton would you say that it's one thing to talk about Plato or Kierkegaard or Nabokov but would you say any text any sort of reader interaction has an ethical dimension to it i think there could be ways of what's called consuming media which don't have where the significance of the act is the fact that someone is doing it rather than doing something else um there's some ethical content there but you know i'm not going to say that um you know i i've been having the television on the background or or maybe maybe it's the beach read that i'm thinking of flipping through a book on on the beach you know what do we mean by ethical it's not a very it needed to be a very significant or weighty act i think that's true um but i think as soon as our capacities for attention are engaged um in any kind of a significant way um and i very much as Dr. Burton brought up i like this concept of attention um once that attention is there then all of a sudden i think you know the ethical possibilities are actualized you know what is our attention going to and why and how is our capacity for attention being shaped by this particular instance of our attending great so as we turn to Dr. Burton once again do you agree with Dr. Jaganathan's assessment that the ethical and the aesthetic are sort of inseparable and maybe as a follow-up because it was something you spoke to what are the sort what is the excuses for the discipline of reading what is in that that that does something that makes it ethical and formative for us so um yes absolutely i'm completely in agreement of the uh an extricability of uh the aesthetic and the ethical um here is sort of the point on which um i construct my understanding of how those things work together i think that's something that the um

cliche christian movie that you do not name and um the yellow book have in common that make them both bad and sort of aesthetically dangerous and and perhaps in the case of this movie aesthetically bad but actually i think morally bad is a certain kind of dehumanization or reducing people to character and character to character to serve a function of plot um you see this for example in you know the creation of Cordelia or Dorian Gray in this particular way um but you see it too in like the bad book that um a crime writer in a festival once brought up his example and i think about this like the book where like the beautiful dead woman is there and we're going to enjoy that she's beautiful and dead isn't it great that she's beautiful and dead because we now sexy story about who killed her um that you that's sort of dehumanization you also see in uh movies that say that or films or more uh movies or films that say novels or films that um say they have a sort of moral message but reduce their characters reduce human beings to ideas that sort of the dehumanization of the other that i think in a text whatever the ostensible moral message is actually aesthetically bad i'm sorry ethically bad and likely to be aesthetically bad because if you have flat characters um generally we notice um i think that the the act of reading is a fostering of attention towards another human being or sort of other human beings both in terms of the uh how i might be respond to the character on the page how might me even have imaginative possibilities for them beyond what uh an author gives us you know what were they thinking what what's their story if they were the the narrator of the story what would this be like actually in dostoevsky one of my favorite writers is a great example precisely because so many of his novels um are are sort of polyphonic and as is back to and said in the way that gives each um each character a kind of center of consciousness even your characters you see for two pages are are full in that way and i think that that direction of attention towards um like i said the humanity of the character the humanity of the author the sense that we are encountering something alien to us and training in um that recognition as a kind of almost I say but i'd say almost mystical but i'll go on and say you know mystical process um i think that is where the sort of ethical and the um amiesthetic converge also because I do think that we as as human beings have a sense um when that is happening and when it isn't now a different question is can we take pleasure um can we enjoy um something a piece of art and that is not ethical and I think yes that is true and that is where I sort of aesthetically judge it um you know do we take whether it's an erotic pleasure or the kind of perverse pleasure of the horror movie where we're like enjoy watching someone uh die horribly there are sort of um what I might call unvirtuous pleasures we might take in um a text in which I think that um let's say the dangerous aesthetic texts often which um do tend to it's worth saying either are erotic or sort of the eroticization of violence those are often the ways or that or the sort of aspirational like let's present you with this beautiful image of beautiful people being wealthy and fabulous which is a sort of another genre of pleasure read that's quite common I think all of these are um ways in which our desires are stated by texts uh but that is I would not necessarily say that those are the same things as being aesthetically good even as I recognize that I I recognize that I might be sort of linking the ethical me aesthetic there

