

# Why Teju Cole's 'Open City', published ten years ago, is a liberal arts and humanities novel

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Teju Cole. | [Michael Coghlan / CC-BY-2.0](#)

I'd heard much of Nigerian-American author Teju Cole's *Open City* almost exactly ten years ago when it was published. As a student in New York, who went for long walks every other day on Morningside, Manhattan, and Amsterdam avenues I could immediately relate to Julius – the protagonist of Nigerian and Belgian extraction in this seemingly plotless story – once I dug into the library copy from the university outside Delhi where I work in the liberal arts and humanities department, seven years after the book dropped into the world.

*Open City* has remained with me, and not only because of the words in it. The Faber & Faber British edition had a bird embossed on the cover; the title burnt in yellow against the thick black of the cover and jacket. The hefty pages demanded a hard hold of the book. As if harmonising with the contents of the story, its pages wore a look between brown and beige, giving off an oldish book smell. As an object, it seemed a visual and tactile experience. I kept returning to examine the cover and the back flap, that too seemed a part of the story.

I've taught in the liberal arts and humanities programme at the university I work at for many years. I'm now disposed to think – given the time it took me to absorb *Open City* and pause every other page to savour its slow music and measured pace – that it's the contemporary English-knowing world's strongest testament in literary fiction for advancing a "liberal arts and humanities" sensibility. What does this mean?

## Tenderness of majesty

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*Open City* has a form where the novelist or the narrator (even if somewhat slippery like Julius) takes immense interest in chasing certain chains of experience as self-fulfilling ends. Invariably, and broadly, these concern subjects encompassing the arts, humanities, and social sciences. So, this book holds you with its studied detours into New York's urban boroughs, quiet evocations of a mix of its museums, birdlife, parks, and art galleries. It meditates on classical music, photography, and race relations. It plunges into issues of identity, the individual's relationship (or lack of) with his ancestries. It counters truisms and generalities over the post-9/11 world, urban crime, world cinema, the Chinese immigrant experience of America, or Belgium's past actions on Africa. It expends ages of time unpacking the many layers of classic American paintings or readying one to the apogee of Gustav Mahler's finest work.

Julius's journeys are without and within. In this novel, you find literature, history, philosophy, the fine arts, the visual arts, music, politics, sociology, economics, architecture, psychology, and gender studies, all hanging together as in a baroque painting. The older term for this kind of book is the "novel of ideas", but *Open City* is extremely particular in drawing ideas about the arts alone. In the lexicon of the liberal arts, humanities and social sciences, Julius has a "cross-disciplinary" approach to his personal experience of life and reading all manner of "high-brow" texts.

While Julius reads, walks, thinks, and converses with people in New York, Brussels, on a flight, or recalls growing up in Nigeria, *Open City* shows with the tenderness and delicacy of its majesty, how a viewer's gaze is fixed, a literary awareness shaped, or an ear attuned, to the sensory riches of the world. Cole is deft with gazing and capturing the emotional resonance of prolonged staring at paintings, parachutes, buildings, objects, and bringing personal or literary connections to his present situation. He is an aesthete of listening and aurally perusing the sounds of the everyday.

*Open City* is not for the easily bored reader, for Cole aims to alchemise ennui into art. It anticipates a language-loving reader wanting to know more of the artistic references Julius makes every other page and reads around them. Strangely, *Open City* doesn't hold forth on the culinary or the gastronomical, an absence that I found odd in a story that made the human senses its leitmotif.

## Aesthetic awareness

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Reviewers across the Atlantic have called Julius a flaneur, but mostly, he seems a savant. The acclaimed novelist and teacher Giles Foden in his [perspicacious review](#) for *The Guardian* spotted some moments when Julius was winging it about music: For literature students, it's an unmissable moment when a fabulous novel finds its best critic – and ally. Earlier, titling his review of the book in *The New Yorker* as "[The Arrival of Enigmas](#)", noted critic James Wood said Cole updated us on a VS Naipaul leitmotif: Of the ex-colonised outsider adapting to the West.

