JEFFERSON
EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes #215

January 2026

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

Why Do People Read Fiction?

Do you read fiction?

Why?

It seems like a simple question; perhaps even a banal question. Yet at a recent luncheon when someone posed the question to the group, I was unable to answer it.

Not because I didn't have an answer. I found myself tongue-tied with too many answers, all of which were undercut by the fact that for the past many years, I have not read much, if any, fiction.

Which, upon reflection, puzzled me.

Once upon a time, I read fiction voraciously. It was a passion of mine. I began my professional career in Gannon University's (*nee* College's) English Department.

But then, as Mae West once said about her virtue, I drifted.

I became enmeshed in film and media studies, which led to an interest in advertising and marketing, and that led to a career in higher education enrollment management and senior administration.

I'll not tire you with the details of the serpentine career path that led me to that luncheon table, unable to answer why people read fiction and why I now rarely do, but my stammering alerted me to an irony: all of the work I have been doing these past 10 years on ***The American Tapestry Project*** and its many off-shoots is predicated upon the notion that the current polarization in American society primarily results from Americans no longer agreeing about the meaning of the American story.

What is a story?

It is a fiction.

Which does not mean that it is false.

Sometimes stories are "truer" than history, if by history one means the "facts," "just the facts, ma'am," as Sgt. Joe Friday uttered on the old TV detective show ***Dragnet***. I'm not interested here in an argument about the philosophy of history, but great stories, great fictions, begin where history's accounts end. If you want to know the condition of life for middle-class American women in the mid-19th century that sparked the women's movement, you can read historians like Barbara Welter and Lillian Faderman. But if you want to know what it felt like, if you want to experience its day-to-day emotional resonance, then you need to read Louisa May Alcott's ***Little Women***. Welter, Faderman, and other excellent historians will tell you about it, but Alcott, like all great artists, doesn't tell you about it. She shows you in a way that enables you to feel and sense it. She goes beyond understanding it intellectually, enabling you to experience the actual "fact" of the matter. Alcott brings it to life.

We don't read fiction simply to be entertained, informed, or distracted. We read fiction because stories shape our moral awareness, preserve emotional memory, encourage empathy, and give meaning to ordinary experiences.

All of this was brought back to me through a gift this Christmas season from my sister-in-law Jill, who gave me a copy of Claire Keegan's ***Small Things Like These***. Keegan's short, spare novella, set in a small Irish town in 1985 during the weeks just before Christmas, offers a concentrated illustration of why fiction matters. The novel resonated for me because in 1985 in the weeks just before Christmas, I was in Ireland. It reminded me about something only the savviest travelers know: you can be in a place, visit its sites and monuments, and still miss "it." You can be "in" a place, but to be "of" a place, you need to understand its people. That understanding only comes in two ways: 1) either from long residence and even then, as an Irish immigrant woman to America once told me, you can still miss it, or 2) through the eyes of an artist sensitive to their culture's ways whose technical skill in whatever medium they choose allows them to share their insights.

Let's connect some dots illustrating how Keegan is just such an artist: emotionally acute and a technical virtuoso of her medium short fiction.

Dot #1: People Read Fiction to Make Sense of Experience

In my ***The American Tapestry Project***, I quote Joan Didion on why we tell ourselves stories:

> We tell ourselves stories in order to live … The princess is caged in the consulate. The man with candy will lead the children into the sea. … We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or the moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of multiple choices. We live entirely … by the imposition of narrative line upon disparate images, by the 'ideas' with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience.[1]

As we move through life, our experience is episodic, uneven, and often morally confusing. It can seem like, as Toynbee said somewhere about history, "just one damn thing after another." We can't bear that, so we tell ourselves a story about our experience to make it make sense. We do that almost unconsciously, but artists do it with intention. They seek the meaning in all that seemingly random activity. In their fictions, the best impose shape without falsifying simplicity. They do not simplify life so much as render life intelligible.

Without ever moralizing, without ever explaining, Keegan does that by showing us one life unfolding in a particular place and time. Keegan shows us Bill Furlong's moral imagination forming and moving toward action after witnessing the cruelty the nuns of the Good Shepherd (a name rich in moral irony) inflict upon the poor, unwed mothers they keep virtually enslaved in the convent high on the hill just outside of town.

