

# Uses of Literature

*Rita Felski*

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## **Uses of Literature** Rita Felski

*Uses of Literature* bridges the gap between literary theory and common-sense beliefs about why we read literature.

Explores the diverse motives and mysteries of why we read

Offers four different ways of thinking about why we read literature: for recognition, enchantment, knowledge, and shock

Argues for a new "phenomenology" in literary studies that incorporates the historical and social dimensions of reading

Includes examples of literature from a wide range of national literary traditions

## **Uses of Literature Details**


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# From Reader Review Uses of Literature for online ebook

## Marjolein says

The point that Felski makes is clear and she gives her statements extra strength by using plenty of interesting and entertaining examples, which make this book very readable. However, it seems to all stay a bit too much on the surface. It would have been better if the book had contained some more pages so that Felski had room to go more in-depth on the subject.

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## Eric says

Felski provides a cogent critique of symptomatic reading, gesturing towards a new style of academic engagement that has elsewhere been called affective reading practice and surface reading, among other terms that indicate an alternative to a symptomatic criticism that here is figured as deadening the pleasures of the text. As with those other arguments aligned with Felski's, this book proves a very interesting and provocative salvo in debates about contemporary critical practice, but ultimately does not provide a convincing alternative model even as it is incredibly adept at showing some of the pitfalls of symptomatic practice. Or perhaps I'm just enjoying my symptom too much. ;)

Definitely worth reading for anyone interested in probing current debates about critical practice in literary and cultural studies.

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## Taha says

Bu kitap edebiyatın ne işe yaradığını ele tiri kuramlar üzerinden bize bahsediyor. Yani kuramlarla alakanı hiç yoksa söylenen çoğu şeyi açık da kalıyor. Ayrıc konuyu üzerine örnek verilen eserler hakkında da bilginiz olmalı. Onlar hakkında da bilginiz yoksa yabancı kalabiliyorsunuz. Yani bu kitabı okuyacaksanız belli bir bilgi birikimine ihtiyacınız var.

Rita Felski beyaz sayfadaki siyah noktaların nasıl insanı etkilediğini, olmayan bir dünyanın imgeleri zihninizde oluşturup onun içinde gerçekmi gibi yaşamı büyüclük gibi olaüstü bir hal olduğunu, okurun bu siyah noktalara nasıl baktığını bizlere bölüm bölüm anlatıyor. Kitabı ele tirdiğim nokta üstte belirttiğim gibi herkese hitap etmiyor. Böyle ele tiri kitapları merak ediyorsanız başka kitaplardan baktıktan sonra tavsiye ederim ederim.

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## Nathaniel says

this is a lot to take in, but it's been a hugely thought-provoking reading experience. Felski raises a lot of interesting and useful questions that I've been trying to think through, and I'm looking forward to digging more into both this and *The Limits of Critique*, once I get a chance to read it, in future.

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## Richard says

### A Positive Aesthetic

In this book Felski explores the simple fact that engagements with literature change people's lives. Students come to the formal study of literature often because they have been enchanted by the way art and literature change things, recontextualize and alter experience of the world.

The book maintains a consistent polemic against the contemporary interpretative tendency to conflate critical reading to suspicious reading with its heavily freighted explanatory frameworks and distanced analytic. A feminist theorist herself, she challenges the dogmas and defaults of contemporary critical theory - feminist, marxist, historicist and post-structuralist. She argues that what they hold in common is 'the discourse of disenchantment' which 'reiterates and reinforces the very condition that it describes, sinking us ever deeper into the void of a dispiriting, self-corroding skepticism' (58).

The book is a manifesto which builds on growing discontent among cultural and literary critics who sense that dialogue with literature has given way to 'permanent diagnosis' assigning 'all value to the act of reading (and the reader) and none to the objects read' (3). Felski wants to recover the way a text can 'bite back' (7) in the process of interpretation. Following Marjorie Perloff, Felski argues for respect of an artwork's ontology rather than 'treating it as a confirmation of our own pet theories' (5).

The book roughs out a positive aesthetic which, while appreciative of the language of interrogation of texts combines 'analysis and attachment, critique and love' (22). The question the book asks and answers in the affirmative is this: "Is it possible to discuss the value of literature without falling into truisms and platitudes, sentimentality and Schwarmerei?"

Uses of literature is divided into four chapters: recognition, enchantment, knowledge and shock. And each is a consideration (neo-phenomenological) of the act of reading under these rubric. Felski draws on a broad repertoire of examples to illustrate the power of what is read to resonate, enchant, propose and dis/re-disorient the reader.

The chapter on enchantment is particularly powerful. She pushes back against reductive 'contextual' reading, which almost always dissolves texts into the circumstances of origin. She beautifully describes how texts have a power to recontextualize the reader. "If we are entirely caught up in a text, we can no longer place it in a context because it is the context, imperiously dictating the terms of its reception. We are held in a condition of absorption . . . transfixed and immobilized by the work and rendered unable to frame, contextualize or judge' (57). The affective and absorbing aspects of reading are featured here in a manner that connects with recent interest in beauty as a way of reorienting critical conversation. The chapter concludes with a defense of enchantment against the main charges of delusion and disablement. 'Once we face up to the limits of demystification as a critical method and a theoretical ideal, once we relinquish the modern dogma that our lives should be thoroughly disenchanted, we can truly begin to engage the affective and absorptive, the sensual and somatic qualities of aesthetic experience' (76).