Yet these appraisals don't explain him fully, for Julius is immensely interested and, for the most part, frighteningly discerning of his likes and peeves, which are ideas within the liberal arts and humanities spectrum, and the human being as a part of them. The way he assembles and filters experience gives us 280-and-odd pages that are an attempt to say the world is an outstandingly enriching enchanting, beautiful place – but if only one could let the world fully in, however uneasy that may be. What else is the passion for reading and observing but a way to equip the individual to appreciate beauty, truth and get to know themselves?

By this point I was convinced that Julius (who is finishing a fellowship in psychiatry) had become a liberal arts student over time. His myriad interests pointed to the success of the liberal arts sensibility, in generating a persona with a viewpoint of such aesthetic awareness that examined almost every aspect of the human experience as a kind of text to be conversed with, argued against, critiqued, compared-and-contrasted with.

Wood said in his review that *Open City* was one of those rare contemporary novels that granted serious space to the arcana of critical theory without mockery, as it was an essential part for that moment in the novel. Despite all the warts of this form of education and way of seeing, Julius presents the triumph of a liberal arts temperament. Undoubtedly, being and becoming Julius is a form of elitism, and in episodes and conversations when this privilege is checked, this nondramatic tale gains drama.

### **Beautiful pursuit of solitude**

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Still, there is a startling and unsettling incident, without which there is no *Open City*. It weights this apparently plotless story with an anchor. Julius's mugging earlier on, pales in comparison with the curveball that stumps us four-fifths into the story. The long, slow cultural banquet and the unexpected turn of non-events and semi-events lead up to an epiphany and recollection.

I felt enraged with *Open City* for I had identified so much with spry Julius that I couldn't see how he couldn't figure out a "blind spot" about himself. Was this purposeful? (Cole published another book later called *Blind Spot*. The "blind spot" perhaps is critical to Cole's art. The limitations of knowledge and self-knowledge are an important idea within the liberal arts. It leads one to accept and appreciate the ambiguous, the contingent within human experience.)

Since I'd begun seeing Julius as a liberal arts lover, the way the epiphany was conveyed made me see it as an attack on a type of bookish person (myself). It made me wonder about the persona of the liberal arts student – the espouser of the generalist viewpoint as a category of the human family. I felt disconcerted, for the big reveal ran the risk of characterising Julius, and perhaps, the liberal arts student, in a certain fashion.

Seduced by Cole's prose, I felt, what was one to make of all the riches and quiet pleasures that were granted us before? Should one judge everything in the book through the prism of the revelation?

Among other things, *Open City* makes the pursuit of solitude look rewarding and beautiful. There is a one-night stand early in the book, but otherwise, Julius chooses being by himself. For him, it is needed to sustain his love for the liberal arts. (Cole has dedicated the book to the “protector of my solitude”.)

But what’s the real reason for Julius, or liberal arts students, being who they are? How are we to understand the epiphany – and in doing so, how do we see and judge the lifelong student of the liberal arts? These queries nudge us towards the philosophical precipice that Cole had been leading us up to without our knowing: Joyce’s dictum of “silence, exile and cunning”, appear to hold a lot of importance for Cole.

To convey the turmoil within Julius, Cole has him attend a Mahler concert. Through the book we saw shades of WG Sebald, John Berger, VS Naipaul, Marcel Proust, James Joyce. Now we feel Fellini, Bergman or Kieslowski have arrived on the page. Julius is taking to art to cope with what has happened. He is shown doing things he’s been doing all along but now we get his reason for it: “It was dark” are the novel’s haunting final words.

We don’t know how to make sense of Julius or the novel anymore. If someone so observant as Julius has deceived himself into not seeing something about himself, what is all the learning for then?

Yet the reader in me has wanted to continue knowing Julius. What must have happened to him and others ten years on? He who made watching, solitude and learning, look so fulfilling. He who appeared to say with his interests and behaviour that each second of life, even at its worst, offers sensory riches that the true liberal arts student must not let go of, by not watching, or not articulating or not putting into order, or into some frame.

