

# THE EPOCH TIMES

# ARTS & CULTURE

## LITERATURE

## Gems From the Gilded Age: The Wit and Wisdom of Mark Twain

JEFF MINICK

Future historians called it “The Gilded Age.”

From the 1870s to around 1900, technology and manufacturing exploded in the United States, and the face of America changed forever. Men like John D. Rockefeller, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and Andrew Carnegie were building industrial empires, railroads crossed the country, and men and women left small towns and farms in droves to work in cities alongside the immigrants pouring into the country.

Hand in hand with these changes came widespread political corruption, both in the federal government and in political machines in the larger cities. Greed and a lust for power drove this double-dealing.

It was a time, too, of social reforms. Often founded and directed by a variety of religious denominations, charities sought to help the poor and the infirm. They built hospitals, lobbied for better sanitary conditions in the burgeoning cities, and improved safety in the workplace. Some journalists joined in these attempts, investigating everything from corrupt officials like Boss Tweed to the conditions in mental asylums.

Among them were Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, who in 1873 co-wrote “The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today,” a satire of that time when the gold gilt of progress and promised prosperity concealed the suffering and poverty of so many. It was the title of this book that would later give its name to this era.

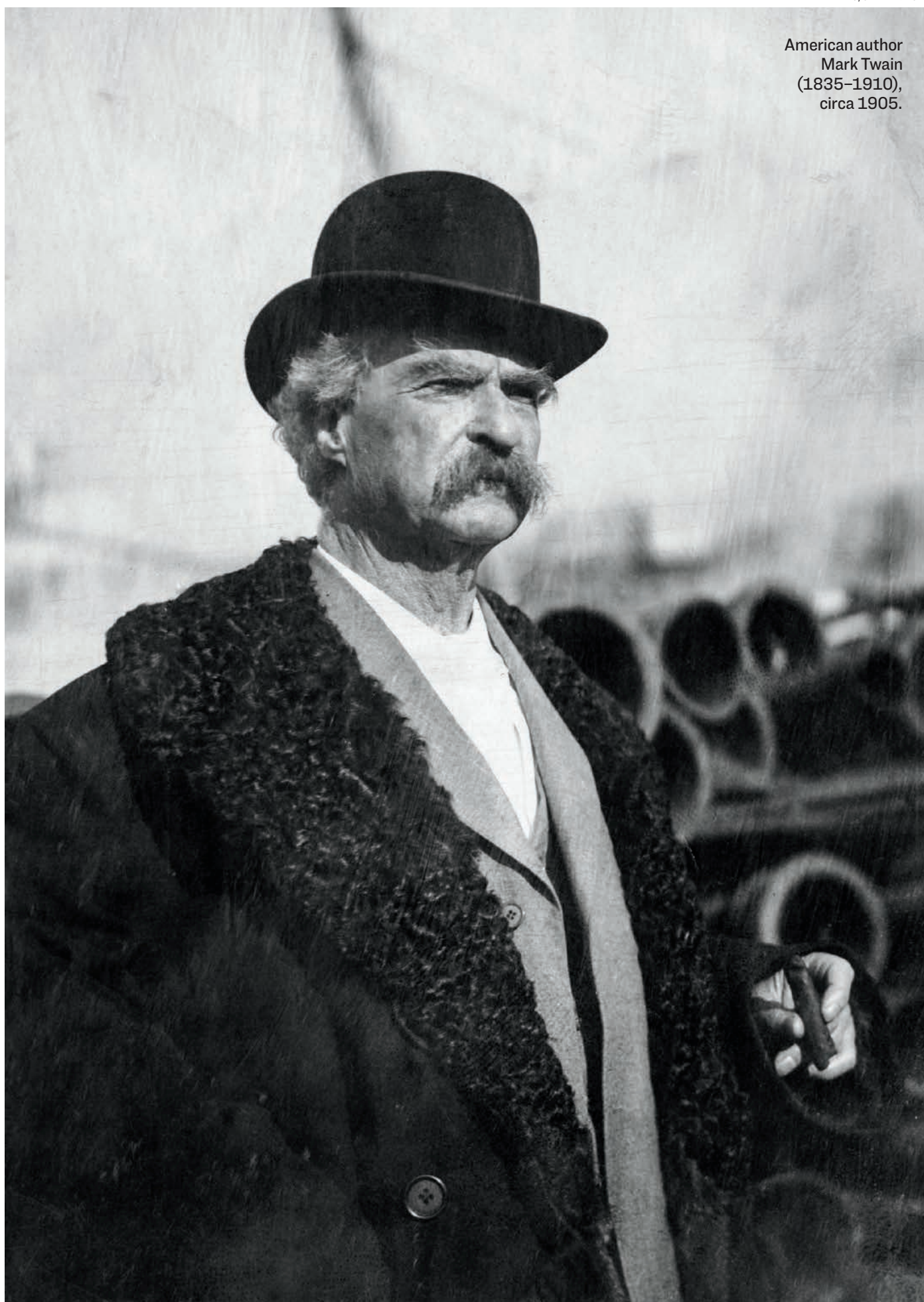
### A Great American Aphorist

Even if we’ve never read him, all of us know of Mark Twain—Samuel Langhorne Clemens—as the author of books like “Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,” “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,” “A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court,” and “Life on the Mississippi.” (An aside: Though known for his irreverence and satire, Twain thought his best work was “Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc,” a fictional account of the life of that warrior-saint. Of her, he wrote, “She is easily and by far the most extraordinary person the human race has ever produced.”)

Those who have studied Twain’s books, journalism, speeches, and correspondence have dug up a gold mine of his epigrams and aphorisms. Paul M. Zall and Alex Ayres are just two of these literary archaeologists. The former put together almost 600 of Twain’s observations and witticisms in “Mark Twain Laughing: Humorous Anecdotes by and about Samuel L. Clemens” (The University of Tennessee Press, 1985, 200 pages), while the latter did the same in “Greatly Exaggerated: The Wit and Wisdom of Mark Twain” (Barrie & Jenkins, 1988, 260 pages), though now out of print. It is from these two sources that I have gleaned the quotations used here.

### Today’s Headlines

Though Twain died well over a century ago,



FPG/GETTY IMAGES  
American author  
Mark Twain  
(1835–1910),  
circa 1905.

**Though Twain died well over a century ago, his observations remain pertinent—and funny—today.**

his observations remain pertinent—and funny—today, unspoiled by the passage of time. Even regarding our current political battles and debacles, some of his comments hit home.

For example, if you’ve followed the current school board battles, Twain delivers a knockout blow with this punch: “In the first place, God made idiots. That was for practice. Then he made school boards.”

Of Congress, the writer had this to say in his 1897 book “Following the Equator”: “It could probably be shown by facts and figures that there is no distinctly native American criminal class except Congress.”

In a speech he gave in 1901, he even supplies an observation appropriate for the COVID-19 virus and our government’s insistence on mandated vaccinations: “Whose property is my body? Probably mine. I so regard it. If I experiment with it, who must be answerable? I, not the State. If I choose injudiciously, does the State die? Oh, no.”

### Free Speech

We are all aware of the truncheons that some wield on social media to beat down people whose stances and opinions they despise. Rather than engage in argument or discussion, they prefer to bully those they find disagreeable, thereby kicking the First Amendment to the curb.

Twain must have encountered some version of this bullying in his own day, as wit-

nessed by this comment in 1907: “In all matters of opinion our adversaries are insane.”

Whether we stand with the left or right in our politics, which of us has not at times looked at our opponents and believed they are missing a few of the bulbs in the chandeliers that light their brains?

In “Pudd’nhead Wilson,” Twain writes, “It were not best that we should all think alike; it is difference of opinion that makes horseraces.”

### The Patriot

Though Twain frequently critiqued the government, politicians, and foreign policy, he remained all his life a believer in American ideals. He loved his country, and again and again he defended America against the criticism of Europeans, arguing, for example, of liberty that “it was the American Revolution in particular that planted it.”

In an 1890 speech, Twain remarks: “We are called the nation of inventors. And we are. We could still claim that title and wear its loftiest honors if we had stopped with the first thing we ever invented, which was human liberty.”

And in a 1905 essay, “The Czar’s Soliloquy,” he reminds us of what so many people forget today: “The modern patriotism, the true patriotism, the only rational patriotism is loyalty to the nation all the time, loyalty to the government when it deserves it.”

Continued on Page 4





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Andrew Benson Brown in his library.

POETRY

## A New and Important American Poet: Andrew Benson Brown

JAMES SALE

One of the lessons of history is that it is difficult to predict in advance who are truly the important people of the day—be they politicians, philosophers, artists, musicians, novelists, poets, or in any area of human endeavor. My favorite example of this is Shakespeare. While he was a huge commercial success as a playwright—groundlings and aristocrats alike seemed to have loved his plays—the idea that he was the “immortal bard” or one of the greatest English poets who ever lived would have seemed, almost certainly, laughable to most of his contemporaries (Ben Jonson’s tribute excepted).

The proof of this assertion seems to be in the difficulty we have constructing his biography. Clearly, very few people saw him as being noteworthy; hence the “lost years” and many other lacunae besides in his life’s story.

Who Will Stand the Test of Time?

At present, we ask ourselves, who are the poets of today whose reputations will stand the test of time once the vested interests of commercial publishers, academic lobbies, political pressure groups, and social media brigades have past. Who will rise to the top when a new generation sees the field afresh and with unbiased and uncluttered eyes?