and by sort of saying bad bad aesthetics is something different I'm open to that um we could say something like bad books can be beautiful or sort of provoke something in us uh professor Jaganathan did you want to add an example I think yeah just one one one example I mean I think um you know if you're coming from Plato or Kierkegaard our attention was drawn to um precisely to the kind of um by the horrible things in human life being aestheticized in the wrong way or or the misdirected erotic impulse you know um I'm interested in a phenomenon in modern literature which you know I see represented even in a lot of quite fine what's considered fine literature which is the promotion of a certain kind of cynicism that really to look at the human to look at human life is to see that there's no meaning there ultimately and to dress that up in a couple hundred pages of excellent writing and I think that that's that's more terrifying to me than the pulp the pulp fiction novel or something like that um because I think it's much more insidious it's harder to spot and it's one of the examples that got me thinking about this question that really radicalized me because I had the kind of you know response well of course the thing can be beautiful um you know even if it's not improving the ethically improving um but then I started to think well um there's a certain other ways of directing our capacities for attention elegantly um that uh that are you know corrupting or dangerous that are much much harder to spot them than the kind of um refined beauty example of the SS as a set aside horror example and so I wonder I wonder if you know we shouldn't keep track of that too that um uh cynicism is I think one of the one of the great dangers of modern life and one of the things that a lot of the narrative aren't that we encounter tends to promote. Very interesting um you had me thinking that you're sort of saying better off to read the Marquis d'Assard than Nietzsche but I won't press you on that distinction um I wanted to ask and maybe Dr. Burton we can start with you I think you raised very clearly this helpful distinction between individual assessments of harmful tax and sort of corporate or civic assessment social assessments of those and it came up in both of your opening comments um so beginning with you Dr. Burton how you spoke more about the personal or sort of individual assessment I think that maybe makes sense to us I can recognize I don't listen to this album when I'm not feeling well or like sad about my life or I know where these sorts of texts leave me at the end of them um do you think uh there could be especially in our pluralistic society um a sort of collective assessment that certain texts or a text especially given as you pointed out the polyvalent nature of so many of the most compelling texts could we arrive at a consensus that a particular text is harmful for us as a society? My hope is that as a society we might be able to which is which is to say um I think that a good society again speaking about ideals then and not actualities is one that um cares for the common good and part of that caring for the common good is a kind of full-throated moral commitment to what is good um do we think that this is viable or possible um at least in any society that I that I sort of can imagine anytime soon or ever no I um I don't trust any let's say institution to ever be able to safeguard well this particular question and I think again the dangers outweigh the risks you know if we had uh you know the heavens opened and the list of dangerous books came down to us great but uh I think that uh as I would not

want to rely on any human institution to institute such warnings I'm gonna say bring back the index yes the institutions will be even perfect but really really what I mean you know the the the time that I think about this the most keenly is thinking about um my role as a teacher and because I teach in the Columbia Corps curriculum I'm handed a syllabus and told to teach it and I'm supposed to teach every book on it and no books that aren't on it well there's a little bit of freedom not terribly much and one of the things that it got me thinking is sort of you know what is the kind of moral authority that is involved in that I think it would be easy to say well here are some important books or here's a selection of things that are are worth your time for because they'll lead you to interesting questions in various ways and I think that that's fine we can be provisional with that but I think we should also you know we should also take seriously the possibility that we in recommending certain kinds of literature are harming our students and I think this about philosophy classes too that you know I it's a little bit of a joke but on the first day of my ancient philosophy class I teach the apology and I tell students look what Socrates is telling us is that philosophy is dangerous it's important it's necessary to get ourselves to know the truth about these things but you know those truths might be bad for you they might make your life actually go worse and I think that's something that you know people don't don't give too much attention to and and philosophy either I think I think it's true in both cases that and that means that that you know we can't defer these questions we have to decide for ourselves do the benefits outweigh the the dangers and I think you know for the most part books we test have sort of kind of test of time and I'm yeah I'm not like a gust and I don't think that that the Aeneid is terrible because it it leads you to to vow arrives worldly things too much I see this as you know I don't I don't watch superhero movies and I think they're bad and saying Marvel's pernicious they do valorize the wrong yeah I think I think Marvel's pernicious I think they lead us to to valorize the wrong things I've acquainted myself with a few of them to make sure this is a part re-informed opinion but I think you know these things were seductive and we should we should keep our distance from them it becomes different when you're talking about something like the Aeneid or Don Quixote but but I think I think we should we should you know maybe in some other form of society it would make sense to to have something like an index where it would be not it wouldn't be you know you can't read this and still be a good person or we'll kick you out or something like that but here's a here's a little bit of a warning label on something and maybe you know fascist art should come with these kinds of warning labels too I'm not against that I'm not against Netflix putting a little little thing before gone with the wind I'm all I'm all for that kind of contextualization because I think it's important that it underwrites just how susceptible we can be if we're not familiar you know very few of us are familiar with with the histories of these of these cultural objects that we encounter and that we just sort of absorb and we all have to be more careful than we generally are.

