

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

half read 30 books or more a year, and more than a fourth read at least a book a week. And her respondents have a simple solution to the

problem of “poor writing (variously defined as condescending, wordy, and pompous)”: when they encounter it, they stop reading.

OTHER NATIONS

Has Democracy Come to Ethiopia?

A Survey of Recent Articles

Since the murderous dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam took flight in 1991, ending 17 years of communist rule, Ethiopia has gone democratic, at least in appearance. It now boasts a written constitution, a three-branch federal system based on nine (ethnic) states, an elected national parliament, political parties, and an independent press. Does reality match the appearance? Paul B. Henze, a Washington-based RAND Corporation consultant, maintains in the *Journal of Democracy* (Oct. 1998) that it does. Two other scholars, invited to comment by the journal’s editors, accuse him of a whitewash.

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, born nearly four years ago, “now operates within a constitutional and legal framework that possesses all the universally recognized characteristics of a democratic system,” says Henze, who has written several books about Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa region.

True, the political process is dominated by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi’s Ethiopian People’s Democratic Revolutionary Front (EPDRF), rooted in the northern province of Tigre, whose military forces overthrew Mengistu’s regime. But opposition leaders have simply declined to participate in the political process, both during the transition to the new republic and since, Henze says. When elections were held for the new 525-member parliament in 1995, most opposition parties refused to put up candidates. In 1993, many opposition politicians strongly objected to holding the referendum in the province of Eritrea that resulted in its independence, after three decades of civil war.

Efforts by foreign embassies, pro-democracy organizations, and others to encourage opposition leaders to join the political process have only strengthened their “perva-

sive rejectionism,” Henze says. Unfortunately, Ethiopians’ historical experience “has not taught [them] to grasp the concept of constructive criticism.”

International human rights organizations have condemned the EPDRF for various alleged abuses, including the detention of thousands of militants, some of them allegedly tortured, and the arrests of dissenting journalists. But Henze argues that injustices are “inevitable” in Ethiopia’s circumstances. “What is noteworthy is that the country’s leaders have resorted so seldom and so briefly to repressive actions and that they have consistently maintained their commitment to creating a more open, tolerant, humane, and prosperous society.”

The critics have focused, for the most part, on conflicts involving intellectuals in the capital city, Addis Ababa, Henze says. The issues are of little importance to most of Ethiopia’s 59 million people, 85 percent of whom are peasants. Moreover, the interest of the vast majority in opposition activity has waned, he says, “as the pace of recovery, reform, educational expansion, and economic development has accelerated.” Ethiopia’s gross domestic product grew at an average rate of 6.9 percent between 1992 and 1997, when production of coffee, its chief export, reached an all-time high. “Most elements of the opposition continue to avoid participation in elections in order to avoid exposing their lack of support among the electorate,” Henze believes.

Richard Joseph, a political scientist at Emory University, Atlanta, charges that Henze has distorted the idea of democracy to justify “what are at best semi-authoritarian practices.” Joseph cites a 1998 review by Human Rights Watch which charged that by sponsoring 16 ethnic political parties, the