

## ARTS & LETTERS

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### *THE WARDEN OF ENGLISH: The Life of H. W. Fowler.*

By Jenny McMorris. Oxford Univ. Press. 320 pp. \$27.50

I think of the world as I wish it were, with its hedonism tempered, its courage roused, its greed eliminated, its love of truth multiplied. In that world, Henry Watson Fowler (1858–1933) would have been a hero—statues, tickertape parades, a knighthood, the whole bit. Fowler is, of course, the author of *Modern English Usage* (1926), a reference book that is revered even today, three-quarters of a century after it was first published, and revered even in America, which Fowler never visited and about whose idioms he freely admitted knowing little.

Fans of *MEU* will tell you that it's invaluable for more than the judgments it renders about the niceties of English. They treasure it as well for the character of Henry Fowler—for the way he brought that character to bear on his subject matter, teaching readers by example how to arrive at sound judgments of their own. For instance, he began a discussion of whether to set off slang words with such phrases as “so to speak” and “to use an expressive colloquialism”: “Surprise a person of the class that is supposed to keep servants cleaning his own boots, & either he will go on with the job while he talks to you, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, or else he will explain that the bootboy or scullery-maid is ill & give you to understand that he is, despite appearances, superior to boot-cleaning. If he takes the second course, you conclude that he is not superior to it; if the first, that perhaps he is. So it is with the various apologies . . . to which recourse is had by writers who wish to safeguard their dignity & yet be vivacious, to combine comfort with elegance, to touch pitch & not be defiled.”

To love *MEU* is to want to know more about its author, and now McMorris, the archivist for the Oxford English dictionaries, gratifies that desire. Fowler is full of surprises. A physical fitness buff, he for many years went for a daily run and a swim in the ocean. A shy and self-effacing scholar who was almost otherworldly about money, he did not marry until he was 50, but then entered into what was apparently a blissful marriage with a large, jolly chat-

terbox of a nurse. Half a dozen years later, the Great War broke out, and although Fowler was certainly overage and had plenty of other good reasons to stay home, he wangled his way into the army and then crusaded to be sent to the front lines.

McMorris lucidly recounts the facts of Fowler's life without grinding any particular ax about him. It's up to us to reconcile the man who ultimately composed passages such as the one quoted above with the man who, McMorris writes, mentioned his mother in print just once, telling “a rather foolish tale of his own snobbery as a schoolboy. He was embarrassed by her habit of trimming lamps and polishing glass in the house each morning, and felt that she did this because there were not enough servants to allow her to leave these things alone as, he believed, a lady should; she had explained to him that servants rarely did these small tasks satisfactorily. Only later did he understand the financial burden of educating eight children and that his mother needed to do some small jobs around the house.” Fowler extracted wisdom from his life—and we, too, have the chance to do so, with the help of McMorris's intelligent and winsome biography.

(Anyone tempted to dip into *Modern English Usage* itself should be warned that the stamp of Fowler's heart and mind is faint indeed in the heavily revised 1996 third edition, though it is clear in the 1965 second edition, which remains in print.)

—BARBARA WALLRAFF

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### *IT'S ONLY A MOVIE: Films and Critics in American Culture.*

By Raymond J. Haberski, Jr. Univ. Press of Kentucky. 264 pp. \$27.50

Ain't the past quaint. One of the charms of *It's Only a Movie* is the opportunity to experience again this poignant if banal truism. Erik Barnouw's excellent three-volume history of broadcasting lives in my memory chiefly as the place where I first read General David Sarnoff's pious assurance that network broadcasting was too important an undertaking to be turned over to “hucksters.”

Similarly, Haberski's survey of a century of film critics is enlivened by the goofy pleasure of discovering that Hugo Münsterberg, a pioneer thinker about the psychology of moviegoing, fretted in 1916 over the "trivializing influence of a steady contact with things which are not worth knowing." (As I write this, MTV turns 20.) One can also savor this nugget of auteur theory from writer Ferydoun Hoveyda in 1960: "The specificity of a cinematographic work lies in the form rather than in its content, in the *mise-en-scène* and not in the scenario or dialogue." On behalf of the Writers' Guild, grateful appreciation.

Haberski, a history professor at Marian College in Indianapolis, tells the story of American movies from the vantage point of the critics—at first the amateur and then the professional observers of the craft. It's a Rosencrantz-and-Guildenstern angle on how the industry struggled to elbow aside jazz and have itself recognized as America's only true art form. We move from the 1920s Chicago Motion Picture Commission hearings on film censorship to the rhetorical arena, where, in the 1950s and early 1960s, Pauline Kael and Andrew Sarris sparred over whether movies were Cinema. We revisit an era when the repeated viewing of the same movie was an act of scholarly love by film-besotted nerds, not just some teenage obsessive-compulsive behavior.

There's also a remarkable chapter on Theodore Dreiser's attempt to force Paramount to make a faithful adaptation of *An American Tragedy* (1925), and on the semifarcical lawsuit he filed when, oddly enough, the studio decided to go another way. Although the Dreiser story doesn't have much to do with criticism (he did enlist a "jury" of critics to watch Paramount's version and deride it for the edification of the judge), it can provide hours of pleasure in pondering which is funnier, artistic pretension or rag-trade philistinism.

The story Haberski tells has, in current Hollywood parlance, a good arc: Art critics despise movies, art critics begin to appreciate movies, art critics love movies to death, the concept of art disappears, and the critics become irrelevant. *Become* irrelevant? The author keeps hinting that the decline in the

salience of criticism is lamentable, as if film criticism has something of value to offer. Unfortunately, he never quite gets around to making the case that it does, whether by educating the public (early critics believed in elevating the taste of the masses—there's that quaintness again) or by exhorting the industry to follow its better angels (if you believe in that premise, I have some Internet stock I'd like to sell you).

I've been in and around the movie industry since I was seven years old, and I've yet to hear any practitioner discuss reviews or critics except in the context of whether they hurt or helped business. In an age when Spielberg and Lucas have redefined motion pictures as increasingly expensive recapitulations of childhood media experiences, the only reason movie critics don't feel totally superfluous is that the God of Media, in His infinite wisdom, invented television critics.

—HARRY SHEARER

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**SHIKSA GODDESS (OR, HOW I SPENT MY FORTIES): *Essays.***

By Wendy Wasserstein. Knopf.

235 pages. \$23

Wasserstein is allegedly a humorist, but the centerpiece of this collection of "essays," as her publisher boldly calls them, is a self-absorbed psychodrama about her grim struggle to conceive and give birth on the brink of the menopause. It's a case of life imitating art. After winning the Pulitzer Prize for *The Heidi Chronicles*, a play about a middle-aged, intellectual spinster who suddenly decides to become a single mother, Wasserstein, 40, decided to have a baby of her own.

At first she tried to do it the old-fashioned way. "I began studying fertility brochures and showed them to the man I was currently involved with." A real seductress, this girl. When, for some strange reason, her lover fled, she turned to sperm catalogs to find a partner in artificial insemination. But she flunked the fertility tests, so she took drugs to stimulate her flagging ovaries and tried in vitro with "an old and dear friend" as sperm donor. Fate, though, thwarted her again: When she had six egg-and-sperm combos on ice and a surrogate mother lined up, her