In order to establish, though, who the poets are who will endure, we have to have a clear idea of what poetry is essentially. W.H. Auden, by general consent a pretty important 20th-century poet, writing in the 1970s observed: “I can’t understand—strictly from a hedonistic point of view—how one can enjoy writing with no form at all.”

Robert Frost, another indisputably great master, wrote: “I would as soon write free verse as play tennis without a net.” Finally, as Filipino poet José Garcia Villa noted a generation ago: “Much of what passes as ‘poetry’ these days is self-expression, which is nothing but romantic infantilism and baby talk.” Villa insisted on form. The essential nature of poetry, then, is form.

‘Legends of Liberty’

Thus, we can confidently assert that most of the poetry published today and applauded—usually because of its meme-like quality in asserting political truisms—because it is “free verse,” because it lacks form, and so lacks music and beauty, will not be the classics of tomorrow. That the people-to-come will want real poetry and will be mining our

contemporary scene for the gems that are not currently apparent—but which are there—is a given.

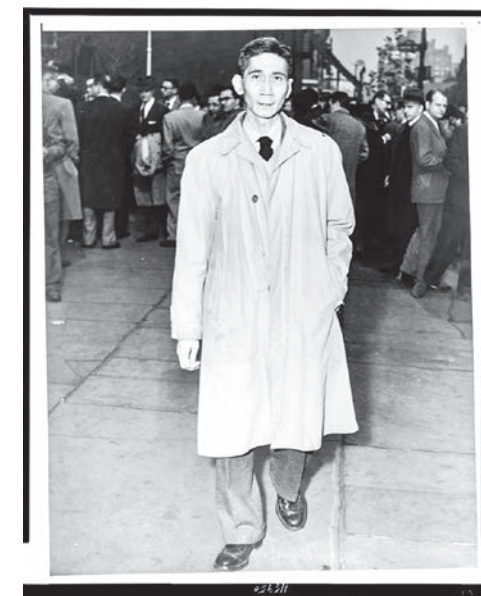
One such gem is the recently published poem “Legends of Liberty” by the Missouri poet Andrew Benson Brown. I first encountered Benson Brown’s work on The Society of Classical Poets’ website and was immediately impressed, so much so that I offered to write an introduction to the work when it was published!

Who are the poets of today whose reputations will stand the test of time?

Here we have a true American poet who is totally nonmainstream but is using form to explore American democracy, to investigate and comment on the War of Independence (which, as a Brit, I like to call the English Civil War, part 2!), invoking classical literature and myths for serious and comic effects, and generally providing a text that is outrageously interesting, gripping, and very funny. Indeed, this poem should be taught in American schools and colleges as there is so much in it that is educational from a poetic, historic, and political point of view (and other points of view too!).

The beauty is, this is not some pre-packaged concoction that insists that we believe this or we believe that. This poem invites serious thinking and serious debates.

The form of the poem is mock-epic in a modified (and consistent) style of Byron’s “Don Juan.” Why, then, do I think it is great? First, because of its ambition: It is a wonderful narrative poem that



Filipino poet José Garcia Villa in 1953. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

sustains its momentum from beginning to end—that is, for over 100 pages. (And, by the way, the illustrations in the book are superb, too.) Quite an achievement.

Second is the technical test: This relates to syntax, meter, sound effects, and so on. How deftly are these handled? Clearly, this is too much to cover in this short overview, but I think that of all these technical issues the most important for a mock-epic à la Byron is the rhyming; for “Don Juan” is so funny precisely because of its rhyming prowess. In Canto XI stanza 55, Byron writes:

Even I—albeit I’m sure I did not know it,  
Nor sought of foolscap subjects to be king,—  
Was reckon’d, a considerable time,  
The grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme.

Byron is the “grand Napoleon of rhyme.” Can Benson Brown match any of this? Yes, he can. His poem is wonderfully inventive and very funny because of the fecundity of rhyming that he deploys. Four examples will suffice:

Where honor, valor, loyalty are slandered,  
Utopias are raised without a building standard.  
(chapter 1: Invocation)

Why there’s Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot.  
And here, I think, is someone that you know.”  
(chapter 2: Thomas Jefferson in Hell)

—“Why yes, it is her favorite jiggy-bob.  
But now the hour is late—you’re needed for a job.”  
(chapter 3: The New-World Mercury)

Spit deadly cud. Smith’s ego bade resist ‘em:  
These soldiers warred with an entire ecosystem.  
(chapter 5: The Old Man of Menotomy)

One need hardly comment on any of these examples as they are self-evidently funny and strained, as many of Byron’s were; inventive too. For example, in stanza 22 of Canto I (“Don Juan”), the narrator pokes

fun at overbearing women. The stanza concludes: “Oh ye lords of ladies intellectual,/ Inform us truly, have they not hen-peck’d you all? A strained rhyme or what? And note, too, that some of Benson Brown’s lines here have an aphoristic quality: “Utopias are raised without a building standard.” More on aphorism shortly.

Do We Quote It?

This leads to a third point: Namely, a key test of outstanding poetry—possibly of great poetry—is what I call “the quotability quotient.” I notice that the great poets of the past—and clearly Shakespeare pre-eminently—are always being quoted. It’s one line, sometimes two, but somehow we call their words to mind when reality confronts us, and they seem to have encapsulated it somehow in anticipation of our predicament.

Before giving an example, let me just note that this is the opposite of today’s modernist and postmodernist poets: Who quotes them? Except when they are being reviewed by their friends in trendy journals, nobody. Whereas, Robert Frost, for example, we quote all the time—“Good fences make good neighbors,” “And that has made all the difference,” “And miles to go before I sleep,” and so on.

Another way of putting this is that really good or great poetry often has an aphoristic quality, and this tendency was itself expressed by a great poet, Alexander Pope, some 300 years or so ago: “What oft was thought but ne’er so well expressed.” Exactly—great poets write about reality. Let me, therefore, show you three wonderful aphorisms from Benson Brown’s poem:

False surfaces, once magnified, see larger truths.  
(chapter 1: Invocation)

Beneath the surfaces of things, even false things, there are truths we can apprehend; this is very succinctly and powerfully put.

Said Dante: “Men don’t sing in Hell, they scream.  
No melodies are found in endless death.”  
(chapter 2: Thomas Jefferson in Hell)

I have quoted the preceding line here to indicate the authority of Dante speaking,



Reproduction of “The Bell’s First Note,” 1913, by Jean Leon Jerome Ferris.

but what a stunning, concise expression: “No melodies ...”

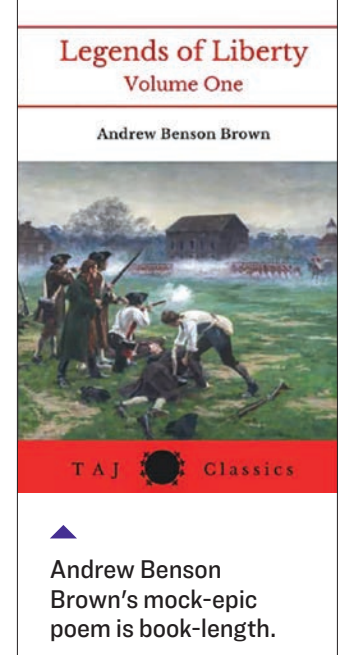
They’re diplomats by trade—we call them hypocrites.  
(chapter 2: Thomas Jefferson in Hell)

Finally—for there are dozens more of these aphoristic lines—something in the modern world that we are all too familiar with: the diplomats and their almost unbreakable association with hypocrisy. The satire here is almost independent of its context; we know this to be true.

Before leaving Benson Brown’s aphoristic power, it needs to be said that this fact arises because his poetry is about something; it means something. That is so refreshing in these times.

Therefore, I strongly recommend Andrew Benson Brown’s “Legends of Liberty.” I believe he is an important and original American poet. One—and hopefully there will be others—who is pushing back against the flabby standards, or lack of standards, that have come to characterize the “infantile” verse that passes for poetry today.

James Sale has had over 50 books published, most recently “Mapping Motivation for Top Performing Teams” (Routledge, 2021). He won first prize in The Society of Classical Poets’ 2017 annual competition, performing in New York in 2019. His most recent poetry collection is “HellWard.” For more information about the author, and about his Dante project, visit [TheWiderCircle.webs.com](http://TheWiderCircle.webs.com)



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## LITERATURE

# Gems From the Gilded Age: The Wit and Wisdom of Mark Twain

Continued from Page 1

## The Other Side of the Man

Though Twain could be sharp and quick with criticism and didn't suffer fools gladly, he had a sweet and sentimental side. He dearly loved his wife, Olivia, and fell into a depression at her death. Two of his three daughters died when in their 20s, and Twain felt himself crushed by those losses as well.

He was often kind to friends. One famous example of his generosity is the assistance he gave to his friend, former President Grant, in getting his memoirs published. Grant was dying of cancer and was racing against time to finish his book so as to provide some income for his wife, Julia, and their family after his death. Twain struck a deal with him to publish his book, which became a bestseller at the time, more than provided for Julia's needs, and remains in print today.

This goodness also comes across in Twain's public and private writing.

