

to the Beatles, and none at all to those home-grown phenomena, Ealing film comedies such as *The Lavender Hill Mob* (1950). By the time he arrives at the publicity-driven consumer culture of the 1980s, Strong's disillusionment is palpable. He wonders what resonance Milton will have in a country that can already be defined as post-Christian. For all his innate conservatism, though, Strong does not idealize every aspect of yesteryear. National greatness and artistic creativity do not always coincide, as he notes in his overview of the closing years of the 19th century.

Strong's prose sometimes falls short of its usual elegance, and he can falter when he ventures beyond the visual and decorative arts. He wrongly asserts that W. H. Auden emigrated to the United States in 1934. Not many admirers of that quintessentially English novelist, Anthony Trollope, would agree that *The Warden* (1855) is his masterpiece; *Barchester Towers* (1857) and half a dozen other titles seem much more likely candidates.

But Strong makes an opinionated tour guide—a rarity in these days of committee-speak. Individual chapters allotted to representative figures such as William of Wykeham, Horace Walpole, and Kenneth Clark himself illustrate the ebb and flow of values over the centuries. The lavish use of illustrations and the easy, conversational tone are in some ways reminiscent of Sir Ernst Gombrich's magisterial narrative *The Story of Art* (1950). Just as Gombrich's work was originally conceived as an introduction for younger readers, so Strong provides a robust overview in which text and image proceed hand in hand.

—Clive Davis

### **HOW TO READ AND WHY.**

By Harold Bloom. Scribner. 283 pp.  
\$25

Bloom is mad for Shakespeare and makes no secret of his passion, so he would probably not mind being called a Falstaff among critics. He is all messy emotion and mood swings—elation one moment at the powers of great literature, despair the next at the diminished ability of contemporary audiences to read it properly. For him, literary criticism should not be the bloodless theorizing that currently chills the air in classrooms. It should be pragmatic and personal, making what is implicit in a book “finely explicit.” Criticism should tease out the art and

the emotion in texts and explain what each has to do with the other.

In this book, Bloom, who holds professorships at both Yale University and New York University, takes his case directly to the general reader. Each section explores a particular genre—short fiction, poetry, plays, and novels—and uses specific works to follow through on the promise of the title. How should we read this material, and why should we bother? Through synopsis, exhortation, ingenuity, and autobiographical asides, Bloom answers the questions. (The asides, it must be said, are thoroughly intimidating: He memorized poetry for personal consolation at seven, read *Moby Dick* at nine, and has been haunted by a stanza from a Hart Crane poem since he was 10.)

The surprising thing about Bloom's answers, his how and why of reading, is how unsurprising they are—not that they're in the least wrong or objectionable, but that they're entirely traditional. Bloom advocates what teenagers were taught about literature as a matter of course 50 years ago in sensible high schools: We should read attentively and without prejudice or preconception. We should read to strengthen the self, to understand others, and to learn about the world. Of course, in this age of destabilizing theory, tradition has the force of radical defiance.

Alas, much of the book is synopsis, and synopses of unfamiliar stories, novels, and poems are about as interesting as the color slides from a relative's vacation. Worse, the summaries are often maladroit. The book is also far too repetitive, as if intended to be read as it appears to have been written, in fits and starts.

Bloom succeeds, though, in making connections and reading brilliantly across genres and centuries. He has exquisite taste and judgment. He carries whole libraries in his head, as well as a prodigious store of textually driven opinions. For the initiated, the book will be an opportunity to confirm or reconsider past judgments.

For the uninitiated, the book's principal virtue may be its table of contents, which argues neither how to read nor why, but plainly identifies what to read and whom. Bloom's favorite modern poets are Yeats, Lawrence, Stevens, and Hart Crane. Among the novelists he admires are Cervantes, Proust, Dickens, Dostoyevsky, James, Faulkner, and others of that long-established and unassailable stature (and Philip Roth and Cormac McCarthy in

our day). If a reader has time for a single author only, then Shakespeare's the one, hands down, for, in Bloom's view, he has taught us nothing less than how to be fully human.

The religion of solitary and committed reading, undertaken for aesthetic pleasure and personal reward, with faith in language and regard for the toiling author, is threatened

by the agnosticism of theory and the idol of visual literacy. Bloom is a high priest of the old order, and the threat, in his view, may well be mortal. If the temple comes down all about him, he may be too absorbed in a poem to notice. His devotion sets an example that will survive the lapses in this book.

—James Morris

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