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t by default) the *Bildungs-* stic form of expression of an personality and as the . . . of a world in which h and belief and freedom mporary postcolonial ex- between an international ctice. Therefore part of *Bildungsroman* make legi- t, and inequities enacted ie compulsory genre for rights society of readers lity is taken as the neces- development. Thus, we ily as gauges of the tri- ations of the realization ust over the horizon, or rights principles; rather, of the ruptures between ration of human rights ghts promise—the loca- he “not yet” of human

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Intimations of a Human Rights International:  
“The Rights of Man; or,  
What Are We [Reading] For?”

One of the messages I want to say to the people of Afghanistan is it's our country's pleasure and honor to be involved with the future of this country. We like stories of young girls going to school for the first time so they can realize their potential. . . . [T]he people of America have great . . . regard for human life and human dignity. . . . [W]e care about the plight of people. . . . I'm going to repeat what I said before: *We like stories*, and *expect stories*, of young girls going to school in Afghanistan.

—U.S. President George W. Bush,  
Speech to the Afghan people, 1 March 2006

Eight days after the world's most notorious Baathist, ex-Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, was pulled from a spider hole by U.S. forces outside of Tikrit in December 2003, National Public Radio aired a review of a recently translated Saudi Arabian *Bildungsroman* entitled *Adama*. The short review by Alan Cheuse is worth reproducing, because it exemplifies a fairly typical metropolitan reception of non-Western literature as well as some of the discursive and historical linkages between the *Bildungsroman* and human rights that I have examined throughout this book.

*Adama* is the name of the neighborhood where the main character, a smart young Saudi fellow, named Hisham Ibrahim al-Abir, a rebellious late teenager, undergoes a formidable, and to Western readers by now rather familiar, transformation from homeboy to questioning intellectual. His mother and father of course want nothing but the best for him. And Hisham's got a good inquiring mind. He reads Western novels and a lot of philosophy; books are truly his life. But although he has a bunch of jovial male pals, and every opportunity to become an engineer or doctor, he eventually falls in with a crowd of clandestine

Marxists. With them he plots the overthrow of the Saudi government in the service of the pan-Arab vision of the Baathists, but then he becomes disillusioned with their radicalism. His story has its moments: a sexual initiation scene both gross and pathetic; a spiritual night beneath the stars in the desert of Saudi Arabia's aptly named "Empty Quarter." But for most of its length, the book seems like a poor Middle Eastern relative of the traditional Western coming-of-age novel. Scene by scene, *Adama* is talky, with never enough metaphors to make it anything but a flat-footed account of one bright boy's education. Still, I read it all the way through, and I think it was well worth it, to eavesdrop, as it were, on an uncommonly free voice from a quarter of the world that usually suppresses such pioneers: an empty quarter.<sup>1</sup>

The commentator introducing Cheuse's review notes that the novel earned "a number of *fatwas*" for this Arab pioneer of second-rate, derivative Western literature, the journalist and political science professor Turki al-Hamad. There is nothing like a good *fatwa* to boost sales, but compared to Rushdie's success, *Adama* remains a relatively obscure novel in the United States and Europe, although it is, as the book's dustjacket announces, a "bestseller in the Middle East . . . despite being officially banned in several countries, including . . . Saudi Arabia." Cheuse himself dusts off Joseph Conrad's Orientalist tropes not only to characterize the atmosphere of *Adama* but to describe the encounter between a cosmopolitan Western reader and an Eastern novel. He reduces the bustling city of Riyadh (and by extension the whole of the Arabian Peninsula) to the sparsely populated sands of the Rub' al Khali (Empty Quarter)—a desert of nomads, silence, and secrets that reveal themselves to the prurient, interloping gaze of the Western reader. Interestingly, the urban characters in the novel use this same trope to mock one another's intellectual capacities as the sort underdeveloped by a pre-modern land where the "sense of place itself was banished, and time seemed somehow to be suspended. . . ."<sup>2</sup> If the encounter with this "uncommonly free voice from a[n empty] quarter of the world" no longer induces the Western reader's Conradian fear of a "remote kinship" with non-Western others—what Marlow described in *Heart of Darkness* as the sneaking "suspicion of their not being inhuman"—part of the trouble with *Adama*, for Cheuse, is that it is all too familiar.<sup>3</sup>

