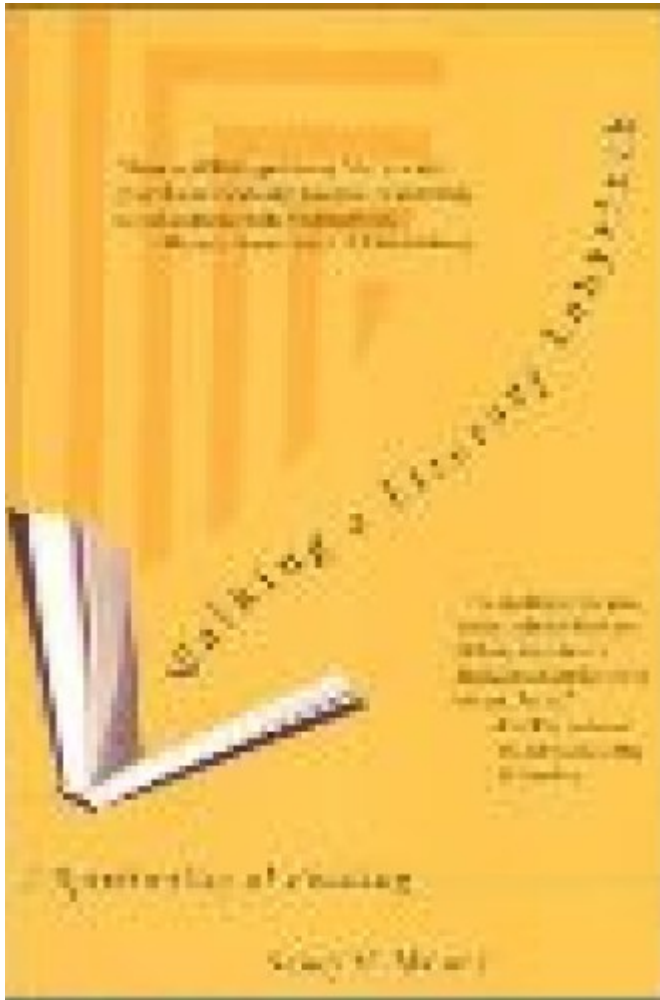


Bibliotherapy

By [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [March 9, 2004](#) issue

In Review



Walking a Literary Labyrinth: A Spirituality of Reading

Nancy M. Malone
Riverhead

There are some of us who read more than we pray. We know we should pray more. We mean to pray more. But something happens to us when we read that does not

happen when we pray. We find our lives by losing them. We enter into communion with people whom we have never met, some of whom never existed in the world we call real. They are allowed to talk, but we can only listen, which frees us to attend to them in ways that we seldom attend to anyone.

We are witnesses to their lives, not actors in them. Like God Almighty, we often know things they do not know, things that might prevent them from making disastrous choices, but they do not ask for our advice. They go places we would never go and love people we would never love. They think things we would never out loud admit to thinking, but our judiciousness does not protect us from suffering their pain, any more than it prevents us from borrowing their bliss. When we close the covers on their lives, we find ours enlarged in ways that we could not have managed on our own.

Nancy Malone not only understands people like us, she is one of us—not a “purposeful reader,” she says, but someone who reads every evening for the same reason she swims in Eastchester Bay every morning—to experience total immersion in a world that is wider than hers. While most of us live in a state of “systemic distraction,” she says, “a good book can create a little hermitage for some people anywhere, even in an airport waiting room.”

Since Malone is also an Ursuline nun, there is nothing lightweight about her take on the life of faith. When she defends reading as a spiritual practice, she does so with the authority of one who has lived under vows for more than 50 years. She also speaks frankly about the eight years during which she fought both depression and addiction, which gives her book the authority that comes from brokenness as well.

As its somewhat opaque title may not suggest, Malone’s book is as much memoir as literary analysis, with eight chapters, an epilogue and a recommended reading list punctuated by reflections. The labyrinth of Malone’s own life provides the boundary within which she ponders everything from the invention of the alphabet to the impact of Vatican II on Catholic religious life.

She never saw her mother read a book, she says, nor her father pick up anything heavier than a detective novel. Yet from the age of seven until she graduated from college, she read for the same reason that most people eat. “Everything living is eating something else in order to stay alive,” she writes. “That is why I read, I guess, to stay alive, to be as fully alive as I can be.”

Growing up, she read the Gold Medal lives of the saints and Nancy Drew. She read F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolfe, Georges Bernanos and Graham Greene. The summer before she entered the convent she read all three volumes of Sigrid Undset's romantic masterpiece *Kristin Lavransdatter*, but it was not until she became a novice that she fully realized what she had done. She had been so preoccupied with the weighty vows of chastity, poverty and obedience that she never thought to ask what nuns could read. In 1953, the answer was "spiritual books only."

"For the next 15 years, as it happened, I would not read one novel, one mystery story, not one 'secular' biography or autobiography," Malone writes, describing a literary fast so extreme that it can take a reader's breath away. "In 'renouncing the world,' I was renouncing the world of books. And I didn't even know it."

To find out how she survived, you will have to read the book yourself. Along the way, you will not only learn what Malone means by terms as charming as "bibliotherapy" and "book providence," but you will also come across books that you might not have thought of as "spiritual classics," such as *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, by Harold Bloom, or *Small World*, by David Lodge.

While Malone allows that "some books diminish us," by telling "only half the story of who we are as human beings," there is a lot of room in her literary labyrinth. A good book, like a good prayer, is one that takes us to the center of ourselves and then leads us back into the world again, with our spirits refreshed and our hearts enlarged. If we are what we read, as she suggests, then here is a book to add to your stack.