I think I have two more questions and then we're going to turn it over to some student questions just a reminder to our audience to please continue to put your questions in the

Slido service that we've offered. So thinking about harmful texts in an election year and I think Dr. Burdenwood you brought out nicely how porous we are as readers to the world that we live in the world that many contemporary texts that come to us come out of how do we know can we know what are the signs in advance that a text for reading is actually harmful or merely is a protest to the world that we assume to be the case right so it seems to me that texts that rightly or wrongly are labeled as harmful or pernicious or corrosive in some way are precisely those texts that take a stand against the ideas of their age and we can't know ahead of time necessarily whether those are the ideas against which they propose an alternative are good ideas we should be promoting or bad ideas that we've become sort of just accepted uncritically. So is there a way in I guess do you know a text is harmful ahead of time and as you read it how do you know when you're actually being asked to question perhaps really uncomfortably values that you've taken for granted or when a text is really proposing a view of the world or the human person or human agency that is really harmful in some way so maybe we can start with Dr. Burden and then turn to Dr. Jaganathan.

For me I think the sort of number one indicator and this is again reflective of my own system of values and I do do grant that but I think it is about how human are the people in this text allowed to be is this a text whether it is a we can talk about new story sure but I'm thinking I guess still about the novel most most prominently but are do do people serve the story are there roles in the attacks to move the plot along to be fetishized to be an object of aspiration to be a place where we can insert ourselves and fantasize or and I think this is where the the cynical gaze I think really are Professor Jaganathan where your kind of the cynical case really gets us something and reminds me a lot of the sort of ironic remove of the vampire writer of the 19th century are human beings just little ants at whom we are we laugh are these do these characters exist in a sense for our amusement whether it's for our erotic pleasure for our fantasizing or for us to laugh at to mock and I think that there's a difference even in and I and I think this is what I love about Don Quixote that you can sort of laugh gently at a character up to a point but we don't sort of fully mock him in the sense of or maybe maybe we do but I don't certainly think that I think maybe a lesser donkey of dick could have fallen victim to that but I think this is a person this is a human being and and and in that kind of whole humanity this is someone with this is someone in who into who we could imagine ourselves not because we're imagining ourselves into the role of the you know in the pulp example of the person who sort of gets the professional success and the romantic happy ending and then secretly the princess all along or what have you but a sense in which we might imagine ourselves into someone different and in so doing expand our sense of who we are who we might be and kind of break open this idea of ourselves as enclosed from the world we become vulnerable to another person and I think that taking that as our ethical starting point are the people in this novel people again with perhaps a little bit of conviction on my on my part that this is a sense that this is something we can respond to that we are able to into with that that we have a moral sense that allows us to accurately

gauge whether that is going on that is the the sort of defining point of whether this is sort of a good book or a bad book less than any ideals it is trying to get across because it may well be that some of my ideals in this modern world of ours are it are terribly wrong and need to be changed and it may be that the the you know the ideas coming to me from this book are are a mix of good and bad it's it's really the ethical character that I want to pin down is not in the ideas it is conveying a certain way but in its treatment of human human beings in the past. Thank you very much. Dr. Jaganathan? I'll just add to that one thing yes is the the idea of sort of characters serving our interests I think is that's sort of an important source of the dubious character of some narrative art.

Of course this this whole enterprise is very it's very difficult I wanted to I wanted to sort of circle back to to my saying that if you look at just lists of banned books for instance you'll find in the the ALA the American Library Association has got this list of banned books and you know the the top 10 in the last 10 years is really interesting to look at it's a very heterogeneous list and on that list is 50 shades of gray and I'm not going to assume sort of why people are wanting to ban that one way or the other but I you know I might even have some sympathy with that but *Tango Makes 3* is also on the list which is this children's book about penguins who own Central Park and you know these kinds of discussions they get wrote into important conversations about what are what are societal values and what what we mean by that in a deeply plural society and I think we can give up on the idea that there's some sort of unequivocal authority that's going to you know the right the list of banned books that comes from the sky we can give up on that on that possibility and and even so sort of you know give give give some space to to the kinds of conversations that you know this is the sort of conversation about about what might make for and you know I think books can be exploitative not just of their characters but also of their readers in various ways and one way that exploitation can occur is precisely by confirming back to them exactly what they come into the book with that that is a form of of exploitation in my view or at least in in terms of sort of serious fiction or narrative art I think it's one of one of the kind of important failings of of some large chunk of modern literature that that attempts to do that for sweeters and so you know we we shouldn't we can't rely on the our you know the free song of disgust that we feel or or horror or whatever it is and that needs and it needs interrogation and you know I'm not not advocating for a kind of morally sensorious attitude where we take for granted that we have the right values and we can take those values out in the world and sort of detects the good literature and put aside the bat. I think you've both suggested in a way that if there are pernicious books we find that out as the result of a process of discernment as we engage them as we reflect on them and of course they're not our only input for ethical formation and perspective and so they're always in conversation with other influences so before we turn over to the students I'm going to ask you a question and I'd like you to address it with our undergraduate audience in mind. How do I know the difference as a student maybe as a scholar and a professor too between being bored or confused or angry at a book and being unduly influenced or harmed by it