Such laundries were known as Magdalene Laundries; they took in unwed girls, fed and housed them through their pregnancy, then orphaned off their babies as the girls worked in torturous conditions to pay for their room and board. The laundries had existed for decades and decades. Furlong's experience in 1985 was just before the convents were exposed for the cruelty they imposed, a cruelty that only survived because of a society-wide complicity of silence. Their exposure and that of the priestly abuse of young boys brought an end to the ancient partnership between church and government that ruled Ireland since time immemorial. Keegan's story is the story of one man's dawning moral consciousness and his decision to no longer be part of the conspiracy of silence.

But Keegan doesn't tell it to you as I just did. She shows it as her novella follows Bill Furlong, a coal merchant in New Ross, through a handful of winter days. On the surface, very little happens: deliveries are made, family routines observed, weather endured. ***Small Things Like These*** opens with:

> In October there were yellow trees. The clocks went back the hour and the long November winds came in and blew, and stripped the trees bare. In the town of New Ross, chimneys threw out smoke which fell away and drifted off in hairy, drawn out strings before dispersing along the quays, and soon the River Barrow, dark as stout, swelled up with rain. [2]

Yet this tight perspective allows Keegan to show how meaning quietly accumulates. The novel's power lies in its rejection of spectacle. No superheroes here; just people. Just folks. In restricting her narrative to the ordinary actions of ordinary people, Keegan shows that moral significance does not require dramatic circumstances. It is already present in daily life, waiting to be acknowledged.

Because she portrays life as it is actually lived, Keegan draws you in. Most people do not see themselves as actors in epic plots. They experience life as participants in some version of a known routine in which they are constrained by custom, responsibility, and societal expectation. ***Small Things Like These*** reassures you that your life is not morally thin. On the contrary, it is precisely where ethical meaning takes shape. As Keegan shows when Furlong tries to tell his wife Eileen about the suffering girl he saw:

> That night, in bed, Furlong considered going over no part of what he'd witnessed at the convent with Eileen, but when he told her, she sat up rigid and said such things had nothing to do with them, and that there was nothing they could do, and didn't those girls up there need a fire to warm themselves, like everyone? And didn't the nuns always pay what was owing and on time unlike so many who would put everything on the slate until you had to put the squeeze on, and there the trouble would come. [3]

Dot #2: People Read Fiction to Practice Empathy

Unlike history and social science, fiction places you inside another person's consciousness. Empathy in fiction is not abstract sympathy; it is sustained attention to how another life feels from the inside. Keegan accomplishes this through restraint. Bill Furlong is not rendered psychologically overstated. His thoughts are simple, often inarticulate, shaped by memory rather than analysis. As Furlong thinks to himself while creaming the butter helping Eileen with the Christmas cake:

> Always it was the same, Furlong thought; always they carried mechanically on without pause, to the next job at hand. What would life be like, he wondered, if they were given time to think and reflect over things? Might their lives be different or much the same or would they just lose the run of themselves? [4]

After he has seen the girl at the convent, you inhabit Furlong's hesitations, his unease, his gradual awareness that something is wrong long before he can name it. When he encounters evidence of abuse at the convent laundry, you feel shock, confusion, and moral pressure with him.

> As soon as he got into the lorry, he pulled the door closed and drove on. Further on the road, he realized he'd missed his turn and was heading in the wrong direction with his boot to the floor and he needed to tell himself to settle, and go easy. He kept picturing the girls down on their hands and knees, polishing the floor, and the state they were in. [5]

This is Keegan's art at work. Empathy is not produced by argument. It is produced by proximity. You experience Furlong's moral quandary growing not by being told about it, but by sharing it with him. Keegan never instructs you how to judge the Magdalene Laundries she has shown you. Like Furlong, she allows you to feel the cold, the hunger, the fear, and, most importantly, the weight of knowing something is wrong while recognizing the cost of acknowledging it. Fiction trains empathy not by telling us to care, but by making it difficult not to.

