

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Put perhaps too simply, this book is a journey through re-learning how to read. Most people assume they know how to read—I certainly thought so when I began this project. And it is likely that anyone interested in picking up this book is “good” at reading to begin with. But I found, as I worked, there was a kind of reading I had not yet truly encountered. Writing is the creative act, I thought; reading is more like exploration. You can learn a lot in exploration—but you don’t create anything. It is now my contention that I was wrong; reading can be a creative, inventive act.

Learning to read was very difficult for me as a young child. I remember watching my classmates begin to pick it up, and the frustration I experienced with my own lack of ability compared to the rest of my peers. Books seemed like such magical items; open them up and there was a whole world inside—a world that, once accessed, could potentially always be available, through memory. I wanted that ability. I coveted it. Books and stories were keys, wings, secret maps to far away places, and I was in need of those things. When I finally got the hang of it and was able to fling myself into reading with whole-hearted abandon, it felt as though there could be no limit to the possibilities. I could do anything and go anywhere, and learn whatever I wanted.

It was many years of being both an avid reader and writer before I realized that stories weren’t just keys, wings, and maps; they could also be locks, chains, and traps. Stories could both bind and loose, with any myriad of positive, negative, or ambiguous ethical consequences.

I suppose I got my first taste of that truth with the very first sign I remember reading. It was a big sign, posted not too far from my childhood home, well within my wander zone. Before I learned to read I imagined it said many different things—mostly proclamations like “Welcome to Sherwood Forest” or “Dragon cave nearby.” I was very disappointed to find one day, when I managed to pick out the words, that it was not an invitation to adventure at all; what it actually said was “No Trespassing.”

The world is often like that, and sometimes “no trespassing” is the least of one’s worries. Stories, signs, and language in its many forms can be used to keep in as much as keep out, and that, perhaps, is where this book begins. Christine de Pizan worked to clear the literary field of texts she felt to be harmful, and then rebuild a literary city of refuge and sanctuary for women, who (depending on class and location) had few if any rights during her life. Following in her footsteps but expanding her work, I am trying to examine how one does this—how to clear a literary field of harm and then rebuild a place of flourishing. This book, which draws on the work of Christine de Pizan, but also on work by Luce Irigaray and Hans-Georg Gadamer, is meant to set out tools and practices to do so, to build new literary “cities” for all those who need them.

I have said it before and will say it again; it takes a community to raise a philosopher. Consequently, there is an entire community of people to whom I am indebted and wish to acknowledge for this book. To Bob Sweetman, my doctoral mentor, goes first acknowledgment. This work would not have the historical depth it attained without his “yes, but...” and it could not have come to fruition at all without him telling me to never be ashamed of the story-loving philosopher I am, and to embrace creativity as an academic strength. To Ron Kuipers goes my next acknowledgment—not for anything that is particularly specific to writing this book, but for constantly encouraging me as a philosopher, and for helping me hone my critical reading, writing, and revising skills. I also thank them both for their friendship. I would be remiss if I did not thank the rest of the committee who read the dissertation from which this book came: Suzanne Akbari, Jim Olthuis, Jill Ross, and Lambert Zuidervaat. Each of you offered very helpful feedback at different points in the process of dissertation-to-book, and this work is better for it. An anonymous reader also gave some excellent suggestions for the final round of review and revision, which again improved the work.

It takes more than academics to “raise” a philosopher, however; a philosopher’s community includes family and friends as well. And, poet and philosopher that I am, I am inarticulate with gratitude and love for that circle of family and friends who have so supported me. No matter how inarticulate my gratitude and love is, however, I will try to name it. To my mother Heather Underwood, thank you for reading to me all those years, and for instilling a love of stories and a love of learning in me. To my sister Kristin Franklin, thank you for believing in me, and sticking it out through everything. You are among the people to whom this book is dedicated, and I am proud of you. To all the rest of my Michigan family, both old and new, thank you for allowing me the chance to find myself. To Ann Fahlstrom, and the rest of the Fahlstrom family, thank you for being a second home. To Rachael Washington, thank you for pushing me as a friend, a person, and a writer. To my children Sage, Liam, and Zoe; you are the lights of my life, and often gave me the joy and energy I needed to bring this book to completion. I hope, among other things, that my love of stories has been a source of joy in your lives as well. To Alanna, thank you for having me as part of your family. To Kristie (who read an earlier version of this in its entirety!), Paul (who spent hours helping me format!) and Autumn (who put up with lengthy conversations on Christine or Gadamer), thank you for all the many ways you support my work and my life. Lastly, to Wil, who has travelled with me through this long process, and through the passage of my own Wild Woods; words can’t cover all I want to say ... but I’d give you my pile of acorns. Love and thanks to all of you.

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Allyson Carr

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