

These two elegiac chapters serve as bookends for 21 essays on individual authors whom Bloom believes most important "for both their sublimity and their representative nature." By focusing on individual writers, Bloom can put into practice his famous theory of literary influence. Indeed, what is best about *The Western Canon* is the way Bloom reads the writers against one another—ingeniously, persuasively, implausibly. Writers go at each other in these pages head-to-head like sumo wrestlers. The most powerful figure with whom they all must contend is Shakespeare—for Bloom, "the largest writer we ever will know," his hero, idol, god, the Western canon all compact in a single vessel. This book is Bloom's homage to Shakespeare, and one likes to imagine the playwright responding in kind: "Here is a reader! When comes such another?" When indeed?

### Philosophy & Religion

**NET OF MAGIC:** Wonders and Deceptions in India. By Lee Siegel. Univ. of Chicago. 455 pp. \$60 (hardback); \$19.95 (paper)

Twice as sonorous as "abracadabra" is the invocation that begins an Indian magic show: *yantru-mantru-jalajala-tantru*. In India the changing phenomena of daily life are considered to be "maya" or illusion, and so a book about the profession of illusion, or magic, promises to be a rather revealing affair. *Net of Magic* indeed makes a good introduction to contemporary India because it captures so zestfully that country's noises, odors, sensory feel, tumult, and contradictions. Siegel, professor of religion at the University of Hawaii and the author of *Laughing Matters: Comic Tradition in India* (1987), describes, for example, riding out to the Delhi slum where street magicians reside, and his prose rhythms duplicate the swelter and back-and-forth rocking of the taxi: "The hot and dusty breath of the earth, the pant and moan of it, and the hot and rude rub of the sky, the growl and grunt of it, were inescapable."

The book has no shortage of magic. Small boys are decapitated and their heads grow

back, mango trees spring up instantly from dust, pigeons turn into pigs. But for those who want to believe in a world of wonders—bad news. Asked by Siegel if there was *real* magic, one magician answered, "No, but I shouldn't ever say it. I earn a living only if people believe... at least in the possibility of miracles. But there are no real miracles, and all the holy men and god-men, Sai Baba and Jesus and other men like them, are just doing tricks, tricks that I can do, that I can teach you to do." This relation between magic and miracle, between staged spectacles and genuine religion, is at the heart of Siegel's investigation. When Paul Brunton wrote *A Search in Secret India* (1934), that country was synonymous in the Western imagination with everything mystical, mysterious, occult. A half-century later, *Net of Wonders* makes India seem the last place to look for religion, a country where, for foreigners, religion is a tourist attraction—with Hinduism as India's Disneyland—and for Indians, a set of mundane rituals without epiphany, without *frisson*.

Siegel's argument, however, is that, while the miracles of religion and the allure of magic may be false scientifically, they can be "true" aesthetically, in their emotional appeal. He



wants to recreate that emotional experience of Indian magic for Western readers, and his approach resembles Robert-Houdin's *Confessions of a Prestidigitator* (1859), in which the famous magician wrote, "My audience shall be my reader, my stage this book." Like a good magician, Siegel also keeps changing per-

spectives, from analyzing ancient Sanskrit and Pali texts to reporting his own travels with Indian magicians to writing fictional short stories about their inner world. "As I leave the plane and make my way toward the counter—Indian Immigration and Customs," so his narrative starts, "I sense that the magic show is

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about to begin." Indeed, Siegel's subsequent experiences in India, such as procuring airline tickets to Kashmir when none were available, often mirror the "wonders and deceptions" in an Indian magic show. Eventually he succeeds in transferring the fascination and complexity of the magic show from itinerant conjurers on dusty street corners to the workings of the society surrounding them. A study of magic becomes a way of understanding, and experiencing, contemporary India.

Earlier belletrists aimed only to think well and write charmingly. *Net of Magic* represents a newer academic genre, in which the scholar leaves his desk and does original field research, and then returns not with a monograph but with literature.

### *Contemporary Affairs*

**THE BELL CURVE: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life.** By Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray. Free Press. 845 pp. \$30

*The Bell Curve* is not the seminal, groundbreaking work its authors suggest. Nor is it the semilunatic, right-wing tract that some critics have charged. Herrnstein (who died last year) was a psychologist at Harvard University and Murray is the author of *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950-1980* (1986); together they have written a sober critique of "the ideology of equality." They argue—not so controversially—that the present, singleminded leveling in *all spheres* is a far, far different thing from the Founders' notion of the moral equality of all men.

Were this all their argument, Herrnstein and Murray would be indistinguishable from a dozen other conservative commentators. What makes *The Bell Curve* the most controversial book of the year is that it places human intelligence at the center of social-policy debate. Herrnstein and Murray have aroused a furor by reviving evidence that black Americans, as a group, score consistently and considerably lower on IQ tests than whites. They further argue that IQ tests measure something real and are

not culturally biased. Finally, they conclude that society's organized efforts to raise IQ scores, such as the Head Start program, have been dismal failures. At this point, Herrnstein and Murray may begin to sound a bit like two good old boys making racial slurs and then claiming they are only reciting the facts of nature.

Yet underneath their sometimes smarmy tone they present an argument that is more qualified, more ambiguous, and not without its ironies. Although they believe that intelligence has a genetic component, they point out that cognitive abilities are hardly immutable. There has been, for example, "substantial" narrowing of the black-white gap in IQ scores in the past 20 years. Indeed, Americans generally are scoring better than ever: "On the average," Herrnstein and Murray write, "whites today may differ in IQ from whites, say, two generations ago as much as whites today may differ from blacks today." That admission could be read as an implicit endorsement of welfare state policies, and in fact the authors do endorse such proposals as a modest income redistribution through increased earned income tax credits.

But ultimately Herrnstein and Murray want to draw the curtain on the welfare state. If they concede that certain societal changes—from the democratization of higher education to better nutrition—have equalized environmental influences and created a meritocracy in America, they also argue that all such possible improvements have by now been accomplished. Any further efforts, they argue, will come up against genetically determined differences in intelligence. This is a point many Americans will not want to hear—certainly not black Americans. Perhaps the case for unchangeable disparities in group intelligence could be made without much ado in, say, Sweden, but to argue thus in a racially diverse, ethnically divided America is like lighting a stick of dynamite. Indeed, if the "science" of *The Bell Curve* has proved debatable, its policy recommendations, under a varnish of sophistication, come close to being politically naive. Though the authors maintain that the welfare state cannot bring us equality, they suggest nothing else for dealing with the entrenched inequality they have described.