Cultural Amnesia: Necessary Memories from History and the Arts by Clive James

Worth Remembering

Forty years in the making, a new cultural canon that celebrates truth over hypocrisy, literature over totalitarianism. Echoing Edward Said’s belief that “Western humanism is not enough, we need a universal humanism,” the renowned critic Clive James presents here his life’s work. Containing over one hundred original essays, organized by quotations from A to Z, Cultural Amnesia illuminates, rescues, or occasionally destroys the careers of many of the greatest thinkers, humanists, musicians, artists, and philosophers of the twentieth century. In discussing, among others, Louis Armstrong, Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Franz Kafka, Marcel Proust, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, James writes, “If the humanism that makes civilization civilized is to be preserved into the new century, it will need advocates. These advocates will need a memory, and part of that memory will need to be of an age in which they were not yet
alive." Soaring to Montaigne-like heights, Cultural Amnesia is precisely the book to burnish these memories of a Western civilization that James fears is nearly lost.

**Personal Review: Cultural Amnesia: Necessary Memories from History and the Arts by Clive James**

CULTURAL AMNESIA is a compendium of intellectual criticism, very broadly construed. The subjects include history, politics, and the arts, but one of the lessons of the book is how artificial the boundaries of those disciplines are, that in truth they are intermixed. So I guess it is best to describe CULTURAL AMNESIA as a book of intellectual criticism of human life - for the most part, 20th-Century human life.

The bulk of the book consists of 106 chapters, each of which is devoted, at least nominally, to a different figure from history, politics, and the arts. Some of them are famous (e.g., Albert Camus, Duke Ellington, Adolf Hitler, Marcel Proust, and Margaret Thatcher); some are obscure, at least in this country (e.g., Ernst Robert Curtius, Ricarda Huch, and Pedro Henriquez Ureña). Although most are from the 20th Century, a few predate it (e.g., Sir Thomas Browne, Montesquieu, and Tacitus). Each of the chapters, in turn, has two parts. The second and the raison d'être for the book consists of one or more brief quotations from the figure in question with extended commentary from James that relates to the quotation(s), in one way or another and eventually if not immediately. (For example, the quotation that anchors the chapter on Franz Kafka is "How short life must be, if something so fragile can last a lifetime."). The first part of each chapter is a brief (one-or-two-page) profile of the person, which serves to set a context or frame for the more extended discussion that follows.

Clive James is very well-read, in five or more languages. Now 70, he must have been collecting quotations and working on this book for the better part of his life. It is extraordinarily wide-ranging and eclectic. But it does have certain themes or preoccupations. The principal object of the book is to champion humanism and liberal democracy. Thus, James's primary preoccupation is with those who sponsored fascism and communism in their various manifestations, those who turned a blind eye or were taken in or were hypocritical, and those who resisted, criticized, or heroically endured totalitarianism during the 20th Century. A second theme deals with intellectual and artistic integrity. A third preoccupation has to do with whether, in evaluating an intellectual or an artist, we can dismiss or ignore his/her personal weaknesses, inordinate egotism or selfishness, and hypocrisies. (In this regard, interestingly, James is much more inclined to give a pass to artists than to intellectuals.)

Next to its phenomenal intellectual breadth, what most distinguishes the book is the writing, which in the main is of the first order, often brilliant, marked by cleverness and wit, and studded with memorable aphorisms (both James's own and others he quotes or borrows). Here are a few examples:
* "No ideology can tolerate a full historical consciousness."

* "When academic language gets beyond shouting distance of ordinary speech, voodoo is all it is."

* "A crippled schizophrenic, Goebbels was easy to make fun of at the time by those safely out of his reach."

* "In Sartre's style of argument, German metaphysics met French sophistry in a kind of European Coal and Steel Community producing nothing but rhetorical gas."

* "Many attempt without success to make up for their lack of talent with defects of character."

* "Revisionist historians and commentators who deplore the use of nuclear weapons against the two Japanese cities have a humanitarian case, but they weaken it by supposing that they have a military case to back it up."

CULTURAL AMNESIA is not uniformly superb. Some of the essays are odd (e.g., Michael Mann). At times James is too abstruse or didactic. A few of his discussions are out-of-place (too vulgar) or simply silly (e.g., the extended piece on the movie "Where Eagles Dare" and Richard Burton's hairstyle). James is much better as a critic than as an original thinker (witness the claptrap at the top of p. 702). While the writing itself often sparkles, there are occasions when it is too aphoristic, instances when it is overly artful or contrived, and at times simply baroque.

But I am very glad I stuck with the book and read it cover to cover (although it took me two years of off-and-on reading to traverse its 850 pages). CULTURAL AMNESIA introduced me to numerous figures of consequence of whom I otherwise probably would die in ignorance; it alerted me to twenty or so books that I want to read (or re-read) before I kick the bucket; and, overall, it broadened, and deepened, my own critical faculties. Trite to say, but it has made me a better human being. CULTURAL AMNESIA is a splendid book that I recommend highly.

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