It is a curious phrase ("to Western reader's by now rather familiar") that Cheuse chooses to qualify our recognition of the story

form. What is familiar, it seems from these cultural, temporal, and geographic qualifications, is not so much the *Bildungsroman* form (which could hardly be described as only now becoming familiar) but the story of non-Westerners coming of age. So, on the one hand, the Third World *Bildungsroman* is a stepchild of a Western "original" (with, to complete the implication of Cheuse's metaphor, a rich uncle in the States) and, on the other, such novels of personalization have become characteristic of non-Western literature circulated in the West. Thus, *Adama* is simultaneously an uncommon, but pale, copy of an original and just one more of an innumerable canon of such knockoffs. This dialectic of familiar (form) and foreign (content)—of generic predictability and pioneering innovation—characterizes more generally the international literary relations between Western cosmopolitan readers and non-Western literature.<sup>4</sup> If, in the century since Conrad, the Global South is no longer the image of perpetual childhood (of "primitivism, abnormality, underdevelopment, non-creativity and traditionalism"<sup>5</sup>) it has been promoted, in the dominant transition narrative of modernization and development, to the land of problematic, antisocial adolescence; the *Bildungsroman* relocates to these demarginalizing territories of the world republic of letters and an international order of human rights to perform its historical social work of incorporation and emancipation. Freedom in the Middle East, as Cheuse's review esteems it, is the liberty to write (even flat-footedly) in the idiom of the Western novel, to submit oneself to the generic codes and conventions of the *Bildungsroman*.

*Adama* is indeed a pedestrian male coming-of-age story, satisfying all of the plot elements that Jerome Buckley identified in the European *Bildungsroman*,<sup>6</sup> and Hisham's transformation from "homeboy to questioning intellectual" is even more prosaic than Cheuse suggests. Hisham is an avid reader not only of revolutionary theory by Lenin, Nasser, Fanon, Régis Debray, and Che Guevara but of canonical European *Bildungsromane* and novels by Dickens, Balzac, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Gorky, and Hugo (among many others). The "crowd of clandestine Marxists" with whom he associates is little more than a semisecret bourgeois reading society with revolutionary pretensions that breaks up as much from a lack of common conviction and shared interpretations of the books they read as it does from the external pressure of a secret police seeking to

keep the comrades from their "study of forbidden texts."<sup>7</sup> The conflict between Hisham's youthful ideals of social justice and the concrete form of revolution in which those are put into practice comes to a head when his reading group debates the blistering critique that "[t]hose in power in Iraq" have betrayed the pan-Arabic socialist cause and are nothing more than "a pack of opportunists and reactionary traitors with no relation whatsoever to [our] great revolutionary party."<sup>8</sup> If the evolutionary trope of *Bildung* (and its novelization) "imply[es] opposition to a barbaric political system and . . . offer[s] its proponents an alternative to revolution for realizing humanitarian goals," the revolution to be forestalled in *Adama* is a repeat in Saudi Arabia of that other July fourteenth revolution—the socialist Iraqi revolution of 1958 that eventually installed Saddam Hussein in power.<sup>9</sup> The plot accomplishes this displacement of social revolution by personal evolution with the disbandment of Hisham's Marxist reading group and his matriculation at the Faculty of Commerce in Riyadh, where he will "be able to read *Das Kapital* and understand it properly," not as the critical foundation for a proletarian revolution but as a theoretical analysis of capitalism indispensable to a future Saudi businessman. Hisham's youthful revolutionary fervor is ultimately redirected into his formal education in economics and politics, for which he hopes to "get a scholarship to study in America or Britain."<sup>10</sup> In the end, Hisham gives up the ideal of social revolution to become, as Hegel commented wryly on the dénouement of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, "as good a Philistine as others."<sup>11</sup>