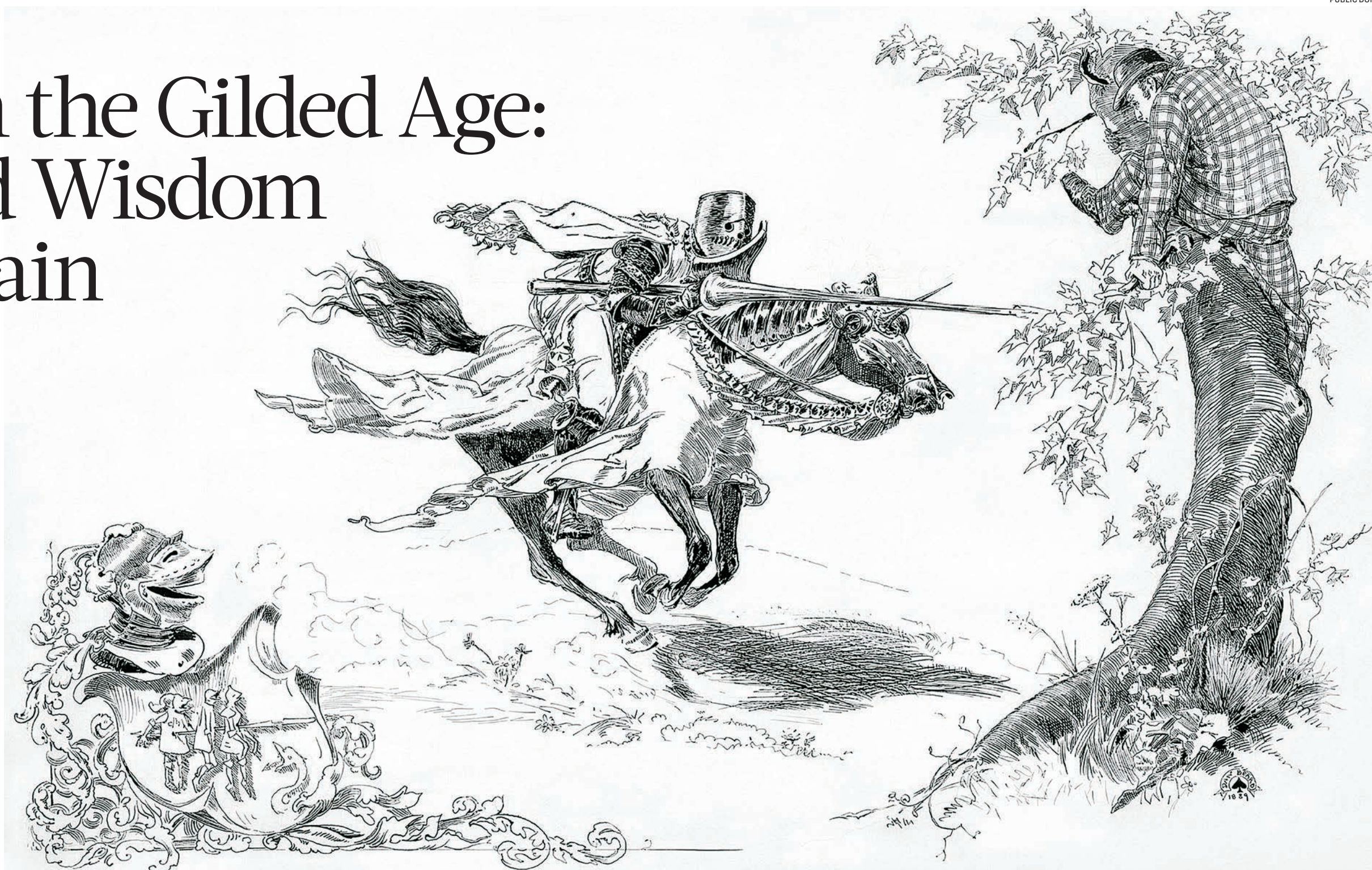
In "My Early Life," for instance, Winston Churchill describes meeting Twain and asking him to sign "his works for my benefit." Twain obliged him, Churchill wrote, "and in the first volume he inscribed the following maxim intended, I dare say, to convey a gentle admonition: 'To do good is noble; to teach others to do good is nobler, and no trouble.'"

Though no angel himself, particularly in his younger years, Twain matured as he aged. We detect a growing tenderness in him. In "Tom Sawyer Abroad," published in 1894, he wrote, "The more you join in with people in their joys and sorrows, the more nearer and dearer they come to be to you. ... But it is sorrow and trouble that bring you the nearest."

And in 1901, in a "Note to the Young People's Society," he famously wrote: "Always do right. This will gratify some people, and astonish the rest."

## Advice for Parents

In "Greatly Exaggerated," Ayers recounts the story of an 1879 speech that Twain delivered at a banquet honoring President Grant. He was the last at the podium that evening, and it was three o'clock in the morning, by which time we may assume

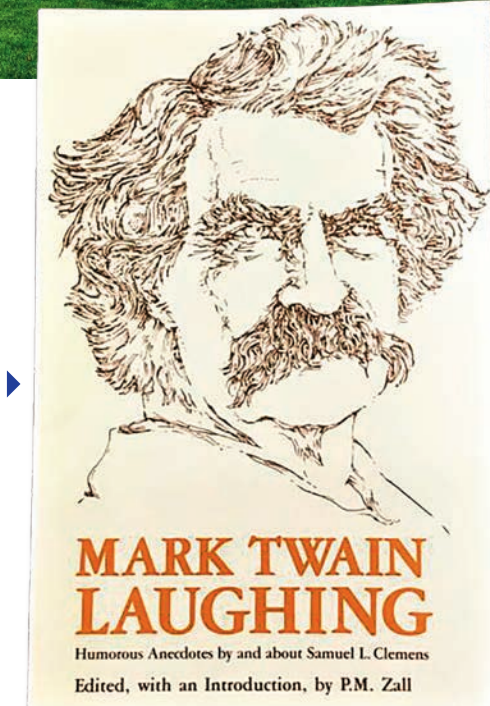


PUBLIC DOMAIN



Mark Twain co-created the term "Gilded Age." It refers to the economic boom after the Civil War to the 1920s characterized by materialistic excesses and extreme poverty. The Breakers, a Gilded Age mansion in Newport, R.I., built by the Vanderbilts, who made their wealth from the railroads.

Paul M. Zall's "Mark Twain Laughing" offers countless examples of Twain's humor.



Published as the frontispiece in Mark Twain's "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court," as illustrated by Daniel Beard.

the audience was ready to hit the sheets. Nevertheless, according to Ayers, Twain gave one of the finest speeches of his life, "The Babies."

"Babies are national treasures," he told the audience. "Among the three or four million cradles now rocking in the land are some which this nation would preserve for ages as sacred things, if we could but know which ones they are."

Twain then said of a baby: "He is enterprising, irrepressible, and brimful of lawless activities. Do what you please, you can't make him stay on the reservation. ... As long as you are in your right mind don't you ever pray for twins. Twins amount to a permanent riot. And there ain't no real difference between triplets and an insurrection."

## Water and Wine

In Twain's "Notebooks," we find this 1885 entry: "My works are like water. The works of the great masters are like wine. But

everyone drinks water."

"A classic," Twain said in another speech, "is something that everybody wants to have read and nobody wants to read."

Twain's remark is both humorous and right on the money, like so many of his epigrams, yet ironically his own works now qualify as classics. Time has changed his water into wine. His books and words are the still-beating heart of American literature and a part of the canon of Western literature.

As for his well-known comment about the classics, perhaps his observation should give us pause. When we stop listening to the voices from the past, when we plug our ears against their advice and their injunctions, we make ourselves children, lost boys and girls without a map or compass.

When we read the great writers of the past, including Mark Twain, we have the opportunity to make these navigational tools our own.

## Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner in 1873 co-wrote 'The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today'

## AMERICAN TREASURES

# Johnny Mercer, an All-American Genius

KEN LAFAVE

His words inhabit the psyche like a soundtrack of the American century, from the autumn leaves falling past my window to the Atchison, Topeka, and the Santa Fe. Johnny Mercer (1909–1976) was America's lyricist, giving voice to the loves, ambitions, hopes, dreams, and whimsies of his country's people for four decades.

A slim sampling of Mercer's 1,500-plus song lyrics is a virtual history of the American popular song from the 1930s through the 1960s: "Lazy Bones," "Hooray for Hollywood," "Jeepers Creepers," "You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby," "That Old Black Magic," "One for My Baby (and One More for the Road)," "Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive," "Laura," "Autumn Leaves," "Glow Worm," "In the Cool, Cool, Cool of the Evening," "Satin Doll," "Moon River," and "Summer Wind."

Not bad for a teenager from Savannah, Georgia, who hopped a boat for New York with little more than talent to his name.

## A Boy From Georgia

John Herndon Mercer was born to a family whose fortune collapsed when he was 17, leaving him without the prospect of college or decent employment. He left for New York with the goal of becoming an actor, but when the entertainment industry discovered he had a voice, it made him into a singer.

Singing other people's songs made him realize that he could do better, and in 1933, collaborating with Hoagy Carmichael, Mercer produced his first hit, "Lazy Bones." From there he jumped to Hollywood and back again, commuting between the coasts to write for Tin Pan Alley, the movies, and Broadway.