in some way? Are there some you know maybe two telltale signs that to use your language Dr. Jagan-Nathan that my horizon is being limited in a harmful way rather than being challenged in a helpful way so how would I know that? I mean Dr. Jagan-Nathan if you want to go first yeah.

Yeah one thing I think this is really important you know this always happens on the first day of class with literature humanities where we tend to start off with the ilead and the students say well why do we have to read the catalog of ships and I like to sort of head this response off by giving them this little poem by one of my favorite Russian poets Josef Mandelstam which is called yeah I think it's called insomnia and you know the narrator of the poem is sort of falling asleep while reading the eusomniums he goes to read the catalog of ships in order to fall asleep and what I think is wonderful about that is it eusomniums pathically for for for lolling us to sleep depends on the rhythmic character of the of the verse the repetition is actually part of the point and once we see that we can maybe see past our boredom to see a kind of wonder even in that and we have this fellow reader of a you know alongside us Mandelstam that wonderfully draws our attention to that and then of course we can have a serious conversation about how Homer's original audience or the original oral audience for the ilead but have loved hearing about all different places and how it would have taken them geographically in their mind and our problems that we don't know all these place names and so and we have to look at a map to follow along and but you can you can kind of feel the narrator of the ilead taking us on this massive geographical tour and then you know that's a different way of kind of accessing sort of what the point of this of this boring stretch is um I'm also reminded of one of my very favorite recent books is a novel by Elie Fattemung named after Dostoevsky's novel The Idiot and a lot of critics really thought you know the second half of this novel is so slow and so flabby and you know goes on for a hundred pages too long and I really think you know that there's so much of wonder if you read something slowly enough that you know that if you slow down if you fight against your own boredom and you see what are the human possibilities that are being described what world is being evoked for me what feelings is the author drawing out in me those are reflective it's a reflective posture that we can take and I think even literary critics can get this wrong I think the second half of the ilead is as one of the most marvelous things and sort of recent American fiction and yeah I'm very fond of Elie Fattemung that's part of it is that I sort of have the capacity to see that in the text because she's also a travel writer and I think you know again just like with Homer's geographical mood you know sometimes a book is slow because it's trying to evoke a certain time in the place and so I think we can develop these kinds of habits and the best thing to do is to read a lot of different kinds of things and so you can start to find wonder and and more of it which is not to say that you know there's some things that are just boring and that's an okay conclusion to end up trying to. Dr. Burton how do we know the difference between being harmed by a book and being challenged to grow by a book? So I'm actually I'm also going to defend boring books for as you were talking to Professor