The final chapter on 'shock' explores the power of texts to resonate across time. Here the polemic against historicism, 'synchonic historicism,' comes to the fore. Felski argues that literary meaning isn't limited to a flash and that texts have power to resonate across time. Shock is difficult in our time, since moderns and

postmoderns have institutionalized shock, we are 'shockaholics.' Nevertheless, she makes the case that texts are always ticking. 'We might think of such texts as time travelers, incendiary bombs packed with an explosive force that unleashes itself long after the moment of manufacture' (115). She deploys the German term 'Nachtraglichkeit' - afterwardness - to capture the sense that texts are not embedded once and for all in the circumstances of their production, but 'diffused across a temporal medium' (119).

In a particularly interesting passage, especially for someone like me who interprets the two testaments of the Christian bible, she explores the power of retrospective reading. Felski offers language which I think makes explicit what Christians, beginning with the New Testament writers, have done with first testament interpretation. Because there is lag-time between an occurrence and its resonance, meaning can be 'washed forward into the future rather than anchored in one defining moment. . . . Retrospection recreates the past even as it retrieves it, in a mutual contamination and co-mingling of different times' (119).

My appreciation for the book was three-fold:

- 1) I just loved Felski's articulation of a mode of interpretation which is able to receive the otherness of a text, rather than simply to use the text as a confirmation of a heavily freighted suspicion. Her direction to the work of Eve Sedgwick ('Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading: or, You're so Paranoid, you Probably Think This Essay is About You') - who characterized suspicious hermeneutics as 'paranoid' was instructive. Suspicious reading (paranoia) is a strong theory, in the sense that very often it can't do anything other than prove the assumptions with which it begins;
- 2) I found some great help for the work of biblical interpretation here. Biblical interpretation suffers from the same malaise as interpretative theory more generally with its heavy investments in suspicious orientations of one sort or another. This piece with it's attention to how texts (the Bible) recontextualize the reader by recognition, enchantment, revelation and shock, was very helpful. Her suspicion of suspicion helps break-up the current interpretative monopoly; and
- 3) while a technical book, it is beautifully written. It is clear and descriptively powerful.

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## Özge ?nci says

edebiyat?n varl?k sebebi, i?lev(ler)i ve insanlara ho? vakit ge?irmenin d???nda ne gibi yararlar? oldu?u sorusunu ele alan yazar bu i?levleri tan?ma, bilgi, büyülenme ve ?ok olmak üzere dört kategordie ele alm?? ve bu konudaki di?er kitaplar gibi kendi kitab?n?n da "eksik ve kusurlu bir manifesto" oldu?u özele?tirisiyle kitab? bitirmi?. söz konusu dört kategori tatmin edici görünse de fikirlerin takibi aç?s?ndan biraz da??n?k ve dolay?s?yla okunmas? zor bir kitapt?. edebiyat ele?tirmenlerine yap?lan sa?lam ele?tirilerse gayet yerindeydi. edebiyat? sadece ho?ça vakit ge?irmenin ötesine ta??ma niyetinde olanlar?n okumas? gereken bir kitap.

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## Highlyeccentric says

YES GOOD. A++ SUPER USEFUL thank you Rita Felski.

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## Melissa says

Literature After Feminism is still my favorite, but I'm a Felski fan.

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## Ben says

If you are going to teach literature in any capacity or you had your love of books messed up by contemporary criticism in college, this is a must read. Felski is a joy to read, never satisfied with simple resolutions to hard questions of why lit matters. Her arduous thinking is presented clearly and precisely. Excellent.

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## L Timmel says

Felski calls her book a "defective or delinquent" manifesto. What she's about can be summarized in these few sentences from her introduction: "In retrospect, much of the grand theory of the last three decades now looks like the last gasp of an Enlightenment tradition of *roi philosophes* persuaded that the realm of speculative thought would absolve them of the shameful ordinariness of a messy, mundane, error-prone existence. Moreover, the various jeremiads against commodification, carceral regimes of power, and the tyranny of received ideas and naturalized ideologies mesh all too comfortably with an ingrained Romantic tradition of anti-worldliness in literary studies. In idealizing an autonomous, difficult art as the only source of resistance to such repressive regimes, they also shortchange the heterogeneous, and politically variable, uses of literary texts in daily life."

