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The Use and Abuse of Literature

Marjorie Garber



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In this deep and engaging meditation on the usefulness and uselessness of reading in the digital age, Harvard English professor Marjorie Garber aims to reclaim "literature" from the periphery of our personal, educational, and professional lives and restore it to the center, as a radical way of thinking.

But what is literature anyway, how has it been understood over time, and what is its relevance for us today? Who gets to decide what the word means? Why has literature been on the defensive since Plato? Does it have any use at all, other than serving as bourgeois or aristocratic accoutrements attesting to one's worldly sophistication and refinement of spirit? What are the boundaries that separate it from its "commercial" instance and from other more mundane kinds of writing? Is it, as most of us assume, good to read, much less study—and what would that mean?

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