Dot #3: People Read Fiction to Explore Moral Questions Without Dogma

Fiction excels at moral inquiry precisely because it does not argue like philosophy or legislate like law. It dramatizes ethical tension but does not resolve it. ***Small Things Like These*** never presents a moral thesis. Instead, it stages a dilemma: What does one owe to others when social consensus depends on silence? Bill's community is not ignorant of injustice. It is organized around not speaking about it. Keegan shows that moral failure often consists not of cruelty, but of accommodation. As with Mrs. Kehoe, owner of the restaurant Bill frequents with his employees, who asks Bill,

> 'You'll put me right if I'm wrong, I know, Bill – but did I hear you had a run-in

with herself above at the convent?'
Furlong's hand tightened round the change and his gaze dropped to the skirting
board, following it along the base of the wall, to the corner.
'I wouldn't call it a run-in but I had a morning up there, aye.'
'"Tis no affair of mine, you understand, but you know you'd want to watch over
what you'd say about what's there? Keep the enemy close, the bad dog with you
and the good dog will not bite. You know yourself?' [7]

You turn to fiction for this kind of moral exploration because it respects moral intelligence. Keegan shows how conscience develops under pressure, shaped by memory, fear, and responsibility. The reader is left to wrestle with the implications: What would I do? What have I already accepted? Where have I chosen ease over courage?

Dot #4: People Read Fiction to Experience Beauty and Pleasure

Even when fiction confronts painful subjects, readers are drawn to the pleasure of language and form. Beauty, in literature, is not decorative. It is a way of sharpening attention. Keegan's prose is famously spare. Each of her sentences is almost a work of art unto itself. Every sentence carries weight; every image is earned. Her austerity creates its own kind of beauty mirroring the moral seriousness of the subject.

The rhythm of Keegan's language slows the reader down. She wants you to linger, to notice, to dwell. This artistic discipline matters because Keegan resists moral sensationalism. She does not exploit suffering for emotional effect. Instead, she creates a style that honors the seriousness of her story. Keegan reminds you why literature endures: it creates conditions for reflection that the clash and bang some other forms of storytelling undermine.

In addition, for American ears accustomed to an Irish idiom that is a caricature of genuine Irish speech, Keegan is the authentic sound of Ireland. There is absolutely no blarney in her; her voice is the voice of Ireland.

Dot #5: People Read Fiction to Escape — and Return Renewed

Fiction offers a temporary removal from one's own circumstances, but that removal is purposeful. It allows readers to return to their lives with an increased understanding.

Although rooted in a specific historical context, ***Small Things Like These*** does not feel remote. You recognize its dynamics immediately: the pressure to conform, the fear of social exclusion, the quiet bargains people make with themselves. In reading Keegan, one quietly engages in an internal moral review. You step into Bill's

situation, confront its costs, and then return to your own life with a heightened awareness.

This is not escapism as avoidance. If escape it is, it is escape restoring moral attention dulled by habit and inattention.

Dot #6: People Read Fiction to Understand How Societies Remember and Forget

Fiction often preserves forms of truth that official histories suppress. Like the novels of Toni Morrison, Keegan's novella functions as cultural memory. The Magdalene Laundries existed for decades, supported by church, state, and community. Their cruelty was widely known and rarely challenged. ***Small Things Like These*** does not catalog facts; it restores the emotional reality of complicity. It shows how silence is maintained through politeness, gratitude, and fear of standing out.

Great fiction remembers what institutions prefer to forget or choose not to know. Like the novels of Morrison I mentioned a moment ago, her novel ***Beloved*** makes it impossible to rationalize away the horror of slavery. The most consequential work of fiction in American history is Harriet Beecher Stowe's ***Uncle Tom's Cabin***, which in the 19th century made it impossible for Americans to continue to be complicit in what James Madison called America's "original sin of the African trade." Great storytellers like Keegan, Morrison, and Stowe transmit moral knowledge across generations, ensuring that past failures do not become abstractions but remain, like a pebble in the shoe, irritants spawning moral awareness.

Dot #7: People Read Fiction to Feel Less Alone

Perhaps the quietest but most enduring reason people read fiction is recognition. Stories tell you that your unease, confusion, or moral hesitation is shared. Furlong's uncertainty is profoundly recognizable. He is not sure what he can afford to do. He is not confident that action will be rewarded. He feels the weight of responsibility: to his family, his livelihood, and his place in the community. In reading Keegan, you recognize this tension because it is common. Moral life rarely presents itself as a clean choice between good and evil. It presents itself as a series of small compromises that slowly become character. Life, it turns out, really is all about the choices you make.

In sharing this experience, artists like Keegan reduce your isolation. She assures you that moral difficulty is not personal failure, but a common, universal feature of human social life.

Dot #8: Why 'Small Things Like These' Is an Ideal Example

Keegan's novella, only 115 pages long, is a powerful example of why people read fiction because it is:

Short, yet morally expansive;
Quiet, yet ethically forceful;
Local, yet universally legible;
Restrained, yet emotionally exact.

