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REVIEW

Shut up and read: Ozick on why literature still matters

Reviewed by Julie Foster
Friday, June 9, 2006

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The Din in the Head

By Cynthia Ozick

IMAGES



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HOUGHTON MIFFLIN; 243 PAGES; \$24

Eleven years ago in an essay written for the Washington Post Book World, Cynthia Ozick mused on the difference between the communal acts of watching a play as opposed to the solitary act of reading. "Reading is the expression of a profound

social isolation," she wrote. "As in getting born or dying, you are obliged to do it alone; there is no other way."

Ozick, an author who claims to labor over her sentences, has written more than a dozen works of both fiction and nonfiction. She won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 2001 for her collection of essays "Quarrel & Quandary," and was a finalist for the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for her collection "Fame & Folly." Her most recent novel, "Heir to the Glimmering World," was selected as a New York Times Notable Book.

With publication of "The Din in the Head," Ozick revisits her notion expressing the necessity of aloneness for the act of reading plus takes a serious swipe at our media-drenched culture, one that harbors "the ignominy of a pervasive indifference to serious critical writing."

And though she claims these 18 essays may not be connected by any one single idea, Ozick concedes "they do not celebrate trivia or hunger after the lesser. ..." The range of authors she's chosen to discuss is broad. A short list of characters includes the young Tolstoy, Kipling, the poet Delmore Schwartz, Azar Nafisi, author of "Reading Lolita in Tehran," Sylvia Plath, Henry James, John Updike and Robert Alter, a professor of Hebrew and comparative literature.

In each essay, while enlightening readers on a specific author's work, she also produces an erudite narrative detailing why serious literature matters for both writer and reader.

Whether she is enlightening readers on Helen Keller's lifelong struggle to break free from the "iron pragmatists who meant to disinherit her, and everyone, of poetry," or analyzing the Oprah Winfrey-Jonathan Franzen fireworks over highbrow culture, Ozick's words are wonders.

Readers journey back through a cornucopia of vanished literary landmarks and time periods. For Ozick, the Village in New York City, where once Auden and Marianne Moore lived and worked, has been transformed into "a sort of performance arena nowadays, where the memory of a memory grows fainter and fainter..."

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She bemoans the passing of the high-art literary tradition where literature once ruled and critic Lionel Trilling was king. Today our culture is mute on works like Philip Roth's "Shop Talk: A Writer and his Colleagues and Their Work," which according to Ozick would have been an event as little as 50 years ago.

The disappearance of the once ubiquitous telephone booth, "those private cells for the whisperings of lovers and conspirators," is an apt reflection of the collective dilemma of our society. For Ozick, we are now victims of the life of the crowd, the archenemy of the inner life of letters.

Technology is one culprit. And "with the ratcheting up of technology, every machine turns out to be a crowd." The crowd, with its electronic tentacles, reduces the din in the head that Ozick describes as "this persistent internal hum ... that catches experience and draws it close, to be examined, interpreted, judged." Readers now swim in the murky backwash of information aimed at mass audiences, with little aimed at the individual. Instead, we're fed the empty calories of the chat room, blogs, films and trash television. Ozick fears the din in our heads has been so diminished that we are no longer able to decipher what's important and what isn't, and, worse yet, how to tell one from the other.

She leads the reader through the weary world of political correctness, deftly skewering the doctrines of hierarchy, conformism, multiculturalism and propaganda. Taking on the notion of hierarchy, which she admits is an "off-putting" notion for egalitarian Americans, she shines a much needed light on the back side of the concept.

"But hierarchy also points to the recognition of distinctions, and -- incontrovertibly -- the life of the intellect is perforce hierarchical: it insists that one thing is not the same as another thing."

So how to amp up the hum and cultivate a rich inner life? These essays provide tantalizing clues. Whether Ozick is lauding Saul Bellow or the "pleasurable rewards" of Kipling, she points the way out from underneath the ever increasing "verbal packets of information suitable to crowds."

With this collection she has given readers a gift. A small jewel box containing bits of glittering insight and wisdom, which can be mined again and again for directions to the lush world of an inner life. •

Julie Foster is a writer in Sacramento and a member of the National Book Critics Circle.

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