Jack and I was in put in mind of Simone Vay's essays on Born, I'm an Attention and precisely I think we're all agreeing that books should be boring I'm not sure how I feel about the implications of this but there is something to the directed attention of something challenging outside of a self that I think that is is morally good and one might say the kind of converse to that or the way in which one might be harmed if sort of surface level satisfied by a book is to come away with it sort of self-satisfied. I'm on the right track things are going kind of well for me I'm a better person I'm definitely about it like the worst thing I think you could feel about a book is like well I feel better about my own life now you know those fools doing doing terrible things to each other at least I'm not that and I think that sense of I won't say moral certainty but a kind of comfort with one's own life as compared to the lives of the people we've just read about or a kind of sense of um also satisfaction that everything turned out exactly as it should in and I think this is sort of the pulp rather than the cynical uh danger but the the idea of well life works a certain way and you've just got to do X, Y, and Z thing and then it'll all be fine and and you go have the happy ending and I think both of those are forms of self-satisfaction and and certainty so I think that actually books should destabilize you in such a way and the way in which I think a sort of de-heart uh the harmful destabilizations that you find in these sort of 19th century figures for what it's worth are books that sort of provide an image of I mean it's usually to be frank quite erotic in these books it's books that are that are alluring because they offer either beauty or the account of a beautiful woman dying very slowly under mysterious circumstances or something like that where the the seduction is always framed as a kind of form of sexual desire you know we're we're lustful for the ending we're lustful to see the horrible thing happen to the woman on the race the the railroad tracks or we're lustful to to see the you know murder happen in slow motion in a really gory detail it's that sort of unsettling that that is that is the mechanism in these bad yellow books by which kind of harm comes where it stokes our desire makes us want to see a bad thing happen or to enjoy bad things happening to the characters um and I think that's that sort of if we're if we're enjoying the the bad fate of of the people in a book whether it be uh oh well they got their come up and soar well they're so stupid or oh that that three that beautiful woman died very slowly I think all of those are examples of a kind of moral corrosion in what we're reading great excellent so we're going to turn to some student questions now or questions from the audience the first one is for you dr berten regarding your point of the impossibility of an entirely evil book um a student or an audience member at least asked even if no human is entirely evil can they still not perform an entirely evil act and I guess I interpret that to be it seems like we can point to pernicious men and women who write books and philosophies and things so is it possible that a book can really be harmful because of who wrote it or what it says or how have their life influenced what they wrote um I certainly think if we're talking about like the political ramifications of a book yes sure a book can be sort of caused such harmful things that happen that we might consider in that category um but I think speaking purely at the level like of do I personally read this book um I think that that there are indeed sort of pernicious people who can write books

designed to convince us of uh pernicious ideas while framing it in pernicious ways and all of those things are true but I think precisely because we are not fully autonomous beings but precisely because as human beings we are contingent in language we are contingent upon story the very expectations and um of genre of narrative are themselves kind of received and given to us in communal um no human being could kind of create could have such power over text itself other than I don't know by hypothetically writing their own language and in such a way as it's we could not even understand a book that was purely evil precisely because the way in which that the ideas and notions and language of our hypothetical villainous author our make their way to us is through so many layers of a kind of wider human discourse and unless we're willing to kind of consign all of them then we can't say that that that a book is really only the product of its author and so no matter how pernicious the author there is still something of a kind of greater humanity in what we see which again is why I think that in reading and recognizing this and recognizing kind of our own place in this contingency as sort of constant readers of text surround us it allows us to push back against the kind of vampiric ironic remove that is itself the source of such um I would say wickedness yeah so if I'm understanding your last comment there correctly the author him or herself is contingent in porous and so in any ways an evil book is discontinuous with itself because it inevitably has elements of the broader human experience that in manipulating it reveals its own sort of inconsistency something like that absolutely and it's actually something that I that I really enjoy in them there's a sort of common ending to a lot of these 19th century books which is always that uh you know the the sort of attempt at self-isolation and power and mastery at the end of of these books like whether it's the end of his molesome against nature the yellow book itself like it always fails it always falls apart these books are these stories always get kind of broken in on by another voice another truth nature itself um there's one novel I'm thinking of a version of this so i believe it's tomorrow's eve we're like there's an unexpected shipwreck at the end and there's always that just that sense of the world breaks and we aren't autonomous any attempt to pretend to be like our attempts to be autonomous and in this role of ironic mastery um are both at the heart of the wickedness of text but also our rhythms are like it's wrong it is a wrong statement about the human condition and reading helps us realize that more fully thank you very much uh professor jagan afon what are some of the works of art that you think should not be read and why um i've only got one more i've only got one good answer um uh to that and that's in part uh because uh worrying about about the novels of michavelle back his how i got yeah thinking about these questions about a year ago a year and a half ago um i was writing about about his uh sumis yon um uh his his book about a near future islamic takeover of france and um you know i i wouldn't maybe i agree with dr bernan but i wouldn't want any political authority to to go and withdraw his faculties of right novels or something like that but i think the world would be better if no one repped those books um his books in particular and that's in part because he's always he's always writing the same story um the plot the protagonists of his novels are always himself uh thinly disguised and um the uh the plot is uh relatively similar and what