## The Right Words

The eclecticism of the songs in the list above—love ballads, crooner tunes, upbeat swing numbers, novelty songs of all stripes—owes partly to the range of composers whose tunes Mercer's words accompanied, including Henry Mancini, Hoagy Carmichael, Harold Arlen, Duke Ellington, and Jerome Kern. But Mercer's erudition and his ability to adapt to different imagined situations inside the music also played a role.

Take for example, "Laura." You could say that it's the title song of the 1944 movie, but you'd be only half right. The

## Johnny Mercer's embrace of the total range of popular song allowed him to reflect the feelings, beliefs, and changing language of the country.

music, by David Raksin, was indeed composed for the film, but it remained lyric-less until the following year, when the tune's popularity demanded words. (Watch the movie and you won't hear the lyric anywhere.) The challenge was to shape a lyric that fit both the rise and fall of Raksin's melody and the image of the film's title character: mysterious, distant, ideal. One wordsmith was hired and fired before the music's publisher contacted Mercer. What the man from Georgia produced matched all the particulars:

Laura is the face in the misty light, footsteps that you hear down the hall,

The laugh that floats on the summer night that you can never quite recall.

And you see Laura on a train that is passing through. Those eyes, how familiar they seem.

She gave your very first kiss to you. That was Laura, but she's only a dream.

The words are simple, direct, as if spoken. Only the rhymes give them away as a song lyric, especially the internal rhymes of light/night/quite. The lyric's snug fit with Raksin's tune makes it hard to believe they were written a year apart.

## Sometimes the Tunes

Though Mercer usually wrote words to the music of other composers, he sometimes penned his own melodies, which were as eclectic as his lyrics. Considering the quality of his three best-known tunes, it's remarkable that he didn't compose more: the faux-folkish "I'm An Old Cowhand (from the 'Rio Grande')," the richly lyrical "Dream," and the swingin' "Something's Gotta Give."

As a lyricist, Mercer reached a peak of sorts in his 30s, with such songs as "I'm Old Fashioned," "Skylark," "Come Rain or Come Shine," "Blues in the Night," "And the Angels Sing," "On the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe," and "Laura."

When he turned 50 he peaked again, this time with a string of hits written for the movies with composer Henry Mancini. First out of the chute was one of the most perfect popular songs ever created, "Moon River," written for the film "Breakfast at Tiffany's" (1961).

Semiautobiographical, the song's famous reference to "my huckleberry friend" owes to Mercer's memory of picking huckleberries in Georgia. It won that year's Oscar for Best Song, as did Mercer and Mancini's next effort, the title song to "Days of Wine and Roses" (1962). The team wrote more movie material,

including the title song to "Charade" (1963) and "The Sweetheart Tree" for "The Great Race" (1965).

Johnny Mercer's songs are so popular, even today, that professional singers can purchase and rehearse with his soundtracks.

## Singer-Songwriter and Businessman

Mercer never gave up singing. In an age when songwriters and song performers were effectively two mutually exclusive groups, Mercer was a precursor of the singer-songwriter, with a popular following and hit recordings.

He also covered other people's songs. When Disney released the movie "Song of the South" in 1947, it was Johnny Mercer's version of "Zip-a-Dee-Do-Dah" that reached the Top 10 of the popular charts. As if all this wasn't enough, in 1942 Mercer co-founded Capitol Records, the first major record label on the West Coast, adding successful entrepreneurship to his list of accomplishments.

With fingers in so many pies, some areas of his profession lagged behind others. Mercer's exposure on Broadway was limited to the modest hits "St. Louis Woman" (1946, music by Harold Arlen) and "Li'l Abner" (1956, music by Gene de Paul), plus some minor pieces.

Mercer's list of film musicals, on the other hand, is lengthy and includes the iconic "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers" (1954, music by De Paul) and the Julie Andrews star vehicle "Darling Lili" (1970, music by Mancini).

For quality, quantity, and variety of lyrics, Mercer is matched in my opinion only by Oscar Hammerstein II. But Hammerstein focused on the theater, where his lyrics were driven by plot and character, whereas Mercer's embrace of the total range of popular song allowed him to reflect the feelings, beliefs, and changing language of the country that made it possible for a penniless young man from Georgia to find fame and become America's genius songwriter.

Former music critic for the Arizona Republic and The Kansas City Star, Kenneth LaFave recently earned a doctorate in philosophy, art, and critical thought from the European Graduate School. He's the author of three books, including "Experiencing Film Music" (2017, Routman & Littlefield).



FOTORESEARCH/GETTY IMAGES

Mark Twain with his family, circa 1865.

Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, N.C. He is the author of two novels, "Amanda Bell" and "Dust On Their Wings," and two works of non-fiction, "Learning As I Go" and "Movies Make The Man." Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See [JeffMinick.com](http://JeffMinick.com) to follow his blog.



A statue of Johnny Mercer, the American composer, songwriter, and singer, in Savannah, Ga.



## BOOK REVIEW

# Beauty, Delight, Wisdom: Blown Away by ‘The Critical Temper’

JEFF MINICK

Joy comes in many guises.

A proposal of marriage, a promotion at work after two years of putting in extra time and effort, the birth of a child: These can leave us walking on air with a smile as big as the crescent moon.

Even transitory delights—the gap-toothed grin of a 7-year-old, an unexpected gift from a spouse, a surprise birthday party—can flood our hearts with happiness.

And sometimes joy arrives in a small brown box delivered by the UPS man.

Recently, I was sitting on my front porch when the van pulled into the driveway. I walked across the yard to meet the young man in the brown uniform, took the package in hand, waved goodbye, saw the address, ripped the box open using a postal box key, and found what I had anticipated: “The Critical Temper: Interventions From The New Criterion at 40.”

Bliss is a word I rarely associate with books, especially those I intend to review. But here in this collection of over 50 essays, edited by Roger Kimball of The New Criterion Magazine, bliss—great joy—is precisely what I found.

Let me explain.

## Artistry

Included in this gathering of essayists for The New Criterion are writers I’ve enjoyed for years, including Bruce Bawer, Joseph Epstein, John Derbyshire, Heather Mac Donald, Harvey Mansfield, Myron Magnet, and Roger Kimball himself.

Here too are writers I’ve never read, men and women like Andrew Roberts, Charles Hill, Brooke Allen, and Alexander McCall Smith.

Each of these commentators offers pieces unfamiliar to me, and each article is superbly constructed. Reading them, I must confess, humbles me as a writer because of both their intimate knowledge of selected topics and their sculpted prose.

Take Andrew Stuttaford’s “A Schoolboy’s Guide to War.” In just seven pages, Stuttaford marches his readers through the sacrifices of England’s public school boys in World War I. We learn of their horrendous losses during that war’s butchery and of the devotion they felt toward the men they commanded.

As Stuttaford ends his essay:

“They died together. And they are buried together, too, not far from where they fell. As the founder of the Imperial War Graves Commission explained, ‘in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, the officers will tell you that, if they are killed, they would wish to be among their men.’  
“A century later, that’s where they still are.”

## Criticism

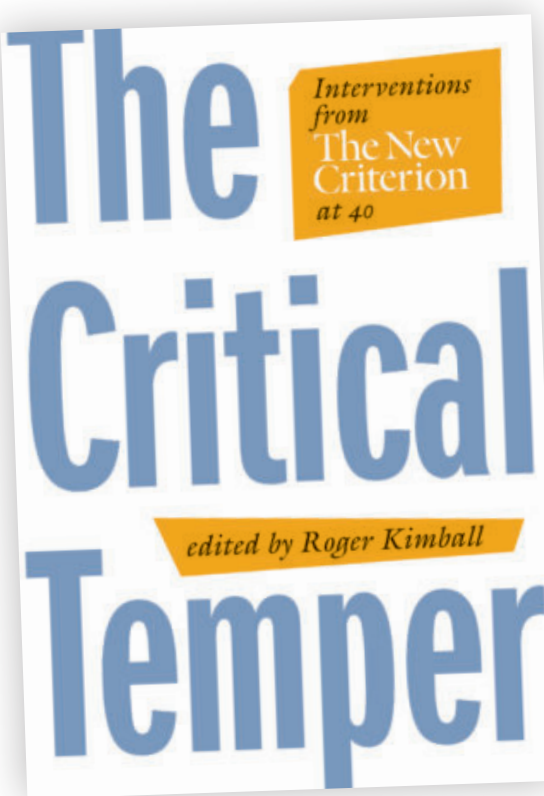
Whatever the topic—opera, painting, the Constitution, Henry James—these essays share one commonality: “a ferocious allegiance to the truth of experience.” In his “Introduction: Hilton Kramer and the Critical Temper,” Roger Kimball pays tribute to Kramer, one of the founders of The New Criterion, and to his passion for criticism—not just in the arts, but in all areas of public life. “Criticism is a serious business,” Kimball writes, “because life is a serious business.”

And all the writers in “The Critical Temper” hold themselves to Kramer’s high standards of criticism, addressing issues of politics and culture with a refreshingly blunt candor. In “Part II, Reputations Reconsidered,” Bruce Bawer dissects the work of academic and literary critic Stephen Greenblatt. Anthony Daniels takes a close



Joy can come in many forms: gaining knowledge and wisdom being among them.

The authors and their editors aim for clarity and ease of understanding.