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## Jesi says

Felski is one of the "many-gendered mothers of my heart," to quote Maggie Nelson quoting somebody else. I think she is a better essayist than book writer, but you can't beat her for clarity and I <3 her ability to summarize huge trends so succinctly. Gender of Modernity was a transformative book for my thinking, and also, now I no longer have to Google "what is modernism" when I'm writing about modernism.

what I would add to her work: even though she is critiquing the western lit canon, she remains fairly firmly within the parameters of that intellectual tradition. It's like.. she's kinda highbrow even when she's calling out the highbrow. (don't tell her though, bc that's how I'm going to build on her work!!) I also think that it would be real interesting to put her in conversation with Lorde + also Anzaldua, both of whom I've been reading a lot of for syllabus prep. It seems like a lot of the political urgency of queer of color writing ("poetry is not a luxury" / "poetry makes something happen") + the borderlands / new mestiza consciousness / queer sensibility stuff (not seeing strict divisions between reality and fiction, approaching reading/imaginative engagement as a visceral experience that engages the body and not just the mind) could be really productive for envisioning new models for literary criticism. I think that there are already richer vocabularies available for reworking academic conceptions of literature and it would be cool if Felski were more in dialogue with those, instead of sometimes according almost undue importance to the male-dominated critical tradition she is taking to task. citational practices are one of the ways that canons get reproduced! we gotta be careful!

oh and also she doesn't know it yet but she and sara ahmed are going to adopt me and raise me in the wild. they will edit all my chapters and help me get published in NLH and braid my hair around the campfire before bed, etc etc

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### **Sarah Reffstrup says**

Skal jeg til at bruge Felski i samtlige af mine akademiske opgaver på universitetet fra nu af?  
Ja. Ja det skal jeg.

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### **Guanhui says**

Rita Felski's book is a refreshing literary manifesto that argues for the uses of literature. While the word "uses" denotes functionality and pragmatism, Felski's thesis steers away from such utilitarian waters towards a balanced presentation of literary study. Ever since the so-called linguistic turn in the '70s, along with the emphasis on "Power" in the '80s, literary criticism has taken on a more theoretical-edge, leading some naysayers to conclude that literature is avantgarde and irrelevant to the common-man in the streets. The linguistic turn, with its emphasis on the "arbitrariness" of language led to a diminishing in the powers and, some might say, enjoyment of literary texts. That which affects literature would surely affect literary study? Felski's offering offers a palliative, if not, refreshing perspective on the relevance of literature in this day and age.

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### **Jason Ray Carney says**

This is an inspiring book. Felski calls it a "delinquent" manifesto because its purpose, from my perspective, is to critique monolithic theories about the "use" of literature, hence the plural "uses" in the title. Felski provides a taxonomy of four uses but makes it clear in her conclusion that she does not think any work (or specific reading of a work) can be or should be categorized exclusively. Her four uses of literature are "enchantment," "recognition," "knowledge" and "shock." Enchantment is that pleasure of surrender we experience when we give ourselves to the virtual worlds evoked by literary works. Recognition is the satisfaction we enjoy when we read about our distinctive experiences and view that experience being honored or at least acknowledged in a work. Knowledge is an intriguing "use" of literature she discusses. Essentially, Felski presents literary works as being able to provide a kind of "phenomenological" or "experiential" knowledge that cannot be provided by other kinds of knowledge-producing enterprises like science or philosophy. Finally, we use literature to be "shocked" to perceive the limits of our "social ordinary" and the horizons of our personal normal. This is a brief book, schematic in nature, but it is nevertheless dense: rich with claims that stagger, frustrate, inspire, and discourage.

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### **?irin says**

Rita Felski bu ele?tiri kitab?nda s?radan okurun g?ndelik hayatta edebiyat ile ili?kisinde deneyimledi?i durumlar?, edebiyat?n i?levleri olarak sunuyor ve inceliyor. Bunlar, tan?ma(recognition&insight olarak), b?y?lenme, bilgi ve ?ok olarak d?rde ayr?lm??. Kitap ilerledik?e fark ediliyor ki ger?ekten bu ayr?mlar

bizim s?radan okur olarak sürekli ya?ad???m?z s?radan süreçlerin yans?malar?. Bundand?r ki yeni bir ?eyi ke?fetmi? gibi hissetmiyorum. Amac? bu de?il zaten, amac? bu "i?levlerin" teorik tart??malarda anlaml? oldu?unu kan?tlamak. Bundand?r ki çe?itli teorisyenlerden, edebiyat ele?tirmenlerinden durmaks?z?n al?nt? yap?yor. Bu al?nt?lar okuru çok yoruyor özellikle bu tart??malara hakim de?ilseniz. Kitab? çok zor okudum üzerine ödev yazaca??m bu da zorlay?c? geliyor. Dedi?im gibi bir sürü adam?n kendi aras?nda büyülenme ?udur aman büyü bozal?m; ?ok olmuyoruz art?k bi?iyici?e ayol diyerek tart??t??? tart??t??? rita felski'nin hepsine ayr? yorumlar yapt??? bir metin. Birkaç y?l sonra okusam belki de benim için daha anlaml? olacakt? bilmiyorum. Sonuç olarak, Rita Felski edebiyat?n temel i?levlerini safdilliklerinden (kendi deyimiyle) kurtarmak istiyor. ?kna olduk mu? Galiba. Kim bilir?

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