Keegan shows that fiction does not need complexity of plot to achieve complexity of meaning. It needs only to show how people live, remember, and choose.

Dot #9: Why Fiction Endures

Keegan's short novel reminded me why I once set out to make my life's work the study of stories. I drifted for a while, a long while, as it turns out, but Keegan reminded me we read fiction because it performs moral and emotional labor that no other form reliably accomplishes. Stories, at their best, whether on the printed page, or in the sound-bytes of an audible book or podcast, or in the flickering images of a movie or TV show, make experience intelligible, inspire empathy, explore ethics without coercion, preserve cultural memory, and reassure readers that they are not alone in their moral uncertainty.

Claire Keegan's ***Small Things Like These*** is the work of a modern master. It reminds us that moral life is not formed by slogans or systems, but by remembered kindnesses, ordinary labor, and the courage to refuse silence when silence is easier.

***

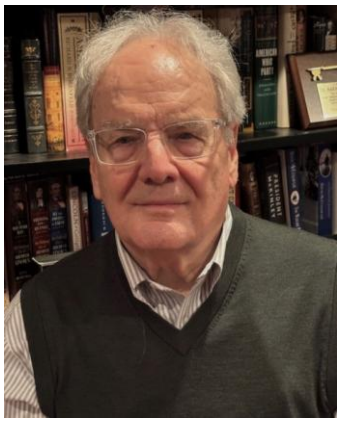
In reminding me of my scholarly roots and the power of fiction, Keegan has prompted me to begin research on a new thread in ***The American Tapestry Project*** tracing what Martin Luther King, Jr. called "the moral arc of the universe" through the canon of American literature from William Bradford's ***Of Plymouth Plantation*** and Mary Rowlandson's ***A Narrative of Captivity and Restoration …*** in the 17th century to the 21st century and Marylynne Robinson's ***Gilead*** and Colson Whitehead's ***The Nickel Boys***. She did that, in part, because in an interview when asked what work of fiction by another artist she would have most liked to have written herself, after demurring for a moment, she replied, "***The Great Gatsby.***" [7]

Photo Credits

"Claire Keegan wins prestigious German award," **The Irish Times** available at Claire Keegan wins prestigious German award – The Irish Times accessed January 10, 2026.
This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-SA

End Notes

1. Didion, Joan. “The White Album,” in ***We Tell Ourselves Stories In Order to Live: Collected Nonfiction***, ed. John Leonard. (New York: Everyman’s Press, 2006), p. 185.
2. Keegan, Claire, **Small Things Like These** (New York: Grove Press, 2021), p.1.
3. Ibid., p.46.
4. Ibid., p.21.
5. Ibid., p. 45.
6. Ibid., p. 98.
7. *“Interview with ‘Claire Keegan on Small Things Like These:’ I wasn’t setting out to write about misogyny or Catholic Ireland,”* at **The Booker Prizes** available at Claire Keegan on Small Things Like These: 'I wasn’t setting out to write about misogyny or Catholic Ireland' | The Booker Prizes accessed Jan. 11, 2026.



-- Andrew Roth, Ph.D.
Scholar-in-Residence
The Jefferson Educational Society
roth@jeserie.org

Subscribe to JES Publications Mailing List!

Support JES | Donate

In Case You Missed It

Book Notes #212| Roth, ChatGPT Critique Klein and Thompson’s ‘Abundance’ written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Andrew Roth**

Death of the Daily Newspaper | Breaking the news and the rules: How citizens must play a part in the future of journalism written by **Chloe Forbes**

Men in Crisis | Can Manufacturing Revive Men’s Search for Meaning? written by **Jeff Bloodworth**

On the Waterfront | Leonard Tomczak: Erie YMCA Legend written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. David Frew**

'I've Seen This Before' | Civil society — the lifeblood of democracy or just an illusion? written by **Lena Surzhko-Harned**

The Wider World | Trust, but Verify written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Diane Chido**

Truth in Love | Rosa Parks: Resolute Leader America Needed written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Parris Baker**

JES Mission: The Jefferson was founded to stimulate community progress through education, research, and publications. Its mission also includes a commitment to operate in a nonpartisan, nondenominational manner without a political or philosophical bias. As such, the Jefferson intends to follow the examined truth wherever it leads and is neither liberal nor conservative, Democratic nor Republican in philosophy or action. Our writers' work reflects their own views.