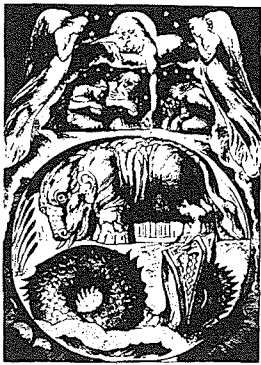


CURRENT BOOKS

FELLOWS' CHOICE

Recent titles selected and reviewed by Fellows of the Wilson Center

**THE GREAT CODE:
The Bible and Literature**
by Northrop Frye
Harcourt, 1982
261 pp. \$14.95



William Blake, Book of Job.
The Pierpont Morgan Library.

Academic literary criticism in America has lately become a mess. Current approaches to theory and explication—whether “structuralist” or “deconstructionist”—have evolved into jargon-ridden, tortuous disciplines, comprehensible, if at all, only to the initiated. What they all lack is a simultaneously intellectual and emotional response to literature.

For this reason alone Frye’s splendid book should be welcome; it is, to use one of the Biblical metaphors that Frye himself examines, water in the desert. For *The Great Code* reminds us that the only purpose of reading is, as Samuel Johnson observed, to render life joyful—or at least tolerable.

Frye, who teaches at the University of Toronto, has already produced two major works of modern criticism, *Fearful Symmetry* (1948), his study of William Blake, and *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). But *The Great Code* goes beyond his previous work in audacity, energy, and relevance. It is an attempt to see the

Bible—that odd, contradictory, frustrating, and indispensable book—as central to the entire Western conception of what literature is, what it is for, and what it is about. This effort involves recovering the Bible from narrowly literal readings, from partisan interpretations, and even from trivializing literary discussions. Rightly read, Frye argues, the Bible leads to the “open community of vision.” And to read correctly, one must consider the language and “all the structures, including literary ones, that language produces.”

Frye’s approach, here as in his other books, can loosely be called “mythic”; that is, he is concerned with the way written stories incarnate those archetypal tales that people have always told to give order to their lives. In chapters on Biblical language, myth, metaphor, and typology, he demonstrates how an intelligent reading of the “Great Code” leads us to understand more profoundly the shape and the sense of those minor

codes—all of western writing—that have been written under its shadow. He also explains how certain features of the Bible distinguish it from most other works of literature: The Bible's structure, for example, depends on its typological pattern—the relationship between Old Testament and New Testament events (e.g., Jonah's release from the belly of the whale prefigures Christ's resurrection)—not, as with most narratives, on a pattern of cause and effect.

In tracing the seven major "phases" of revelation in the Bible (creation, exodus, prophecy, wisdom, law, gospel, and apocalypse), Frye sketches a complex web of allusions, echoes, and images which illuminates not only the sacred text but also Dante, Milton, Blake, Dickens, and even such moderns as Wallace Stevens. Typically acute is his discussion of Kafka's *The Trial* as a revision and commentary on the Book of Job.

To be sure, this is not a work of original Biblical scholarship. Nor does it fit comfortably into any of the categories of contemporary literary theory. It is, rather, an articulate, witty, and moving meditation on the crucial text of Western culture.

—Frank McConnell (78)

CHINABOUND

A Fifty-Year Memoir
by John King Fairbank
Harper, 1982
480 pp. \$20

At a time when the fashion in analyzing China has once again swung from one extreme to another—this time from the breathless apologetics of the 1970s to the more recent accounts inspired by Chinese dissidents—Fairbank's memoir of his 50 years as America's foremost China specialist provides an unusually dispassionate perspective.

What motivates someone to devote his life to studying China? Describing his education (Exeter, Wisconsin, Harvard, Oxford) and his personal ambitions, Fairbank, the son of a South Dakota lawyer, tells us, "I was headed for the Establishment." Unlike some other Americans discussed in the book (such as anarchist writer Agnes Smedley) who were attracted to China because of a sense of commitment or personal mission, Fairbank says he decided to study China as a means to a successful career. "The state of China itself, about which I knew nothing, had little to do with my decision," he writes, with astonishing candor. "I was much more concerned about my own performance than about the state of the world." This may partly explain why this memoir reveals far less about China (where he lived in the '30s and '40s and to which he returned on many occasions) than about the man and his career.

The career was successful beyond imagination. During his 40 years as professor of history at Harvard, he built the library collections, wrote bibliographies, and trained graduate students who became leaders in the field of Asian studies. He served on all key organizing committees at the national level (e.g., the National Academy of Science-sponsored Joint