changes is the kind of imaginativeness of the setting he's a kind of you know sort of fantastic fiction or science fiction writer and so there's something just you know you pick up a new one and it looks different to you but if you sort of peel back you know what's there what you're getting is um i think quite a despairing vision of of humanity and a lot of hate a lot of hate for direct directed towards people um and uh you know there's enough layers of irony in sumis yon that um you know uh there's a kind of thinly veiled celebration of how well it france for islamic and people would be morally serious but of course the joke is that it's impossible to be morally serious in the modern world and all everyone anyone wants his power and sex anyway um so even the irony as octoberton was talking in these books the irony the world ends up rupturing the irony at some point um there's this there's a tissues of self contradiction as you or yourself saying that's right so so my my sense you know i i would not want um i would want to put this on the um reader bear list rather than the index but um that that's my best example and it's um and maybe it's just my personal ones i hate i hate those books very much and i hate sumis yon in particular so i'll say that fair enough dr burt and another question for you uh as a as a novelist yourself is the aspiring artist writer painter musician etc more or less vulnerable to the corrupting influence of ethically suspect art if such an influence exists so instinctively i think that um i think that we must be uh speak as novels myself in part because i think that that there is a kind of desire for control or there's a sort of power to to to shape that happens when we write and and it is it let let or let me be famous slightly differently um i think that if you're going to write if you're going to sort of take on the mantle of creation and have create something that is uh might well be gross to someone else there is all the more responsibility um and i think that because we there is a sort of impulse to create and that impulse is so um often polluted and perverted as one that is an impulsive mastery i think it is likely that um art that kind of a certain kind of showy literary art of the where the um it's hard i actually do enjoy stonard very much but like stonards the red and the black where he's just sort of smirking at his stupid characters being stupid the whole time i think that posture of remove is something that's quite intoxicating isn't it fun to know more than than our characters isn't it fun to sort of whisper oh what fools these mortals be and i think that that's something that we ought to guard against um as as as would be writers as would be creators of any kind um but i'm not i'm not sure if there's a sort of temperamental susceptibility or simply that we all as human beings are susceptible to that and it's just that once we start writing or painting that's where um we might take those those those bad lessons we've learned and re-inscribed them that i'm not sure thank you uh dr jaganathan i'm assuming the next question is for you because it picks up on your discussion of idealism uh the idealism implicit in any realist novel uh so how does a free society guard itself against idealisms usurp patient of political power while at the same time ensuring the flourishing of of various idealisms yeah good um you know i think we should not be afraid of having too many ideals i mean we should always be afraid of having too few and um in particular simplistic ones so um you know i think you know important political movements um that have uh contributed to our our common flourishing where that's you

know wildly and properly understood um have been very idealistic um one good example is um the spread of the techniques of non-violence in various kinds of civil rights struggles in the the 20th century um you know that from from say gandi to martin luther king to know nelson and andala in various ways these kinds of ideals um they were sort of like it was like a package um this ideal of non-violence combined with certain kinds of resistance and saying that when people are being oppressed then then they ought to resist that at oppression and the best way to do that is to manifest the oppression into public because the oppressor always wants the oppression to be hidden and non-violence is something that could be plugged into that political problem as a certain kind of ideal and of course there are powerful literary expressions of of these ideals too um fictional non-fiction as well uh and you know the um if you think about the letter from bermanum jail of martin luther king you know that you have to understand a lot about historical context even understand what he's talking about and yet it's got this literary afterlife where it can be you know exported and thought about in a different context too um so i'm i'm very you know i'm very friendly to that to these to these kinds of ideals but um of course there's also the kind of ideal that tries to occlude certain things about ourselves so um i think uh you know again just i'm going to draw my own views here i think nationalist political ideals tend to be self-sept including that they um they understate the difference that exists the human diversity exists even within an ethnosaurination and so they're self undermining and so they they can't stand up to to very much scrutiny you know the story is always messier than than than it is so if you look at 19th century nationalist movements you know um and my favorite example is the finish uh case where the national epic had to be invented because there weren't the right sources going back far enough and so it just had to be invented at a whole clock whereas you know you know some of the other countries you could go to the linguistic tradition and and would cover an ancient epic and say oh that's our national epic there's our national story but where that's missing you you wish got to indent one you know so i think you know that that shows us that um you know the way the literary and political ideals can operate together um and uh you know there's the kind of ideal that tries to that tries to be self-occludes and i think those are the ones that that we can that don't stand up to um intellectual scrutiny i am i'm an optimist you know i i think the the ideals can sneak in very easily and and we we grow up before we have the capacities for critical reflection having absorbed so many of them already so including in sort of forms of storytelling that we're deeply familiar with that that are i think you know often pernicious um or because they're precisely because they're simplistic and um and so we we know we come equipped to read stories by having absorbed storytelling techniques that that are themselves you know potentially problematic um but i think you know critically this sort of practices of critical reflection and community is a readership wide community is a readership or a kind of an important way of resisting that and um i guess i'm optimistic in the political case too that we can we can really scrutinize these ideals and see who they're serving so let me let me ask you a brief follow up if we're envisioning a society in which like our own a sort of plural society in which um a sort of

