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Wryly Noted-Books About Books

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Wryly Noted — Books About Books

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What could *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Divine Comedy*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Beowulf*, and *Infinite Jest* all have in common?

These five titles are part of over one hundred books that make up a new compendium of imagined worlds contained in the publication, *Literary Wonderlands*, edited by Laura Miller, co-founder of Salon Magazine and authored by forty literary experts drawn from colleges and universities in all parts of the world. Many of the authors have specialties in medieval and ancient history, science fiction and fantasy, and children’s and young adult literature. The book is beautifully illustrated with art work from the first editions or later exemplary versions, such as *Edward Burne-Jones’* tapestry realized by William Morris & Co. for *Le Morte D’Arthur* or movie posters and cover art for 1984, *I, Robot*, and *Planet of the Apes.*

*Literary Wonderlands* could pass for an entertaining coffee table book, but should instead be considered as a checklist and guide to essential utopian, dystopian and speculative fiction that you have always been meaning to read. If you have read these books already, whether as a child, teenager, or student, you will find that the essays are concise summaries and refreshing new looks at reading you have previously enjoyed and want to re-live.

I found that the attention to detail in the examinations of the story telling was a great way to jog my memory and bring old classics back to life. The chronological listing and grouping by era put them in context with their kindred

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When Martin du Gard was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1937, he described himself “like an owl, suddenly roused from its nest and exposed to the daylight, whose eyes, used to the dark, are blinded by dazzling brightness.” He continued in his award speech during the banquet held in December of that year to speak of the influences of other authors upon his literary thought process and his development as an author:

“I was still very young when I encountered, in a novel by the English writer Thomas Hardy, this reflection on one of his characters: ‘The true value of life seemed to him to be not so much its beauty, as its tragic quality.’ It spoke to an intuition deep within me, closely allied to my literary vocation. Ever since that time I have thought that the prime purpose of the novel is to give voice to the tragic element in life. Today I would add: the tragic element in the life of an individual, the tragedy of a ‘destiny in the course of being fulfilled.’” At this point I cannot refrain from referring to the immortal example of Tolstoy, whose books have had a determining influence on my development. The born novelist recognizes himself by his passion to penetrate ever more deeply into the knowledge of man and to lay bare in each of his characters that individual element of his life which makes each being unique. It seems to me that any character of survival which a novelist’s work may have rests solely on the quantity and the quality of the individual lives that he has been able to create in his books. But that is not all. The novelist must also have a sense of life in general; his work must reveal a personal vision of the universe. Here again Tolstoy is the great master. Each of his creatures is more or less secretly haunted by a metaphysical obsession, and each of the human experiences that he has recorded implies, beyond an inquiry into man, an anxious question about the meaning of life. I admit that I take pleasure in the thought that, in crowning my work as a novelist, the members of the Swedish Academy wished to pay indirect homage to my devotion to that unapproachable model and to my efforts to profit from the instruction of his genius.”

Martin du Gard took his instruction well.