Eighteen months after the U.S.-Allied invasion of Afghanistan and the "fall" of the Taliban, another topical *Bildungsroman*, carefully packaged and produced by its editors and publisher, began its journey to the American bestseller lists in June 2003: Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*. This *Clef à Roman* tells the story of Amir, a refugee who flees Afghanistan during the Russian invasion of 1981 and who himself becomes a bestselling writer in the United States. Just months before 9/11, the narrator-protagonist sneaks into Kabul to rescue the orphaned son of his onetime best friend and houseboy, Hassan. His return is a quest for redemption—to repair a childhood lapse of judgment; Amir, an ethnic Pashtun, had abandoned his ethnic Hazara houseboy to be beaten by a gang of kids who years later become cruel leaders in the Taliban, killing

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Hassan and taking his son for a sex slave. But Hassan turns out to be Amir’s half brother, and, given their shared patrimony, Amir’s redemption represents not so much an overcoming of ethnic prejudices—since Hassan is the mistaken object of those prejudices—as a reunification of the natural family. This plot logic (which updates the paternal recognition scene in Goethe’s novel) does not suggest that Pashtuns should, in principle, treat Hazaras with dignity and equanimity despite ethnic or cultural difference; rather, it warns that some Hazaras may be Pashtuns, by nature (birth) if not by social convention. Thus, the suspect humanitarian moral is not that we should regard difference as irrelevant to our treatment of others, but that we should treat others as ourselves—that “[a]ll human beings . . . should act towards one another in a spirit of [half] brotherhood” (UDHR)—because they may not, in the end, be altogether (ethnically) other. The novel ultimately elevates the invasion of Afghanistan to an act of humanitarian intervention not only by representing the Taliban as a vicious sect of homosexual pedophiles intent on repressing the human personality; it also assures its American (and Allied) market readers that “we” are on the side of the people (and therefore that the aptly named “Operation Enduring Freedom” is a liberationist rather than imperialist venture) and, more pointedly, that these are people like us—people who “love . . . the *idea* of America” and freedom, enjoy Coca-Cola, appreciate John Wayne and Charles Bronson films, read *Les Misérables* and Ian Fleming novels, pursue happiness, and desire upward mobility.<sup>12</sup>

According to U.S. First Lady and literacy advocate Laura Bush, who recommends *The Kite Runner* as one of her and her husband’s favorite books, the novel “tells a compelling story of how wounded people and wounded societies seek redemption and renewal” in a world of lost childhoods.<sup>13</sup> As the president’s speech to the Afghan people during a surprise visit to Kabul in the spring of 2006 suggests, it is the possibility of childhood and normative *Bildung* that America supposedly seeks to restore with the forced installation of democracy and that it also *expects* to read about. In formulating a literary foreign policy from American reading tastes for Third World *Bildungsromane*, President Bush implies that at least part of what we are fighting for is reading—not only for a world in which young girls will have the opportunity to learn to read (and realize

their potential) but also for a world in which the philanthropic readers of the West will be well-supplied with stories about young girls learning to read. Converting readers' taste into humanitarian expectation, Bush appeals to Americans to identify not with girls kept from reading but with his own paternalistic desires and literary magnanimity for those girls and their stories—with his own “cosmopolitan largesse.”<sup>14</sup>

Bush presents himself as an empathetic figure of American humanitarian (literary) sensibility—a man who would rather be a peacetime reader than a wartime president. In a sense, he merely adopts as a policy of literary foreign relations what a survey of our recent popular literature seems to suggest: that we do like and expect to read more of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, more reading of Balzac by “little Chinese seamstress[es],” more *Bildungsromane* of young girls (and boys) going to school in “the literarily deprived territories” to realize their potential in the “world republic of letters.”<sup>15</sup> These popular stories of literary incorporation package a modicum of tolerable, even cherishable, cultural difference in a generic story form that insinuates a transnational affinity between the novel's reader and its protagonist-reader. To put this in slightly reductive, materialistic terms, the ethnic prints worn by the protagonists mark them as foreign, while the cloth binding of the novel already outfits their stories in the generic trappings of the familiar.<sup>16</sup>