**‘The Critical Temper: Interventions From The New Criterion at 40’**

**Editor:** Roger Kimball  
**Publisher:** Encounter Books, 2021

**Pages:** 576

look at Ayn Rand, author of such novels as “The Fountainhead” and “Atlas Shrugged,” and concludes that “Rand fulfilled Stalin’s criterion for the ideal writer: she tried to be an engineer of souls.” Roger Kimball’s “Guilt Trip: Versailles, Avant-Garde & Kitsch” reassesses the commonly held view that onerous conditions imposed on Germany in the Treaty of Versailles caused World War II.

These critics may sometimes appear harsh, but in truth they all play fair. In “Bernstein at 100: A Personal Look,” for example, Jay Nordlinger writes an appreciation of Leonard Bernstein and his music for

the centennial year, 2018, of his birth. Here he delivers a balanced look at the man and his personal flaws along with an analysis of his compositions, his conducting, his skills as a pianist, and the musicians who influenced him. In just over 20 pages, Nordlinger provides a mini-biography of the man and a summing-up of his influence on the arts. Though Bernstein “dreaded being remembered as the man who wrote ‘West Side Story,’” Nordlinger regards that musical as a work of genius: “As long as there is anything like musical theater, there will be ‘West Side Story.’”

## A Light Touch

Criticism may be a serious business, but it is also, as Kimball writes, “compatible with humor.” In “No Flash in the Pan,” for instance, John Steele Gordon celebrates George MacDonald Fraser’s “Flashman” books. Based on a character in the Victorian classic “Tom Brown’s School Days,” who is expelled from school for drunkenness, Harry Flashman finds new life in Fraser’s novels as a handsome soldier, a skilled horseman, and one of the most outlandish rogues in the history of literature. Having praised these books to the skies—a tribute with which I fully agree, having read most of these stories myself—Gordon ends his critique with these words:

“And one final note of caution: these wonderful books are best read either alone or in the bosom of the family. For if you read them in a public place such as a suburban commuter train or a doctor’s waiting room, you will, from time to time, burst out in helpless laughter and everyone will turn around and look at you.  
“You have been warned.”

Note again the excellent writing, which runs throughout “The Critical Temper.”

## A Personal Favorite

One essay in particular that delighted me was John Byron Kuhner’s “The Vatican’s Latinist,” which introduces readers to Reginald Foster, an American Midwesterner who became a priest and who spent 40 years at the Vatican translating encyclicals and other church documents into Latin.

Just as important was his influence as a teacher. Foster often taught students free of charge—he became famous for the summer institutes he offered without fee—and “the number of Foster’s students runs into the thousands.” Kuhner’s article drew my attention because long ago I wrote to Father Reggie Foster inquiring about his summer class, and he generously sent me back a packet of materials he used with students for that particular program.

At the end of “The Vatican’s Latinist,” Kuhner includes this observation: “It’s as if the whole Latin tradition—Classical, Medieval, Renaissance—came down to just one man.” Michael Fontaine says.

“He was like the funnel-point for all that culture. And he worked tirelessly to bring it to people—hundreds, thousands of people. And now it comes down to the rest of us to carry it on.”

Agreed.

## A Big Dipper

In some of the reviews I’ve written in the last 20 years, I’ve referred to “dipper books,” works that encourage dropping into the text wherever we wish rather than reading the book from cover to cover. Works of poetry, volumes of essays, collections of short biographies—all lend themselves to such dipping.

With its broad range of topics and diverse authors, “The Critical Temper” also qualifies as a dipper book, one of the best I’ve ever read. Here readers can travel where they will, reading an essay about “The Federalist” and then skipping ahead 150 pages to Robert Messenger and his thoughts on comedic novelist P.G. Wodehouse.

## A Great Education

Moreover, though these articles are more erudite than the columns commonly found on so many online sites, the authors—and their editors—aim for clarity and ease of understanding. For example, I am ignorant of all things operatic. I’ve attended a few operas, listened to a few, but am overall dumb as dirt when it comes to the history and music of this art form.

In her 2018 piece “Operatic Precocity,” Heather Mac Donald made me wonder what I’ve missed all these years. Mac Donald dives into the life and music of a 12-year-old British girl, Alma Deutscher, a prodigy whose opera “Cinderella” won the applause of sold-out audiences wherever it played. From Mac Donald’s conversations with Deutscher, her description of technique, and her comparisons of “Cinderella” with other famous operas, I discovered more about opera in 20 minutes than I’ve learned in 10 years.

One exhilarating moment: Many other composers and critics contend that Deutscher needs to “discover the complexity of the modern world,” essentially meaning that she must stop looking to the great music of the past for her inspiration and become a modernist. Here is her response: “Well, let me tell you a huge secret. I already know that the world is complex, and can be very ugly, but I think that these people have just got a little bit confused. If the world is so ugly, then what’s the point of making it even uglier with ugly music?”

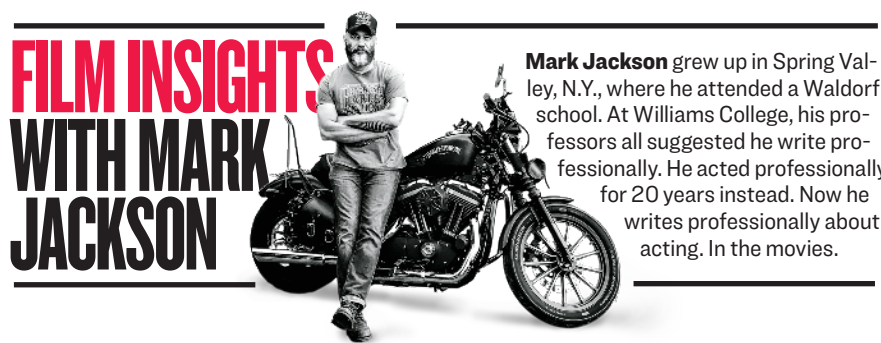
Though sitting at my desk, I actually applauded and shouted “Yes!” when I read Deutscher’s comment.

## A Final Note

Reading “The Critical Temper” did rouse one regret in me: I should have subscribed years ago to “The New Criterion.”

That’s a mistake I intend to rectify.

*Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminars of homeschooled students in Asheville, N.C. He is the author of two novels, “Amanda Bell” and “Dust On Their Wings,” and two works of non-fiction, “Learning As I Go” and “Movies Make The Man.” Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See [JeffMinick.com](http://JeffMinick.com) to follow his blog.*



Mark Jackson grew up in Spring Valley, N.Y., where he attended a Waldorf school. At Williams College, his professors all suggested he write professionally. He acted professionally for 20 years instead. Now he writes professionally about acting. In the movies.

## POPCORN AND INSPIRATION

# A Queen as Divine as She Was Human

MARK JACKSON

“Elizabeth” (1998), a depiction of the early life and times of Elizabeth I of England (daughter of the notorious Henry VIII), is considered to be Australian actress Cate Blanchett’s international breakout role. It was the first time most people had ever seen her on-screen before. It was a powerful, “A Star Is Born” debut.

Blanchett is hands down the queen of this opulent cinematic Renaissance pageantry, plain and simple. Without her, Indian director Shekhar Kapur’s labyrinthine history lesson (playing fast and loose with the actual history, it must be added) would have merely been a bunch of dark maneuverings in murky castles by men in tights.

Blanchett’s declaration, “I am no man’s Elizabeth”—like fellow Aussie actress Miranda Otto’s later declaration in “The Lord of the Rings,” “I am no man,” before smiting the mighty Nazgul witch-king—gave audiences to understand that here was indeed a woman with the fortitude to rule the British empire. (Blanchett also played Queen Galadriel in “The Lord of the Rings.”)

In fact, “Elizabeth” cast member Christopher Eccleston (Duke of Norfolk) said that it was Cate’s fiery Aussie blood that helped her nail this role, something he felt would have eluded most of her Brit actress contemporaries.

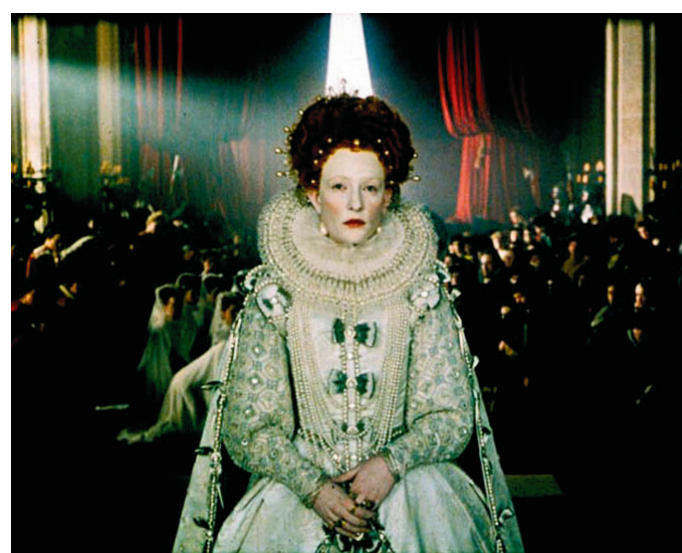
“Elizabeth” covers just a small part at the beginning of the monarch’s 44-year reign, but it’s the juiciest, most Shakespearean part, beginning when she was an intelligent, educated, but untested and wet-behind-the-ears young lass, head over heels in love with Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester (Joseph Fiennes) with nary a care in the world. And then the monumental ascension to power, akin to a true spiritual awakening.

