“This book will appeal to everyone who believes that we can learn about others and the world by reading fiction and studying great authors. Drawing on new work in cognition sciences, Alsup pushes back against Common Core State Standards typically interpreted and implemented to replace literary studies with mechanistic, less valuable, and less enjoyable approaches to learning. Present and future English language arts teachers will especially want to read this book. It is likely to become a standard in university courses in the teaching of English.”

—Allen Webb, Western Michigan University, USA

Taking a close look at the forces that affect English education in schools—at the ways literature, cognitive science, the privileging of the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines, and current educational policies are connected—this timely book counters with a strong argument for the importance of continuing to teach literature in middle and secondary classrooms. The case is made through critical examination of the ongoing “culture wars” between the humanities and the sciences, recent research in cognitive literary studies demonstrating the power of narrative reading, and an analysis of educational trends that have marginalized literature teaching in the USA, including standards-based and scripted curricula. The book is distinctive in presenting both a synthesis of arguments for literary study in the middle and high school, and sample lesson plans from practicing teachers exemplifying how literature can positively influence adolescents’ intellectual, emotional, and social selves.

Part I, “What Literature Can Do,” is an overview of the positive effects literature can have on readers, as determined and explored in research and scholarship. Chapters in this section conclude with a sample lesson from a secondary school teacher who has taught literature in ways that encourage adolescent growth in both intellectual and emotional/social domains. More examples of such lessons and activities are provided in the Appendices at the end of the book.

Part II, “Challenges to Literary Study,” offers more detail and discussion about some of the barriers to continued literature teaching in our schools, namely standards-based education or education that privileges teacher and school accountability over student learning. A case study of one school exemplifies these barriers and its teachers’ struggles to teach literature in a school focused on standardizing daily lessons to meet the objectives of the Common Core State Standards.

Part III, “Reviving the Secondary School Literary Experience,” revisits the arguments that open the book and takes them to the next level, addressing such questions as how English teacher educators can best prepare new secondary school literature teachers, why literary study may be particularly important to adolescents and why, given all the evidence, the study of literature may be more important now than ever.

Janet Alsup is Professor of English Education, Purdue University, USA.