Most of the *Bildungsromane* that I have discussed in this book were written by authors, and feature protagonists, “whose introduction to the very idea of the novel came from reading French and English novels in the course of a colonial (and latterly a postcolonial) education.”<sup>17</sup> These non-Western novels should not be read as transparent representations of cultural, anthropological, or ethnographic difference, but this does not mean that they are simply cultural derivatives of the Western novel. As Peter Hitchcock speculates about the apparent expansiveness of the novel form, “the democratic instincts of the genre, nurtured by the democratic instincts of its genesis, are open to rearticulation and reformation through content which is itself liberatory in its inclinations. . . . [T]he postcolonial novel exists because it is in the nature of the genre to provide form for content that challenges what constitutes the genre.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, if we view the *Bildungsroman* as the generic name of a social function, or incorporative technology, as I have

done throughout this book, then its vitality at the margins of what Pascale Casanova calls "world literary space" speaks to the character, operation, and relations of an international order in which both human rights and "world literature" emerge, are implicated, commodified, and determined.<sup>19</sup>

Thematically within *Adama* and *The Kite Runner*, and in their public reception (as with the other *Bildungsromane* that I have examined in this book), the worlds of geopolitics, consumer capitalism, literary subjectivity, and human rights law, discourse, and practice overlap in a single world. In *The World Republic of Letters*, Casanova attempts to compile a codex of the rules of emergence and operation of this world literary space; while its "literary geography," she says, "can never be completely superimposed upon the political geography of the world's nations," it nonetheless abides certain "international laws" of its own.<sup>20</sup> Like the "international treaty regimes" of human rights, the international law of world literary space is not yet "the expression of community but of power."<sup>21</sup> As I have argued throughout this book, international human rights law appropriated forms and institutions—e.g., the *Bildungsroman*, the public sphere, and human rights themselves—that historically served to legitimate the emergent European nation-state. In its conscription of the *Bildungsroman*, international law retasks the nationalist genre of human personality development to perform its work of incorporation at an international level, largely in advance of any administrative, institutional formation comparable to the nation-state. If contemporary human rights have failed to deliver fully on their transformative promises to internationalize the individual and to procure the effective "universal" recognition and observance of human rights themselves, this may be partly a consequence of having enlisted modern Westphalian institutions and cultural forms to imagine, and hypostatize, a projective Dumbarton Oaksian international order. Thus, the novels that I have examined must qualify as "world texts," since they refer to "a broader entity [than the nation-state]—a continent, or the world-system as a whole" (in Franco Moretti's terms); but, as Simon Gikandi notes, such novels "cannot [yet] do without the framework of the nation. What needs to be underscored . . . is the persistence of the nation-state in the very literary works that were supposed to gesture toward a transcendental global culture."<sup>22</sup> I would add that the nation-state persists as the organizing principle not only in the novels (and human

rights law) but in the critical and reading practices that we perform on these novels. In other words, I am suggesting that the effective limitations of human rights are related not merely to the institutional frailty of the international legal regime but to the historically nationalist limitations of our literary imaginations—cognitive limitations that make it possible, in the era of a global “war on terror,” to reduce *The Kite Runner* to “a story of two childhood friends in Afghanistan”<sup>23</sup> and to read *Adama* as the expression of a “free voice” from an “empty quarter” rather than to consider the places of the writers and their readers themselves within overlapping world systems.

The implicit cosmopolitan model of reading lurking within George Bush’s statement of great novelistic expectations asks relatively little of our literary, humanitarian imaginations; it invites us to identify not with people unlike us but with our kind of people—people who “care about the plight of people.” In a world where privileges and rights, as well as literary technologies and juridico-institutional resources, are unequally distributed, such cosmopolitan reading practices often serve to recenter the traditional subjects of history now as the subjects of benevolence, humanitarian interventionist sentimentality, and human rights—the literary agents of an international human rights imaginary.<sup>24</sup> “As more texts from elsewhere have entered the syllabus,” observes Anthony Appiah, “we are naturally drawn to congratulating ourselves by describing our reading practices as more cosmopolitan.”<sup>25</sup> If literacy and the consumption of the literary forms of print capitalism facilitated the individual reader’s sentimental imagination of belonging to a national community of fellow reader-citizens, it remains to be seen whether the historically nationalist technologies conscripted by international human rights can crystallize an imagined international community of human rights holders.