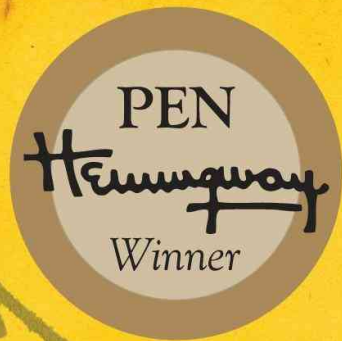
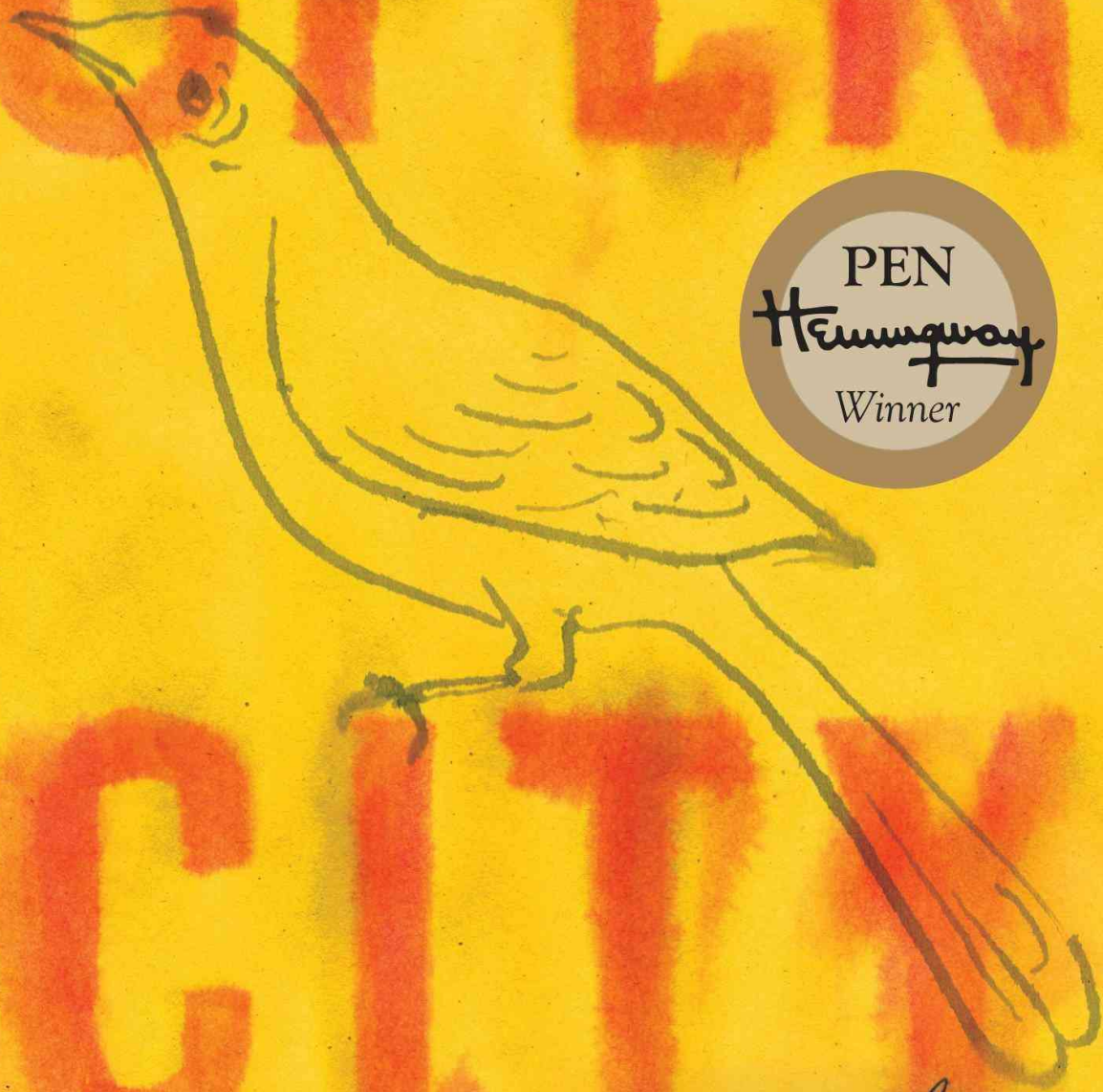
For these reasons, I wish *Open City* were required reading in college syllabi to understand the world through the genre of the novel. Having identified much with Julius, how I wish it didn’t end the way it did

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