

as “simply the result of [an] incongruity between a rapidly evolving cultural world and our evolutionary heritage.” The creation and interpretation of literature, he maintains, are part of a “gene-culture coevolution, a positive feedback system,” in which genes set the basic rules for culture while “cultural practice creates selective pressure for the survival of certain genes.” In the imagined realm of literature, it seems, humans can test out various possible survival strategies.

Handicapped by its narrow focus and required technical background, evolutionary criticism is unlikely to become a full-fledged academic “movement,” Gillespie thinks. But the evolutionary critics may at least do some good by championing some things that are currently out of vogue in the academic literary world, such as “the scientific method, rational analysis, and the idea that there is something approaching an objective, knowable reality.”

## A New Turn in Chinese Painting

“China’s Other Cultural Revolution” by Charles Ruas, in *Art in America* (Sept. 1998), 575  
Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012.

Once the Communists came to power in China in 1949, heavy-handed socialist realism in art was in, and traditional Chinese calligraphy, or ink painting (*guohua*), was out. During the calamitous Cultural Revolution of 1966–76, Mao Zedong’s regime went much further, trying to wipe out all traditional Chinese approaches to art, in favor of militant propaganda conforming to Mao’s every exalted thought.

“The Chinese people,” notes Ruas, a writer and critic, “learned to loathe and fear traditional Chinese forms,” since to do otherwise was to risk one’s life. But since the early 1980s, as the hold of communist ideology has weakened and the regime has relaxed its grip on the economy, Chinese officials—turning to their nation’s Confucian heritage for ideological strength in the face of Western decadence—have made an about-face, encouraging the traditional style of art.

“Suddenly,” Ruas writes, “ink painting was sanctioned for its ‘Chineseness’ but shorn of its historical and ideological context, its roots in the ideal of the Chinese literati, those elite masters of calligraphy and painting with their high Confucian moral and intellectual standards, and their sense of history.”

Surveying the modern part of the massive historical survey of Chinese art exhibited last year by the Guggenheim museums in New York and Spain, Ruas notes that the neo-traditionalist ink and watercolor paintings done since 1980 “hark back . . . to the experimentation of the Shanghai school which began in the last century and lasted through World War

II.” Ironically, this school was not free of Western influence: just the opposite, in fact. In the mid-19th century, Ren Xiong (1823–57) and other artists in the wealthy, Westernized port city of Shanghai incorporated Western influences in both technique and subject matter into traditional Chinese brush-and-ink painting. The Western taste for realism is seen in such works as an undated scroll self-portrait by Ren Xiong, and in his brother Ren Yi’s individualist portrait of a fellow artist in *The Shabby Official* (1888).

The calligraphy of today’s neo-traditionalists “can be powerful and expressive,” Ruas says, “but the subject matter often reiterates time-worn political clichés, as illustrated by Shi Dawei’s 1993 portrait of Mao standing next to an old peasant.” Other artists, showing a strong Western influence, “plunge directly into



Self-Portrait (undated) by  
Ren Xiong

abstract compositions with great technical mastery.”

Missing from the Guggenheim exhibition (mounted with the cooperation of the Chinese Ministry of Culture), Ruas points out, was the work of the more rebellious contemporary Chinese artists from the gen-

eration that knew the Cultural Revolution and the 1989 massacre in Tiananmen Square. Boldly experimenting with modern techniques, they “continue in the spirit of those artists who, earlier in the century, employed oil painting to communicate their alienation and protest.”

## *No Biography, Please*

To the disinterested reader, John Updike writes in the *New York Review of Books* (Feb. 4, 1999), literary biography may “perform useful work.” For the novelist, however, it’s a different story. Updike explains his “decided reluctance to be, were I ever invited, a subject” of a literary biography.

*A fiction writer’s life is his treasure, his ore, his savings account, his jungle gym, and I marvel at the willingness of my friends William Styron and Joyce Carol Oates to cooperate in their recently published biographies. As long as I am alive, I don’t want somebody else playing on my jungle gym—disturbing my children, quizzing my ex-wife, bugging my present wife, seeking for Judases among my friends, rummaging through yellowing old clippings, quoting in extenso bad reviews I would rather forget, and getting everything slightly wrong.*

## *Who Reads?*

“Who Reads Nonfiction?” by Beth Luey, in *Publishing Research Quarterly* (Spring 1998), P.O. Box 2423, Bridgeport, Conn. 06608-0423.

Millions of Americans have bought Stephen Hawking’s *Brief History of Time* (1988) and other high-profile works of serious nonfiction (some of them, like Hawking’s tome, all but impenetrable). Some big hits, such as Carl Sagan’s *Cosmos* (1980), have been glossy coffee-table books tied to public TV shows; others, such as Allan Bloom’s *Closing of the American Mind* (1987), just happened to strike a cultural nerve. But such stunning successes give a misleading impression of the dimensions of the audience for nonfiction, says Luey, director of the Scholarly Publishing Program at Arizona State University. All the regular readers of serious nonfiction in America, she estimates, form a population only about the size of Arizona’s.

Much less is known about nonfiction readers than about readers of “quality” fiction, Luey observes. Folks who read literature and general fiction number about 16 million. A 1989 study showed that 59 percent are female, and 49 percent have attended college. Forty percent are in their thirties or for-

ties, and almost as many of the rest are younger as are older.

Readers of serious nonfiction are a much smaller band: no more than four million, by Luey’s rough estimate. And the realistic maximum potential audience for “a solidly written, well-promoted book” is probably no more than, say, 20 percent of that total, counting both cloth and paperback sales. “Only illustrated books directly linked to television series are likely to have hardcover sales of a million or more,” she says. The usual initial print run of an unknown author’s first trade book is 5,000 to 10,000 copies.

Luey’s informal research (including questionnaires returned by 53 people) suggests the nonfiction audience is, like the fiction one, about three-fifths female, but generally “better educated, and wealthier.” The nonfiction audience also may be much grayer than the fiction one: only 13 percent of her respondents were 35 or younger.

Her survey participants “are avid readers by any definition,” Luey notes. More than