consensus around certain ideals are held by individual communities um and those communities don't coincide right so the text that community A themes as harmful or the red text and the text of community B or the B or the blue text um what our attitude B towards the harmful text of other communities or text whose communities absorb our harmful text and see them as sort of thought-provoking or helpful or constructive in some way like how do we these this idea of flourishing idealism the question i think might have been trying to get at when my text or my sacred text or your non-z sacred text and vice versa like how do we navigate um not only the sort of horizontal dimension you've described within a community sort of discerning things that are helpful from things that are harmful but in a larger community of communities that recognizes we don't all come to the same conclusions about which texts ought to be read and which ought to be avoided good yeah i mean i think um i have this this model of um you know that emphasizes learning from the experience of other readers and um there's always more dissension within communities than than the communities themselves like to recognize and that might not be obvious at a given time but i think it is it tends to be obvious over time over long spans of time where you know that community and and the readers within it are subjected to certain kinds of pressure um uh that are endogenous and you know intellectual pressure from within as long as there are the resources for certain kinds of critical reflection that are made available so um you know the the problem is the problem is sent to arise from uh cases where you know something has a kind of moral authority over us and that that is it's a kind of unquestioned authority um so we might think you know um a number of i'll give you an example from philosophy a number of political philosophers think that the American Constitution is irredeemable irredeemable because it's old and dysfunctional and causes some various problems that are political system uh or because it inscribed certain kinds of aggressive structures there's lots of reasons that people people think that you know we ought to dispense so that um another question becomes are there the resources within the American constitutional and juris prudential traditions for certain kinds of critical reflection and those resources have been found where you know this is not the first period where people have been wondering about this and you can think about the period around the civil war is a period where the American Constitution was rewritten um without changing the text you know always um but it re-understood you know for a new generation of readers and we can think about you know how the 14th amendment was an attempt to rewrite the Bill of Rights in certain ways so so it implicitly addressed all people and um rather than just property owning uh white men for instance so you know and that's because of you know there's you know the the processes for that kind of critical reflection belong to the community not the text and so no text itself is going to is going to generate um it's uh it's all inside of critical resources I think there's some texts that invite it more than others through their pronouncements and their silences and that might have some role um but uh but you know we have to discipline ourselves to being um intellectually curious and also uh not to easily self-satisfied readers whatever kind of text we come to.

Dr. Burton I've got sort of two questions here that are related so I'm going to ask you them both um I you suspect you may take issue with the framing of the first but I'll ask it as it's written how will we know books are too dangerous to be read before reading them and then the second part is basically is literature distinct from other forms of art in its capacity for permissiveness. So I think um I think I'll just add to the second one first and work back for the the first one which is um I think what literature does that is kind of distinct for me is in its sort of creation of let's say an imaginary world by which I could mean just another version of you know our quote unquote world um that sort of creative power one has in in creating that world creating the rules in it and the sort of expectations of it is a sort of godlike in a particular way which is to say um I think about this a lot I would make the case that any sort of novallistic world or any narrative literary world has an implicit theology to it. You can talk about your does god exist in this book does fate exist in this book not just you know in the sense of does this book have an explicit sort of divine hand but what are the assumptions underpinning that and I think that what are what are the you know what is human nature in this book what is you know is there order to this world is their meaning and what does it's therefore say about about our own I think that that particular power to create not just people um and the relationship to one another but a whole kind of implicit metaphysic is is striking I wouldn't go far just so far as to say it's unique I in a sense don't know enough about the creation of let's say other forms of non-narrative art to have an opinion there but that is that is why I think or where I see the distinctiveness of the creation of the literary narrative world um to answer the first question I again I don't exactly think before I think there's something to the the wisdom of tradition I think that that a one might get a sense from from past readings or from a you know even knowing the subject matter something of the danger of the work um I think of um the one of the one of the books I think no one should should really ever read although or should be very careful about reading let's say is you know octave mere bows the the torture garden you know it's right there on the tend it's just it's a hundred pages of of very beautifully written accounts of horrors of the 19th century I but I think that really as as we've said before this conversation it is it is because so much of my understanding of the curse of quality of a book comes in its treatment of its characters that's that isn't something you necessarily can can get from from knowing about its subject matter or knowing about its history um you could have a pretty good idea that if it's a piece of a fascist propaganda art it might see human life in a certain way um but but then again perhaps perhaps uh not and and I do want to reiterate though when I talk about when I think that it's possible again as an act of conscious attention and as a an active rather than merely passive or consumerist approach to reading one might ask oneself what does it mean to come to this text with this sort of commitment to to human fullness already what does it mean for example to read torture garden again this this book um that came up in mid had to write about for my doctoral thesis and was was not I did not enjoy the process but uh what does it mean to to to wonder about each of these people were we're seeing kind of mutilated and tortured in horrible ways what was their life what did they want who did they love to ask