In his Oxford-Amnesty lecture, philosopher Richard Rorty proposes that international human rights are not to be realized through more rationality, or “increased moral knowledge”; instead, he advocates a sentimental education in which “sympathy” is “manipulated” by reading or “hearing sad and sentimental stories.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, the engagement with sad stories cultivates the humanitarian disposition that represents the apogee of *Bildung* in the human rights teleology of personality development. For Rorty, in

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practices that we perform suggesting that the effective is not merely to the institution but to the historically situated nations—cognitive limitations, a global “war on terror,” two childhood friends in the expression of a “free” man to consider the places they lives within overlapping

reading lurking within the expectations asks relationships; it invites us with our kind of people—people.” In a world where technologies and juridico-political, such cosmopolitanism for the traditional subjects of violence, humanitarian interests—the literary agents of the text.<sup>24</sup> “As more texts from the world serves Anthony Appiah, who describes himself by describing himself as a cosmopolitan.”<sup>25</sup> If literacy and the technologies of capitalism facilitated the technologies of belonging to a nation, it remains to be seen how technologies conscripted by international technologies imagined international

Richard Rorty proposes that the good is not to be realized through the cultivation of “virtue”; instead, he advocates “sympathy”; instead, he advocates “sympathy” is “manipulative sentimental stories.”<sup>26</sup> In the end, it cultivates the human subject of *Bildung* in the development. For Rorty, in

the international context, “matters of justice become not legislation but literature,” matters of mediation and the literary manipulation of readers’ sympathetic imaginations that lead us to “see the similarities between ourselves and people very unlike us as outweighing the differences,” or to sense that “anyone could assume the role of the subject endowed with rights,” as Lynn Festa has described the affective work of the sentimental novel in the eighteenth century.<sup>27</sup> “By ‘sympathy,’” explains Rorty, “I mean the sort of reaction that the Athenians had more of after seeing Aeschylus’ *The Persians* than before, the sort that white Americans had more of after reading *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* than before, the sort that we have more of after watching TV programmes about the genocide in Bosnia”;<sup>28</sup> I note, rather crudely, that this is not the sort of reaction that we have had more of after watching similar programs about genocide in Rwanda or Darfur, or the daily sufferings of Palestinians in the Gaza strip.

The cosmopolitan solipsism of the Rortyan pragmatic model of sentimental (literary) education becomes evident when he explains that the stories of others suffering become texts for the training of “our” sympathetic moral imaginations; the edifying effects of “sad and sentimental stories,” he says, “repeated and varied over the centuries, have induced us, the rich, safe, powerful, people, to tolerate, and even to cherish, powerless people—people whose appearance or habits or beliefs at first seemed an insult to our own moral identity, our sense of the limits of permissible human variation.”<sup>29</sup> This sentimental model of reading has a tendency to become a patronizing humanitarianism that is enabled by and subsists on socioeconomic and political disparities. This model of humanitarian reading and sentimentality is essentially not very different from the one that Mamadou ascribes to Lolita’s patronizing mother and the implicated reader in Beyala’s *Loukoum*. In international human rights legal terms, this humanitarian reader is the freely and fully developed human person who has acquired the capacity to recognize perhaps not the “full weight and solidity” or “the reality of other persons”<sup>30</sup> but the abstract dignity of the human personality in both the self and others, whatever its concrete “human variation,” and who is therefore positioned to assist others with the realization of their own human personality and dignity. The edification imagined here is the cultivation of an instrumental humanitarian

disposition of the “powerful” (rights holders) toward the “powerless” (those who cannot enact their rights) that ultimately confirms the reader as a capacitated citizen-subject, a fully developed international human rights person.