## The History

Elizabeth’s precursor, the Catholic Queen Mary I (Kathy Burke), also known as “Bloody Mary” for burning 280 Protestants at the stake for refusing to convert, lied to the public, proclaiming that her distended belly was a pregnancy when it was actually cancer of the womb. She died in 1558. Her heir and Protestant half-sister Elizabeth, who’d been locked up in the Tower of London for conspiracy charges, is then freed and crowned queen of England.

Elizabeth inherits a chaotic England besieged by hostile neighboring countries, crumbling infrastructure, massive debt, and scheming, treasonous nobles lurking in her court, especially the Duke of Norfolk (Eccleston).

Her adviser, Sir William Cecil (Richard Attenborough), would like Elizabeth to marry and produce an heir to shore up the country’s perilous state. But young Elizabeth is not impressed with her suitors, especially France’s leader Mary of Guise’s nephew, Duc d’Anjou (Vincent Cassel), whom Elizabeth catches red-handed partying in his chambers with his entourage, wearing a dress, lipstick, and emitting high-pitched shrieks



Elizabeth I, the “Virgin Queen” of England (Cate Blanchett), has sacrificed all things of a human nature to best serve her people.

Elizabeth must sacrifice her human happiness in order to become the pure link to the divine.



Sir John Gielgud as the pope.

## ‘Elizabeth’

**Director:** Shekhar Kapur  
**Starring:** Cate Blanchett, Geoffrey Rush, Joseph Fiennes, Richard Attenborough, Vincent Cassel, John Gielgud, Daniel Craig

**Running Time:** 2 hours, 4 minutes

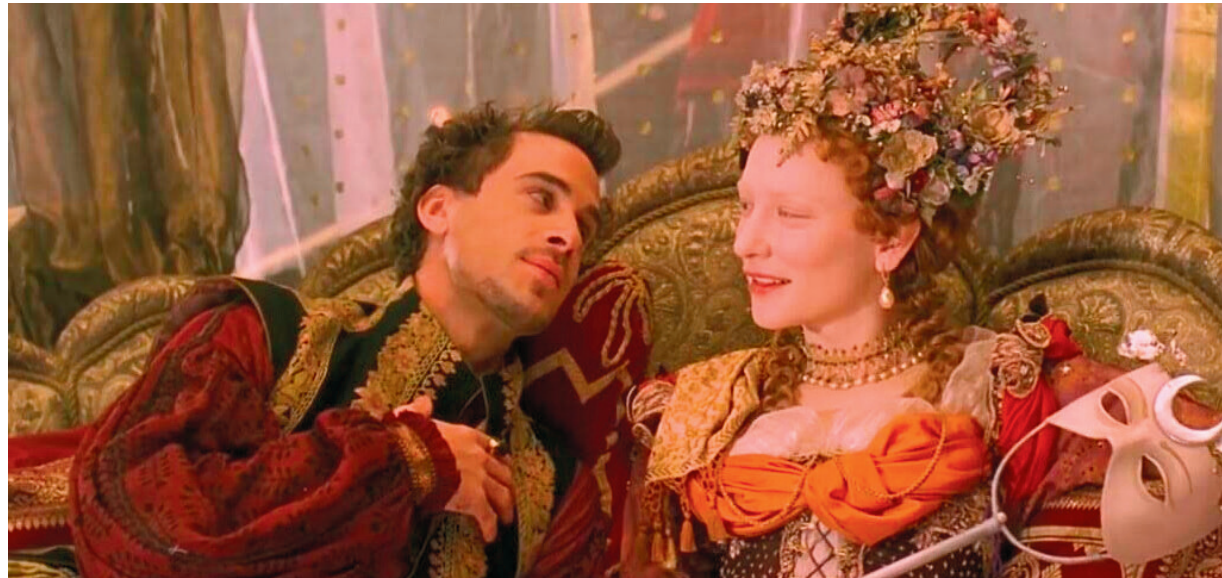
**MPAA Rating:** R

**Release Date:** Feb. 19, 1999 (U.S.)

★ ★ ★ ★ ★



Cate Blanchett became a star through her portrayal of Elizabeth I of England in “Elizabeth.”



Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester (Joseph Fiennes), and Elizabeth I, Queen of England (Cate Blanchett) dally on a couch at a costume party, in “Elizabeth.”

and giggles. She therefore continues her not-so-secret affair with Lord Robert Dudley.

## War With France

When French Queen Mary of Guise (Fanny Ardant), perceiving Elizabeth as weak, sends 4,000 French troops to Scotland, Elizabeth, browbeaten by Norfolk at the war council, orders a military response.

The professional French soldiers slaughter the inexperienced English troops (because a conspiracy of English lords and Catholic priests withheld Britain’s real fighting men). Elizabeth also survives an assassination attempt by Mary of Guise in the form of a poisoned dress that one of Elizabeth’s handmaidens is unlucky enough to wear while cheating in a castle alcove with Elizabeth’s lying paramour, Lord Dudley.

Recognizing the treason swiftly aligning against Elizabeth, Cecil appoints Sir Francis Walsingham (Geoffrey Rush), a Protestant exile returned from France, to be her bodyguard and adviser. Elizabeth sends Walsingham to Scotland with a message for Mary of Guise: She will reconsider marrying Guise’s dress-wearing nephew. Unfortunately for the bloodthirsty Guise, it turns out that Walsingham also happens to be a skilled assassin.

## Uniting the Christians

In an attempt to heal England’s religious divisions, Elizabeth signs into law the Act of Uniformity, which unites all English Christians under the Church of England—severing England’s connection to the Vatican.

Naturally, the pope (Sir John Gielgud) is not having any of that, and he sends James Bond to England to assist Norfolk and his co-conspirators in hatching their plot to overthrow Elizabeth. That is, he sends a priest played by Daniel Craig.

## Coming Into Her Own

Elizabeth eventually fires Cecil, decides to follow her own counsel, and sets Walsingham to apprehend John Ballard, the priest carrying conspiracy letters from the pope. Under torture, Ballard sings like a canary, naming names and revealing the Vatican plot to put Norfolk on the throne if he agrees to marry Mary, Queen of Scots. Norfolk is arrested.

Norfolk: “I am Norfolk!”

Walsingham: “You were Norfolk. Dead men have no names.”

Severed heads are put on spikes. Elizabeth is no longer playing around. Elizabeth has had it. She’s all grown up, and dead. Her treasonous, cheating (and, she discovers, married) boyfriend she lets live, to remind herself of how close she came to danger.

The most powerful moment in the movie is when Elizabeth heeds Walsingham’s wisdom that she must sacrifice her human happiness in order to become the pure link to the divine that the people can actually touch. Ironically, she draws inspiration from a statue of the Virgin Mary. She cuts her long hair, bedsuds her face with chalk-white makeup, renounces the flesh, proclaims herself married to England, and presents herself to her kingdom as “the Virgin Queen.” And on her stately approach to the throne, among kneeling courtiers and royal attendants—a woman indeed fervently reaches out to touch the hem of her robe. Imagine the inspirational power of such deep faith.

## Thoughts

In a time when women were able to acquire status only through marriage, Queen Elizabeth led an empire. With her power constantly challenged by powerful men of church and state, conspiring against her every which way, it’s little wonder that the strength of the first Elizabeth to rule England at such a young and tender age is legendary.

And while it’s been mentioned more than once that this transformational arc bears a chilling resemblance to Michael Corleone’s transition to power in “The Godfather,” the two films couldn’t be farther apart. “The Godfather” is about the loss of compassion and the death of the soul by an individual headed for hell.

The resemblance, which hinges on Elizabeth’s stoned-faced ascension to the imperial monarchy, is a culmination of the long journey of growing up, battling fears, shedding illusions, absorbing pain, learning judgment, acquiring the steel, sinew, and resolve of a true leader, and becoming one of the rare early female heads of state to rule successfully without an alliance with a man.

Ultimately, though, what we witness is the inspirational (and daunting) sacrificing of human emotion in order to become an empty vessel—a conduit for the divine to shine through. She relinquishes the love of a man in order to touch the people with the elevated compassion of a true spiritual leader.

The film was nominated for seven Oscars: Best Picture, Best Actress, Makeup (won), Cinematography, Costume Design, Art Design, and Original Dramatic Score. Cate Blanchett won for Best Actress in nine other award ceremonies, including the Golden Globes.

