**This Is America**

The case for progress

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**Why?**

Curiosity is a celebration of reading, a craft in danger of becoming a lost art.

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Toward the end of his life, Carl Jung connected his uncertainty about himself with a growing “feeling of kinship with all things.” The meaning of his existence, he wrote, “is that life has addressed a question to me. Or, conversely, I myself am a question which is addressed to the world, and I must communicate my answer…”

Like Sigmund Freud, Jung believed that the quest to address that question helps explain our attraction to the stories of others. Although literature rarely supplies answers, Albert Manguel, the writer, editor, translator and critic, suggests, it can at its best map who we are (and are not) or believe we are (or are not) and stimulate “a trove of more and better questions.”

In *Curiosity*, Manguel draws on scores of writers and texts, especially Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*, to find fresh ways to ask fundamental questions: How Do We Reason? Who Am I? What Are We Doing Here? Why Do Things Happen? What Comes Next? Elegant and erudite, his book is a celebration of critical reading, a challenging, enjoyable and essential craft that is in danger these days of becoming a lost art.

Manguel acknowledges that literature cannot eliminate suffering, protect us from evil, or supply us with moral courage. He demonstrates, however, that “when the stars are kind,” literature can illuminate the complexity of reality, lend the world an uneasy and uncertain coherence, “offer the intuition of something gigantic, light in the ashes a spark of the old curiosity, and make it burst once more into the everlasting flames.”
Through her adventures and later through the looking glass, Manguel writes, Lewis Carroll’s Alice is haunted by the thought that she hardly knows who she is. “At least I know who I was when I got up this morning,” Alice tells the Caterpillar, “but I think I must have changed several times since then.” She will learn, Manguel reminds us, that human beings are defined in no small measure by what they remember. Trapped in a rabbit hole, Alice realizes as well, echoing Jung, that if things appear to have no meaning she must choose one – and an identity – for herself.

Although “experience comes to us with no recognizable system, for no intelligible reason,” Manguel emphasizes that humans are “tidy creatures,” who believe in law and order, divide space into regions and time into days, collect and classify inanimate and animate objects, “and portray our gods as meticulous archivists and dogmatic librarians.” For these reasons, Manguel implies, the Divine Comedy was adorned with maps of heaven, purgatory, and hell. And Vladimir Nabokov prepared charts of the locations in which the novels he taught - Bleak House, Mansfield Park, Ulysses - were set.

Shortly after his arrival, in the middle of winter, at the concentration camp at Auschwitz, Primo Levi saw an icicle hanging outside the window. Levi stuck out his hand and grabbed it, only to have a guard snatch it, discard it, and assault the prisoner. “Why?,” Levi asked, in rudimentary German. “Here is no why,” the guard responded. Unlike Dante’s realm, where every punishment has a reason, Manguel points out, in the hell called Auschwitz, there is no why.

“Why,” Manguel concludes, is at least as important in the asking as in the answer that is expected or delivered. It is, then, especially and agonizingly unfortunate that in the twenty-first century curiosity has defenders, but precious few champions. Training camps for skilled labor, compelled to reward that which can be measured, elementary and secondary schools, colleges and universities, Manguel claims, with good reason, cannot be counted on to be nurseries for what Francis Bacon called “merchants of light.” And the Internet serves as an engine for quick and superficial answers - a far cry from the approximation of truth that can be found in the stories we invent, in the spaces and places between “our reality and the reality of the page.”