

## Welcoming the Word: The Challenge of Other Voices in Public Reading Groups

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**I**n his papal letter on the importance of literature in formation, Pope Francis writes:

When I think of literature, I am reminded of what the great Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges used to tell his students, namely that the most important thing is simply to read, to enter into direct contact with literature, to immerse oneself in the living text in front of us, rather than to fixate on ideas and critical comments. Borges explained this idea to his students by saying that at first they may understand very little of what they are reading, but in any case they are hearing “another person’s voice.” This is a definition of literature that I like very much: *listening to another person’s voice*. We must never forget how dangerous it is to stop listening to the voice of other people when they challenge us! We immediately fall into self-isolation; we enter into a kind of “spiritual deafness,” which has a negative effect on our relationship with ourselves and our relationship with God, no matter how much theology or psychology we may have studied.<sup>1</sup>

This paper will stress the importance of “listening to another person’s voice” especially “when they challenge us” and will relate how I reached out to members of my former community in El Paso, Texas—a binational, bilingual city on the Rio Grande in the US-Mexico border region—through the public reading group, Mining Books, that I organized with the support of my university and of Humanities Texas.

In 2012, I was on the cusp of tenure and had agreed to take on the role of associate chair in the Department of English at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). While I had the usual portfolio of duties, I thought that I should also try to figure out how I could share our mission—as a department profoundly invested in literature—with the surrounding community through some public programming and outreach at a time when the humanities were constantly being denigrated. I decided to create a public reading group called Mining Books that was open to the wider university community as well as the city, in order to bring attention both to good literature and to the excellent teaching that was being done in our department. As for the name I chose for this program, it may help to know that the University of Texas at El Paso was initially the Texas School of Mines and Metallurgy and that a Miner was our mascot!

This group, the establishment of which was supported by a generous mini-grant from Humanities Texas (in the first year) and a long partnership with the university library, would meet once a month during the semester within the library auditorium, meaning that there would be at least six monthly events during the academic year. Cookies, brownies, and a variety of beverages would be served to create the cozy and welcoming atmosphere of a book group hosted in someone's home. I would line up faculty, primarily from the Department of English but also from related fields such as history, philosophy, African American Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, Languages and Literature, and Religious Studies, each of whom would select a book (fiction as well as nonfiction and poetry) and lead an open-ended discussion of a recent book of interest to the university and city-wide communities that included students and faculty from UTEP and the local community college, alumnae, soldiers and their families from Fort Bliss (a large military base in the city), Border Control employees, and retirees. Each facilitator would be encouraged to make a very brief presentation about the author, the context in which the literary work was written, and other salient information that would prime the audience for a good discussion. Since the invited facilitators were all known to be good teachers, the format worked well.

Many of the books discussed opened up new areas of interest for our community. For example, on a blustery February day in 2015, I led a discussion of Sonali Deraniyagala's memoir *Wave*. The audience (numbering over a hundred people)—many of whom had little or no familiarity with the South Asian country of Sri Lanka—discussed this book about a Sri Lankan-British woman who lost her husband, two young sons, and parents during the 2004 Asian tsunami. The author dealt with trauma and survivor's guilt for years, attempting to dull her pain through substances and self-destructive behaviors before heeding a therapist's advice to put her thoughts and feelings down on paper. Attendees talked for a long time about how writing can help those who have gone through such traumatic experiences.

In 2021, the then-Dean of Liberal Arts at UTEP, the sociologist Denis O'Hearn, co-led a discussion of James Baldwin's works with Keith Lamar (now known as Boman Shakur), who is currently on death row in Ohio. Lamar/Shakur helped lead the discussion on Eddie S. Glaude Jr.'s book *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* via a video link from the Ohio State Penitentiary. As he responded to questions and comments from the audience, he shared how he had started reading widely following his incarceration and how literary works such as those of Baldwin, Frederick Douglass, and others had influenced him. Many attendees who had never encountered a death row inmate or visited a prison commented how revelatory their encounter with the book and the facilitator had been for them.

Other texts that were discussed over the twelve years that Brian Yothers (who subsequently took over the running of the program) and I were directly involved in the Mining Books program included books of poetry such as *The Age of Phillis* by Honorée Fanonne Jeffers on the life and times

of Phillis Wheatley Peters (a formerly enslaved woman who is considered the first African American author of a book of poetry) and the work of Sri Lankan poet Vivimarie VanderPoorten; novels by minority, Indigenous, and postcolonial writers such as *There There* by Tommy Orange, *What Storm, What Thunder* by Myriam J. A. Chancy, *Into the Beautiful North* by Luis Alberto Urrea, *Salvage the Bones* by Jesmyn Ward, and *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi; young adult fiction such as *Thirty Talks Weird Love* by Alessandra Narvaez Varela and *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo; nonfiction such as *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Mothercoin: The Stories of Immigrant Nannies* by Elizabeth Cummins Muñoz, and *Enrique's Journey* by Sonia Nazario.

What I found most exciting about Mining Books, and what I think connects this enterprise to the Pope's letter, is that it offered participants an opportunity to "listen to others"—people whose locations and circumstances were different from their own, whose ideas and experiences challenged their own opinions—and to use their experience of literature as an occasion for such purposeful listening. Reading books like these enabled participants to put themselves in other people's shoes; they didn't have to condone what other people did, but they could attempt to figure out what might have motivated them to act or behave in certain ways based on their circumstances and positionality. This is the exercise of empathy, which scholars such as Suzanne Keen have asserted is both a cognitive and affective exercise.<sup>2</sup> Participants offered comments about the text in question, took into consideration the responses of others, and reconsidered their own ideas, which sometimes opened up new perspectives and ways of thinking for them.

While it is true that lectures followed by discussions enable this kind of engagement in the classroom, sometimes students might be the same age or have similar affiliations, and they typically select the literature classes that they take. At the Mining Books events, on the other hand, participants were people who came from a wide variety of experiences and affiliations and the books—in terms of topics and genres—were highly varied. Those who attended the book group might be hearing from a facilitator how he, as a young gay man growing up in a conservative community, found that he was not alone when he happened upon a book such as *Dancer from the Dance* by Andrew Holleran; or learning about the social and environmental implications of modern medical technology such as pacemakers from *Lightning Flowers: My Journey to Uncover the Cost of Saving a Life* by Katherine E. Standefer; or getting a sense of what it is like to grow up in a long-running war situation through a novel such as *A Passage North* by Anuk Arudpragasam. Attendees would first be getting exposure to the voice of the author and people or characters featured in the text selected for a particular month; then they would absorb the framework for the discussion from the facilitator; then they would listen to what other attendees had to say about the work under discussion. As a result, Mining Books allowed students, faculty, staff, and community members to engage in the sort of intentional listening that Pope Francis recommended, and it helped to expand the range

of “others” with whom they were in conversation. As a scholar and teacher of postcolonial literature, I believe this is a welcome outcome, and one that highlights the value of our professional work as instructors of literature. Mining Books served to work against the “self-isolation” that Francis decried in his letter and to encourage a truly invigorating experience of textual and personal dialogue.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, “Letter of His Holiness on the Role of Literature in Formation,” The Holy See, July 17, 2024, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2024/documents/20240717-lettera-ruolo-letteratura-formazione.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).