If, as Casanova explains, a literary public sphere determines and trades in “literary value,” then, given the alliance between literature and the law that I have elaborated, it implicitly determines and trades in what Upendra Baxi has called the “symbolic capital of human rights.”<sup>31</sup> That is, in “set[ting] the limits and standards of what is and will be considered literary,” an international literary public sphere has an implicit regulatory relationship to a projective international order, codifying the normative imagery in which it and the human rights person may be imagined.<sup>32</sup> In a global order that continues to equate literacy with modernity and liberty and that is effectively divided between full-rights holders and those who cannot enact the rights they have, we incorporated readers of contemporary postcolonial *Bildungsromane* must learn from these novels to recognize ourselves in the figure of the implicated reader, whose intentions may be humanitarian but whose reading practices make certain consumerist demands for generic conformity that influence the terms and conventions in which the world can be imagined and the observation and enjoyment of human rights realized. That is, we must learn to recognize not only our structural complicity in an international system that extends and denies human rights differentially, but also the triumphalist cosmopolitan pretensions and privileges of our humanitarian reading practices that can exacerbate the divisions between the incorporated and the disenfranchised that both we and these novels presumably aspire to remedy. Thus, a full sentimental education in human rights literacy would involve not only learning to sense the dignity of the human personality in “people very unlike us” but also unlearning the self-congratulatory sense of benevolence (or *noblesse oblige*) that seems naturally to attend such reading acts of recognition—“[s]till, I read it all the way through, and I think it was well worth it.” If we take away from these novels only a heightened sensitivity to human misery and vulnerability and to the dignity and developmental potential of the human personality (whatever the concrete human variation) then we miss half the lesson that these *Bildungsromane* have to teach. These novels insist that, as beneficiaries of the social, economic,

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and political dispensation of the world and as image brokers of an international imaginary and world literary space, we are already implicated in the processes by which the imagined world is given conventional form in the regulatory regimes of law and literature—by our reading acts, we have already assumed, in Djelal Kadir's words, "the subject agency of the verb 'to world.'"<sup>33</sup>

If Rorty views the prospects of international justice and human rights as matters of literature rather than law, many other social historians, theorists, and literary critics have correlated the sentimental affect produced by particular texts at particular moments in the "last two hundred years of moral progress" precisely with humanitarian and human rights legislative projects.<sup>34</sup> For instance, David Rieff reminds us of "the astonishing and unexpected influence" of Jean-Henry Dunant's *Un souvenir de Solferino* (1862), which detailed the horrors of the Battle of Solferino (1859) during the Austro-Sardinian War and precipitated both the founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the adoption of the First Geneva Convention on "The Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field" (1864).<sup>35</sup> Legal historian Paul Lauren attributes at least part of the international humanitarian sensitization to conditions of "oppression and exploitation" in the nineteenth century to the translation and circulation of literature, including the work of Henrik Ibsen's *The Doll's House* in women's rights movements, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the international abolitionist movements, and Balzac's *Les Paysans* and Dickens' *Bleak House* and *Hard Times* in the "burgeoning public consciousness about the sufferings" of the working classes during the Industrial Revolution.<sup>36</sup> More cautiously, Elaine Scarry cites Stephen Spender's exceptional statement about the impact on the British imagination of E. M. Forster's *Passage to India* (1924)—that "overnight" the novel created popular support for the Independence of India Act (1947)—to suggest that very few novels have ever even had such claims made about their effect on legislation.<sup>37</sup> Notwithstanding Scarry's justifiable skepticism, as with the drafters of the UDHR's response to *Robinson Crusoe*, it seems that sometimes a literary feeling for others—or, rather, "the reaction to a book" that excites our sentimental imaginations—"translat[es] . . . into a body of law."<sup>38</sup>



Throughout this book, I have been concerned to elaborate a less spectacular and less immediately measurable set of interrelations and interdependencies between the *Bildungsroman* and international human rights law. I have attempted to show the mutuality, complementarity, and complicity of literature and the law as they cooperate in mundane, but important, ways to universalize and naturalize the normative image of the human in human rights—or, more precisely, the projected image of the international human rights person. Recognizing ourselves in the figure of the implicated reader and the implication of our reading practices in the imagination of an international order based on human rights means acknowledging the ways we collude to naturalize the generic forms in which “human variation” is felt to be socially acceptable. Recognizing the sociohistorical alliance between the *Bildungsroman* and human rights as mutually enabling fictions that institutionalize and naturalize the terms of incorporation in (and exclusion from) an imagined community of readers and rights holders means also recognizing that our reading acts have implications not only for the imagination but the legislation of an international human rights community; they partly determine the discursive parameters within which, and imaginative patterns with which, a human rights international might be realized. That is, the texts we read—and how we read, teach, speak, and write about them—have an effect (however unpredictable) on the possibility that the projection of a world based on human rights might become legible, articulable, and, perhaps, even commonsensical. To paraphrase H. G. Wells: if we are not reading for human rights, what are we reading for?

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