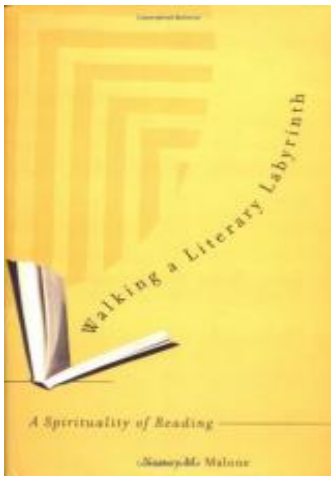
# Walking a Literary Labyrinth

by Nancy M. Malone




## About the Book

Throughout the course of our lives, very rarely do we take pause to appreciate the effect of books on our lives. Whether we have a voracious appetite for reading, or do so only on occasion, we've all come across books that have touched us and that have changed us.

In **Walking a Literary Labyrinth**, Nancy Malone shows us how books can and do influence us on a profoundly spiritual level - and that the actual, physical act of reading puts us (whether we realize it or not) in a reflective mode akin to prayer or meditation, thus bringing us closer to a knowledge of our own selves. Guiding us through her life's journey, Malone illustrates how in reading books, we are walking through our own unique "literary labyrinth" - and on a path to a greater understanding of both our inner selves and the world around us.

Meditative, engaging and spiritual in itself, **Walking a Literary Labyrinth** is a wonderfully intimate account of one woman's love affair with the world of books and reading. Part autobiography, part celebration, and infused with soul-affirming passion, Malone inspires us to try to understand our own spiritual journey, one which begins and ventures on through the simple act of reading a book.

## Discussion Guide

**1.** Do you agree with the author's belief that there does indeed exist a "spirituality of reading?" Can you give examples of your own in which you yourself have experienced such a spirituality?

**2.** Share your own literary labyrinth with the group - what significant books have you read throughout your personal journey? What role did they play in relation to the events of your life? How did they invoke a greater understanding of your own self and the world around you? At what point in the labyrinth do you feel you are in at this time?

**3.** Discuss the importance of fiction within the literary labyrinth. What does the author say about fiction as a means to achieving a sense of spirituality? How does this differ from reading non-fiction or biography?

**4.** In discussing literature's ability to offer terrific possibilities for enlightening us and acquainting us to one another, the author states, "And I, for one, must confess that this canon has more profoundly influenced me in who I am, what I think and feel and do, than, with few exceptions, the canonized saints of the Roman Catholic Church." What do you think the author is saying with regard to religion? What is your opinion on the similarities or differences between "spiritual" and "secular" reading?

**5.** The author defines interiority as "the conversation we're always having with ourselves," and which is most obvious through the act of reading. Discuss with the group your own sense of interiority - in what ways does a good book inspire this inner dialogue or self-realization?

**6.** How does the author distinguish between the ability of poetry to invoke spirituality versus that of prose? What does each of these genres offer along the course of the literary labyrinth in terms of bringing us into touch with our "inner-selves"?

**7.** Do you agree with the author's assertion that erotic literature should have a place in our spirituality? What do you feel is the appropriate use of eroticism in literature?

**8.** Re-read the passages in which the author discusses the power of reading in helping us to imagine what is not clearly or immediately comprehendible. What are some other examples of how reading opens up our imaginations to new possibilities?

**9.** To what extent are the author's concepts of the spirituality of reading influenced by the fact that she is a nun? Do you think that these concepts would carry any less weight had she been a teacher or a doctor or of some other profession not tied to the Church? Why or why not?

**10.** If at all possible (i.e., if you can name just one), discuss with the group your "favorite" book. In what ways might this book have given you a distinct understanding of yourself and the world around you? How can you apply your experiences in reading this "favorite" to the notion of reading as a spiritual journey.

**11.** According to the author, what role does language play in the spirituality of reading? Do you feel that only particular types of writing and language bring us closer to our inner selves, or define a higher level of spirituality?

**12.** Upon entering the convent, the author states that for the next 15 years, she would read nothing but "spiritual books," and that "'in renouncing the world,' I was renouncing the world of books. And I didn't even know it." What impact did her journey through this "literary desert" have in terms of her spirituality, and her view of the Catholic Church? What, if any, positive role did these years play in her life?

**13.** What is your opinion on the future of books and reading? With the pervasive influences of mass media and other outlets that compete for readers' attention, do you feel that one's impetus to walk one's own "literary labyrinth" is being threatened? What do you feel might be the consequences of not taking this literary journey?

## Author Bio

Nancy M. Malone, O.S.U., is an Ursuline nun with a degree in theology from Harvard Divinity School. She was an editor at *Religion and Intellectual Life*and a coeditor of *Cross Currents*.

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**Publication Date:** June 23, 2003
**Hardcover:** 208 pages
**Publisher:** Riverhead Hardcover
**ISBN-10:** 1573222461
**ISBN-13:** 9781573222464