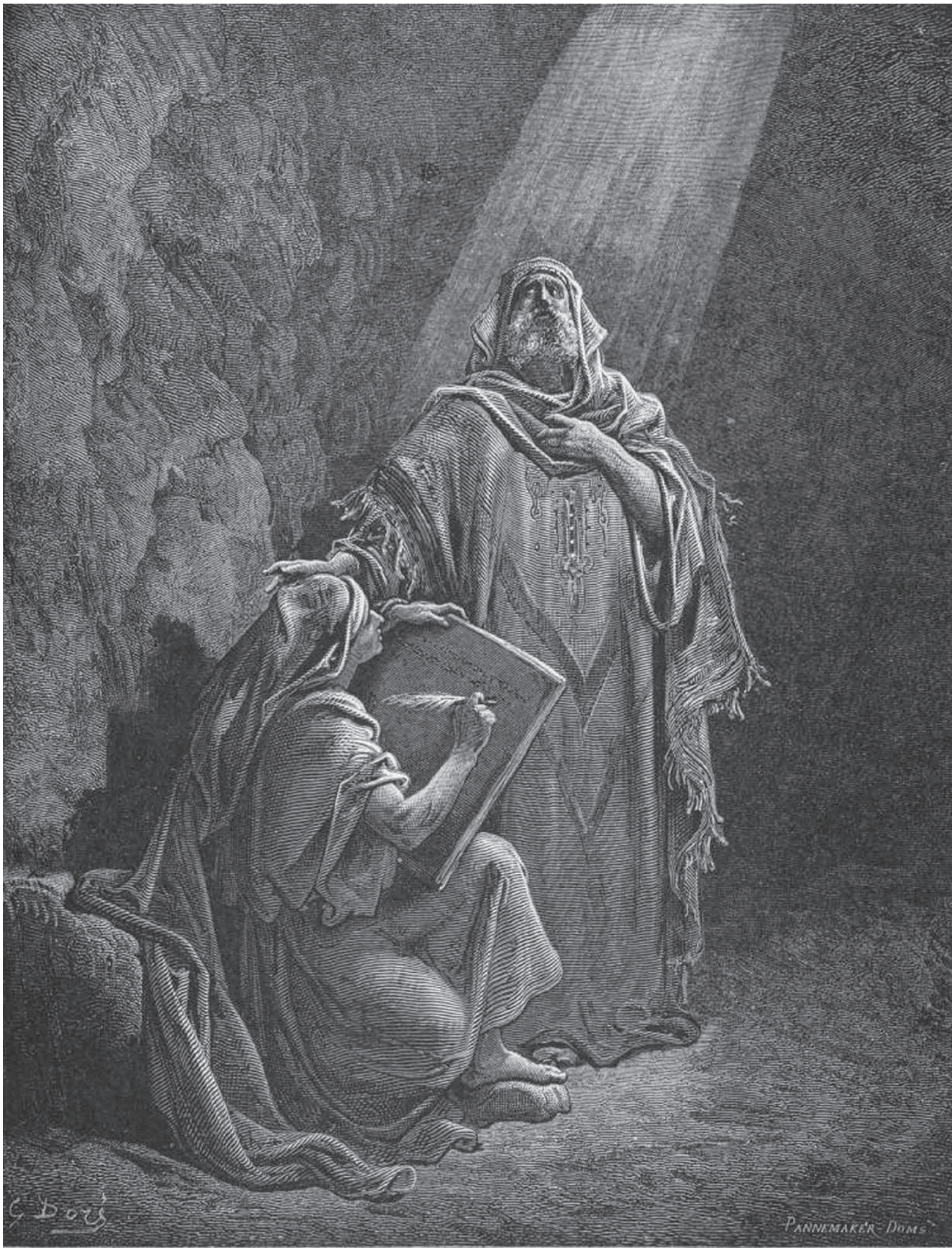
Composer Alma Deutscher in July 2016. Permission of Deutscher’s Managers, Askonas Holt.



ALEX NIGHTENGALE SMITH/CC BY-SA 4.0



"Baruch Writing Jeremiah's Prophecies," 1866, by Gustave Doré. Engraving from "The Holy Bible With Illustrations." London: Cassel, Petter, and Galpin.



PUBLIC DOMAIN

REACHING WITHIN: WHAT TRADITIONAL ART OFFERS THE HEART

# The Divine Light of Truth: 'Baruch Writing Jeremiah's Prophecies'

ERIC BESS

Throughout history, there have been times when people recognize that everything is falling apart, and it seems like civilization is crumbling around them. People begin to organize into groups and attack those not in their circle; it becomes difficult to discern the truth when people focus on attacking those who think differently.

The truth, however, often goes beyond the confines of our limited understanding. Gustave Doré's engraving "Baruch Writing Jeremiah's Prophecies" might provide an insight as to how to discern the truth during times of great dissent.

**Jeremiah, the Prophet**

Jeremiah was a prophet and reformer between 650 B.C. and 570 B.C. in the Near East. There was a period of great transition during his life: The dominant Assyrian empire fell to the Babylonians, and a Neo-Babylonian empire came to power.

Jeremiah prophesied that the Babylonians would attack the people of Judah. The King of Judah, Josiah, decided to institute new religious reforms, but these reforms dealt mostly with religious rituals. Jeremiah tried to warn the people that reforming religious rituals was not going to save them from the coming disasters he prophesied.

Instead, Jeremiah exclaimed that people needed to repent for their wrongdoings and, from within themselves, begin true ethical reform. People needed to follow God's way and accept their lots in life irrespective of how difficult they seemed. However, this message did not sit well with the Temple of Jerusalem's authority, and Jeremiah was threatened and imprisoned.

Jeremiah would later dictate his prophecies to his scribe Baruch, and Baruch would read them at the Temple. After Josiah's death, his son, King Jehoiakim, heard Baruch read Jeremiah's prophecies from a scroll and ordered it cut into pieces and burned. Jeremiah went into hiding but did not stop dictating the word of God to Baruch, encouraging the people of Judah to trust in God and be good people.

**'Baruch Writing Jeremiah's Prophecies'**

Doré, in his engraving for the Old Testament, depicted Jeremiah dictating to Baruch. The size and contrast between light and dark in the portrayal of Jeremiah make him the focal point. He stands up in the middle of what appears to be a cave, which suggests that Doré depicted Jeremiah in hiding. His hooded robe covers his head as he looks up toward the light that descends on him.

Jeremiah holds one hand on his chest and places the other on the head of Baruch. Baruch kneels in front of Jeremiah.

PUBLIC DOMAIN



Gustave Doré was a French illustrator who worked primarily with wood-engraving. The National Library of France.

He looks up and diligently listens to Jeremiah as his hand readies to take down the prophet's words.

The background seems dark and isolated. The textured walls and ground of the cave contrast with the smooth, flowing robes of the figures. The contrast of the figures with their environment reiterates their importance in the composition.

**Minds and Hearts Toward the Divine Light of Truth**

Doré tells us so much with his depiction of Jeremiah. Jeremiah has a light that shines on him from above like a spotlight. He looks up as if to take in and accept the light. Of course, the light represents God's word.

The light is directed at Jeremiah's head, which suggests its influence on his thoughts. The head is often symbolic of critical and rational thinking. Thus, we can presume that Jeremiah's critical and rational faculties are filled with the light of God.

It's not only Jeremiah's thoughts that are influenced by God. By placing Jeremiah's hand up to his chest, Doré may be suggesting that his heart—is influenced, too.

It is Jeremiah's whole inner world that is influenced by God. His thoughts and feelings are affected by God. These thoughts and feelings are truth for him, and he shares this truth with Baruch kneeling in front of him.

Jeremiah shares this truth not only with his words but also with the hand he places on Baruch's head. To me, Jeremiah's words represent the thoughts and feelings that correlate with God's message, but his hand on Baruch's head represents action. This suggests that Jeremiah must not simply talk about God but also must act in accordance with God's will.

Lastly, Doré did not depict Jeremiah receiving the light of God from the material world. Instead, the artist placed Jeremiah in a cave with nothing around him. The muted environment falls into the background and has little influence on Jeremiah. The only thing that matters is the light that falls on him.

Jeremiah shared the truth of God, a truth higher and more profound than of the world he occupied, and he did not care if it was not politically or culturally popular to do so. He was not concerned with the ideas of the Temple or the king, but with truth itself, which was beyond the confines of any group.

Maybe, if we turn our minds and hearts toward truth rather than against anything or anyone, we too can receive the light of God.

*The traditional arts often contain spiritual representations and symbols the meanings of which can be lost to our modern minds. In our series "Reaching Within: What Traditional Art Offers the Heart," we interpret visual arts in ways that may be morally insightful for us today. We do not assume to provide absolute answers to questions generations have wrestled with, but hope that our questions will inspire a reflective journey toward our becoming more authentic, compassionate, and courageous human beings.*

*Eric Bess is a practicing representational artist and is a doctoral candidate at the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts (IDSVA).*

BOOK REVIEW

## Author Donald Critchlow Proves Tyranny Knows No Bounds

DUSTIN BASS

Donald T. Critchlow has written an important book in a time when it seems to be most needed. The Katzin Family Professor at Arizona State University (ASU) has constructed a very readable and relatively short book on the danger of tyranny arising under the promise of liberty.

The 177 pages of "Revolutionary Monsters," which excludes the index, is notably short considering that Critchlow covers the rise of five national leaders who, over the past century, repressively dominated their countries through lies, intimidation, corruption, and extreme violence.

**Targeted Subjects, Targeted Audience**

The lives of Vladimir Lenin, Mao Zedong, Fidel Castro, Robert Mugabe, and Sayyid Ruhollah Khomeini make up five of the seven chapters in the book. Critchlow does not get bogged down with extreme details, but he does provide enough in covering the individual's life before and during his role as dictator, to connect the similarities among the five. In a sense, Critchlow utilizes the 30,000-foot view with each and swoops down only when necessary to provide a closer perspective.

This is not the book for those wishing to read a biography of any of these historical villains. It is an introduction to these persons, as the author makes clear from the outset. He calls his book "a warning to those beguiled by a siren call of revolution," and it was written for those "who know little about the human tragedy of history."

Critchlow seems to be referring to those with whom he has so much interaction: college students. Youth often seem to be the most beguiled, perhaps since they are the most targeted. As true as this may be, "Revolutionary Monsters" is an important read for those who have surpassed the age of youth, yet still "know little about the human tragedy of history."

