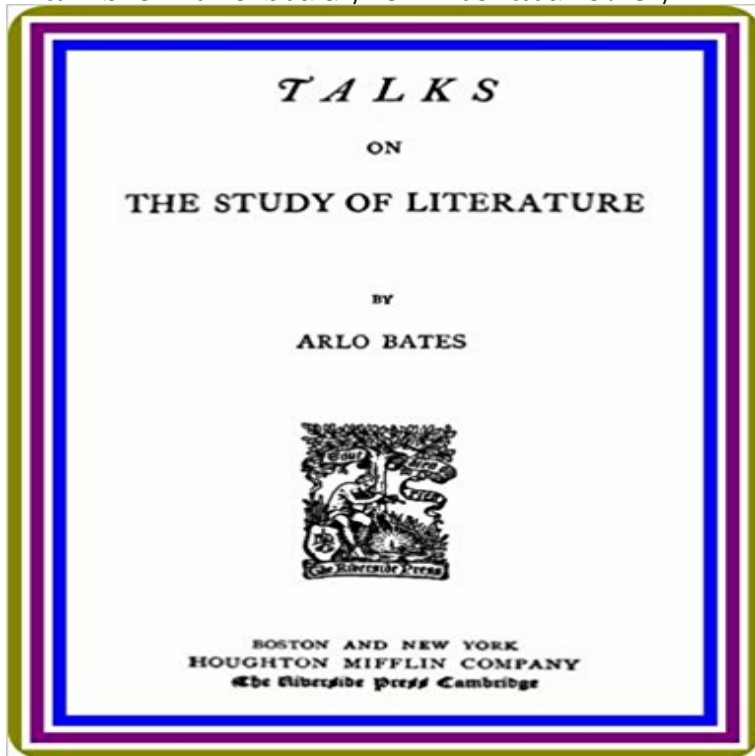


Talks on the study of literature. by Arlo Bates



Talks on the study of literature., by Arlo Bates
This volume is made up from a course of lectures delivered under the auspices of the Lowell Institute in the autumn of 1895. These have been revised and to some extent rewritten, and the division into chapters made; but there has been no essential change.

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1. WHAT LITERATURE IS
As all life proceeds from the egg, so all discussion must proceed from a definition. Indeed, it is generally necessary to follow definition by definition, fixing the meaning of the terms used in the original explanation, and again explaining the words employed in this exposition. I once heard a learned but somewhat pedantic man begin to answer the question of a child by saying that a lynx is a wild quadruped. He was allowed to get no further, but was at once asked what a quadruped is. He responded that it is a mammal with four feet. This of course provoked the inquiry what a mammal is; and so on from one question to another, until the original subject was entirely lost sight of, and the lynx disappeared in a maze of verbal distinctions as completely as it might have vanished in the tangles of the forest primeval. I feel that I am not wholly safe from danger of repeating the experience of this well-meaning pedant if I attempt to give a definition of literature. The temptation is strong to content myself with saying: Of course we all know what literature is. The difficulty which I have had in the endeavor to frame a satisfactory explanation of the term has convinced me,

however, that it is necessary to assume that few of us do know, and has impressed upon me the need of trying to make clear what the word means to me. If my statement seem insufficient for general application, it will at least show the sense which I shall give to literature in these talks. In its most extended signification literature of course might be taken to include whatever is written or printed; but our concern is with that portion only which is indicated by the name polite literature, or by the imported term belles-lettres, both antiquated though respectable phrases. In other words, I wish to confine my examination to those written works which can properly be brought within the scope of literature as one of the fine arts.

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