ourselves that you know even resisting the the desire of a text to tell us homogeneous great isn't this sort of seductive and don't aren't you just carried away by the beautiful awfulness of it all to sort of resist I think the way to resist a text is to to kind of ask ourselves even at the level of imagination almost at the level of creating a kind of alternate text for ourselves of you know the mental fan fiction of what happened to the um these characters after the text before that's an act that I think we can do constantly to guard against the corrosive act of a book once we're in it or even as we go into it and would you a one-brick follow up when you say the the response to a pernicious text a harmful text is it to stop reading it is it to read it is it to countermand it counter narrated in some way any any sort of quick follow up for for the student who finds herself or himself in the middle of a harmful text absolutely I think I think it is about the countermanding which is in a sense all since sort of creation of an alternate text there is that sort of the creative response of resistance to say no these these human beings that you mock that you that you think little love that you objectify are you know imagine futures for them to be open to it as well as to be open I think in the text to who wrote this what were they tending towards what good were they looking for you know unless again we want to sort of consign this human being to a kind of irimidable place then a question to ask is you know is there something in this in this pernicious text is there a good that they're aiming for or missing if they're aiming for something bad why are they aiming for that and is you know what is that a perversion of and if we can you know I think it was just to give one example you know the if we are saying you know this is an eroticization of a certain kind of violence and this is trying to titillate us in a certain way well what does that mean you know for for ideas of connection of genuine love what what where are those needs or those hungers in this text and are these what are being kind of perverted or changed into a desire to kind of again eroticized suffering so that's just one example but I think the reading is at once an act of loving attention um but also a kind of refusal to dehumanize anyone both within the text and indeed the author themselves all right we're coming to the end of our time so I'll ask this last question to professor jagunathan first but to both of you and I I laugh as I read it because I read for the first time master and margarita bulgakov novel this summer and perhaps this student or audience member did too because they ask what sort of story would the devil write what sort of story is most perilous or harmful well I think I'm beginning to think that the devil may quote scripture but not write theology so you know one one interesting point is sort of how much of a world doesn't doesn't piece of narrative art project from what we are given but you know we take the text as a kind of basis do we then get implicitly not just a metaphysic but but an account of the whole world find it and the rules for such worlds holding together well enough that the book can hold well enough together my suspicion is that it would be very difficult to to contrive something very generic something sort of say fully imaginative fully removed from some set of particular circumstances that would sort of fail to project some image of the world back to us but I do think and this is maybe coming back to the point about realism and hyper realism even that maybe maybe what I want to say is you know the kind of book that the devil

would write would be one that tried to project our world back to us look this is all there is to human life it's the life you're living now don't look for anything beyond it and there is something a little bit diabolical in in in quite a lot of literature that I read for this reason but of course the master of margaritas is is not such a book I think actually that that's cynical gaze I think for me would be I mean especially thinking back about I mean the 19th century conception of the devil often was of this sort of bourgeois iron is to begin with but I think a very cutting very elegant book that about how simultaneously in which nothing is in which life is a meeting miss and there is sort of no resolution on that level in which people are weak and feeble and more mental laugh at it and yet that is so elegantly tied up in a bow that we don't even have a sense that there is anything beyond beyond it there there's sort of those narratives that are just so tight that that elegant novel that they betray a kind of self-satisfaction that everything's been thought of there is no mystery there's no openness there's no chance for anything else and I think that that sort of slightly smug novel that is also cynical if you like this and you want to hear more like share review and subscribe to this podcast and from all of us here at the Veritas Forum thank you

(gentle music)

[buzzing]