

conciliation, and he then recounts how the Western tradition took hold of those elements and ran with them for two and a half millennia. Comedy lost its breath when the absurdist playwrights of the 20th century—Jarry, Ionesco, Cocteau, and Beckett—substituted head for heart and willfully destroyed the classical forms. Whereas the great heroes of comedy take on the world with extravagant gestures and profligate language, Beckett's characters are all but immobile, out of words and out of energy.

Segal, a classicist, a best-selling novelist, and a veteran of the theater, movies, and television, is an engaging and immensely well-informed guide through the literature. He believes in the virtues of old-fashioned chronology, and his major figures take the stage comfortably on cue: Aristophanes, Euripides (the tragedian with a comic gene), Menander, Plautus, Terence, Machiavelli (between the preceding two comes a 1,500-year intermission during which comedy bides its time, "with steely churchmen preaching against the diabolical dangers of all stage plays"), Marlowe, Jonson, Shakespeare, and Molière. The book grows thick with Segal's summaries of individual plays. He's generous with his citations, and free—wanton even—with his translations.

Yet you may not laugh, or even smile, at much of what's here. That's because an awful lot of comedy travels about as well as six-year-old kids. Consider Menander, about whose plays, from the Greek comic theater of the late fourth century B.C., it was easier to be enthusiastic when we could also be wistful: We had only fragments of them until a complete play, *Dyskolos* (*The Grouch*), was found in 1957. The excuse then became that we had found the wrong play. And yet, for centuries, both Greeks and Romans thought Menander peerless. "O Menander and life," wrote one ancient commentator, "which of you is imitating which?"

In terms of influence, Segal deems Menander "arguably the single most important figure in the history of Western comedy." Why? Because he excelled at

putting realistic characters from life—young lovers, ill-tempered old fathers, cooks, soldiers, slaves, virgins, prostitutes—on stage, where they have remained, and multiplied, ever since. Menander's quintessential plot is motivated by love, usually at first sight, and driven by ingenious (mechanical?) complications and giddy (inane?) misunderstandings, such as rapes that aren't rapes after all because in due course the parties legally unite. The misunderstandings are resolved; a marriage occurs; progeny are in prospect. Sound familiar? Were he around today, Menander would be writing for TV. Not *The Simpsons* or *Malcolm in the Middle*; maybe *Dharma and Greg*.

Thank goodness Segal knows that a play lives a sheltered life, at best, on the page. His heart is on stage with the players, and he's not afraid to sink to—no, sink below—the jokey level of his subject. When tradesman Ben Jonson gives up manual labor for playwriting, Segal has him "throwing in the trowel." And near-miss incest is "Oedipus interruptus." Twice. It's not every scholar who can also do Mel Brooks.

—JAMES MORRIS

A COMPANY OF READERS:
*Uncollected Writings of W. H. Auden,
Jacques Barzun, and Lionel Trilling
from the Readers' Subscription and
Mid-Century Book Clubs.*

Ed. by Arthur Krystal. Free Press.
289 pp. \$26

In 1951, historian Jacques Barzun, literary critic Lionel Trilling, and poet W. H. Auden sat down together and formed a book club. The



(l. to r.) Jacques Barzun, W. H. Auden, and Lionel Trilling

Readers' Subscription (no relation to the current club of that name), later reconstituted as the Mid-Century Book Society, provided its members with recently published works of literature and history selected by these three celebrated men of letters. "Poets and Professors," wrote Auden, "and all those whose love of books exceeds their love of automobiles will welcome a chance to save in excess of 50 percent on their book purchases." Each month a newsletter carried an essay—enthusiastic, learned, personal—on the club's main selection, and 45 of those pieces have been collected here.

It's a wonderful book, as exciting and pleasurable a gathering of essays as anyone could ask for. Auden on the *Short Novels of Colette* must be one of the best book reviews ever written. He opens, "For years I resisted every recommendation to read her"; in the middle, cites a passage "so beautiful one could cry"; and ends with a ringing statement, after summing up Colette's virtues: "I am reminded of only one other novelist, Tolstoy." In a piece on Philip Larkin and Geoffrey Hill, Auden describes how he approaches a new book of poems, "from the part to the whole," looking for a single striking line, and then sampling a stanza, and finally perusing the complete volume, "comparing one poem with another," to discover whether the poet "possesses what I value most of all, a world and tone of voice of his own." Robert Graves, needless to say, displays the requisite distinctiveness, for "he has been one of the very few poets whose volumes I have always bought the moment they appeared."

As a man who lived by his pen, Auden might be expected to write engagingly, but, to my surprise, his partners from Columbia University are just as entertaining. Trilling could be earnest and pontifical in some of his literary criticism; in these pages, though, he writes boldly about the "obsessive, corrosive, desperate, highly psychologized" depictions of love in Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*, tosses out aperçus about the notion of will in classic fiction, and observes that the magic-realist stuff in Durrell may be "all storyteller's nonsense, the usual mystery of the East, but it consorts with my sense of the way people ought to be, in a novel at any rate—that is to say, objects of wonder." Elsewhere, Trilling reflects on Kenneth

Clark's *The Nude*, the work of James Baldwin, *Lord of the Flies*, *The Wind in the Willows*, Ingmar Bergman's films, and Kenneth Tynan's early theater criticism—and in every case the result is shrewd, unexpected, and sometimes moving. Who else would have remarked on the "Vergilian sadness" and "Lucretian desperateness" of *Ulysses* and *Remembrance of Things Past*?

Well, Barzun might have. Even 50 years ago, the author of last year's *From Dawn to Decadence* possessed a magisterial grasp of art, history, and just about everything cultural. Barzun suggests that Montaigne's motto "*Que sçay-je?*" might be slangily translated as "Don't be too sure," reminds us while praising Hugh Trevor-Roper's *Men and Ideas* that history should give "pleasure and instruction," notes that Erwin Panofsky's 15 pages on Dürer's famous print *Melencolia* are this distinguished scholar's "critical masterpiece," suggests that Molière's *Misanthrope* may be "the comedy of comedies," and proclaims Bernard Shaw "the greatest master of English prose since Swift."

Though one may quarrel with aspects of Krystal's introduction—like his teacher Barzun, he pretty much loathes academia's current focus on theory—one can have no argument with his taste or his punctilious scholarship. He provides a full bibliographical record of all the articles written for the newsletter by its editors, not just those included here. I only wish he had been able to reprint all 173 of them. I want to read Auden on C. S. Lewis's history of English literature in the 16th century, and Barzun on Spengler, and Trilling on Claude Lévi-Strauss. There really were giants on the earth in those days.

—MICHAEL DIRDA

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By Maud Lavin. MIT Press. 201 pp.
\$27.95

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By Steven Heller and Seymour Chwast.
Abrams. 240 pp. \$24.95

Lavin, who teaches art history and visual culture at the School of the Art Institute