**The Playbook for Tyrants**

There are a number of key points Critchlow makes about these rulers' rise to power.

**From the People:** For dictators to rise from within the people, they must at least give the perception that they are one of the people. These eventual dictators based

**The author pulls his monsters from Russia, China, the Americas, the African continent, and the Middle East.**

**'Revolutionary Monsters: Five Men Who Turned Liberation Into Tyranny'**

**Author**  
Donald T. Critchlow

**Publisher**  
Regnery  
October 2021

**Pages**  
Hardcover: 206 pages

their rhetoric on being in solidarity with the people's struggle and often represented themselves as part of the peasantry. Each enabled and encouraged the lies about their upbringing to be perpetuated to the population.

**Revolutionary Hotbeds:** Critchlow notes that the seeds of revolution were planted in certain hotbeds, and those typically involved academia. The universities of these eventual revolutionary leaders were either within their country or without. Either way, these men were influenced by teachers, fellow students, and/or the institution's curriculum. It would be antithetical for Critchlow to condemn academia as a whole, but he proves that he is not so partial to his industry as to ignore a common origin of revolutionary thought.

**Support of the West:** Whether through naïveté or the desire to view revolution without the cost of personally enduring it, journalists, activists, and politicians in the West supported revolutionaries, some more so than others. Critchlow points out that journalists would often ignore and omit statements that read too harshly, or they simply believed the revolutionary did not mean what he said.

**False Promises:** Each of the rulers rose to power by condemning the current regime or form of government. Without question, those regimes and forms of government



FPG/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

One of the five tyrants examined in "Revolutionary Monsters": Mao Zedong.

BOOK REVIEW

## A Thrilling Story of a True Heroine: American Spy Virginia Hall

Sonia Purnell's well-researched book reads like a thriller

ANITA L. SHERMAN

A British biographer and journalist, Sonia Purnell pored through documents in England and the United States for more than three years as well as conducting countless interviews to write the book "A Woman of No Importance: The Untold Story of the American Spy Who Helped Win World War II."

A credit to her craft, Purnell gives readers a riveting account of the life of Virginia Hall, an American would-be socialite turned spy who made her way through the espionage world—one largely dominated

PUBLIC DOMAIN



Virginia Hall of the Special Operations Branch receiving the Distinguished Service Cross from Gen. Donovan in September 1945. CIA Official Website.

by men. She did so with brains, bravado, and a fierce loyalty to her friends, France, and freedom during the years leading up to World War II and in its aftermath.

Hall's expertise, formidable presence, and charming charisma won her friends and foes alike as she battled against a brutal Nazi regime, barely escaping capture on more than one occasion.

England's Special Operations Executive (SOE) was established in 1940. Winston Churchill's wake-up call to Europe was to create an "unprecedented onslaught of sabotage, subversion, and spying."

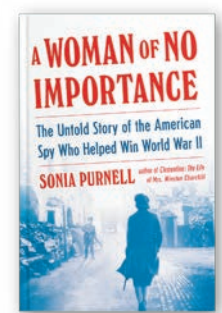
Hall was fluent in several languages. Her education had taken her to France for part of her schooling. Her early ambitions to be a diplomat with the State Department had left her rejected and dejected until a chance meeting with a British undercover agent proved serendipitous.

Giving her only a 50-50 chance of survival, SOE accepted her.

"It was generally accepted that in the field she would either learn fast or die. In any case most of her colleagues thought all women incapable of such a demanding and dangerous job. It was up to her to survive and prove them wrong," Purnell writes.

In short order, once on the ground in France, Hall created a network of crusaders championing the cause of the French Resistance. Successful on several levels, she orchestrated sending information to London about German troop strength and movements. Her true forte was in creating resistance groups and masterminding guerilla-type attacks.

**On the German Gestapo hit list, she was deemed the most dangerous spy in France.**



**'A Woman of No Importance: The Untold Story of the American Spy Who Helped Win World War II'**

**Author**  
Sonia Purnell

**Publisher**  
Penguin Books, 2020

**Pages**  
312 pages

were worthy of condemnation, whether for reasons of corruption, authoritarianism, or a desire to be independent (as in the case of Rhodesia). Critchlow indicates that each of these revolutions began atop a powder keg of resentment and disdain for the current ruling class. Each dictator simply had to promise a better situation than the current one: more freedom, a better economy, and social justice. Each dictator would fail on those promises, and it is rather difficult to conclude that they failed accidentally.

Critchlow gives readers a look at the formula for past revolutions. Yet without his directly saying so, it is unmistakable that he is hinting at America's current climate.

**A Clever Selection of Tyrants**

Critchlow did not choose the big three: Stalin, Hitler, and Mao. He did not stay within a certain ideology like fascism or communism. Furthermore, the author pulls his monsters from Russia, China, the Americas, the African continent, and the Middle East, exemplifying that tyranny knows no geographical or racial bounds.

The two figures that stand out are Mugabe and Khomeini. Enough has not been made of these two on the grand stage of tyrannical rule. Although there are plenty of dictators to go around, choosing one that based his rise on religion and as his being the voice of God and another on his fighting for independence and ending colonialism were wise choices.

The author also identifies what all five had in common, which is perhaps the most necessary tool in the revolutionary-tyrant playbook: the cult of personality. Each was able to convince large portions of the population to follow his lead wherever it went, even the path to violence and destruction.

**A Necessary Read**

Critchlow has written an easily digestible and necessary book that I would recommend to parents for their high school and college students before they return to class after the upcoming winter break. I would further recommend it for homeschoolers or even for private schools, especially within the realm of geopolitics.

The ASU history professor ends his book with several recommendations for readers to continue their study of 19th- through 21st-century tyrants and revolutionaries. In many ways, I view this book as planting its own seed, not for fomenting revolution but for cultivating a healthy skepticism of anyone making lofty promises to the masses.

Dustin Bass is the co-host of *The Sons of History* podcast and an author.

With a keen eye for judging character, she enlisted those from among police officials and prostitutes to doctors, nuns, and merchants. Her web of cohorts was fiercely effective, forming one of the largest resistance movements in France. In fact, on the German Gestapo hit list, she was deemed the most dangerous spy in France.

Hall's resistance groups provided critical support when the Allies invaded Normandy. Her well-planned attacks farther inland kept the German troops away from reinforcing those at the beach.

In 1946, France awarded Hall the Croix de Guerre With Palm, a high-ranking medal for heroism in combat.

Her final escape from France took her over the Pyrenees into Spain during winter—no easy feat traversing hazardous mountain trails with but a few companions and "Cuthbert," her prosthetic left leg.

**A 2nd Career**

Back in the States, Hall was one of the first women to join America's version of the SOE, the Office of Strategic Service, which later became the Central Intelligence Agency during President Truman's administration.

While never having a family of her own, Hall did eventually marry and was able to experience some serenity.

A New York Times bestseller, winner of the Plutarch Award, and a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, Purnell's compelling and well-researched book deserves our attention. But that is easy: Purnell's account of Hall's story reads like a fast-paced thriller, and Hall's deeds are on a Homeric level: full of action, adventure, intrigue, and treachery.

This read will make you proud. Virginia Hall is an amazing heroine worth knowing.

*Anita L. Sherman is an award-winning journalist with 20 years' experience as a writer/editor for several Virginia publications. A bibliophile, film noir fan, and Blackwing pencils devotee, she loves the stuff of stories. You may reach her at anitajusturite@gmail.com*



## FILM REVIEW

## Denis Villeneuve's Uneven First Half of Herbert's Epic Novel

ALL PHOTOS BY WARNER BROS

MICHAEL CLARK

Not long after the release of Frank Herbert's novel "Dune" in 1965, film studios set their sights on making a movie out of it. Three attempts in the 1970s with directors Arthur Jacobs, Alejandro Jodorowsky, and Ridley Scott—for very different reasons—never got beyond the pre-production phase. In 1981, producer Dino De Laurentiis hired David Lynch to write and direct a version, which was released in 1984.

An immensely gifted artist, Lynch was absolutely the wrong guy to make the movie. Containing nearly two dozen (mostly) A-list performers with close to two dozen major speaking parts, Lynch's "Dune" clocked in at over four hours, something Universal Studios (largely at the behest of theater chains) summarily rejected. They cut it down to 137 minutes, removing all continuity before releasing it to scathing reviews and anemic box office returns.

Lynch had his name removed from the credits, replacing it with "Alan Smithee," a generic industry moniker sometimes employed when directors are dissatisfied with studio meddling.

**On Paper, Villeneuve Was the Best Choice**

In 2017, after the back-to-back success of "Arrival" and "Blade Runner 2049," director Denis Villeneuve accepted an offer to remake "Dune," something which thrilled both Herbert die-hards and sci-fi movie geeks. He was the best possible choice to take on what everyone agreed would be a herculean task.

On the upside, Villeneuve's adaptation (co-written by him, Jon Spaihts, and Eric Roth) is light-years better than the "Smithee" interpretation, which isn't saying much. Considering that Villeneuve's film covers only half of the novel, the filmmakers had a wider creative berth and a running time far longer than the final "Smithee" cut.

To provide even a thumbnail of the plot here would be more confusing than helpful as this is one of the most convoluted stories ever imagined. In printed form, convoluted can be a plus, but on-screen it can become problematic—similar to untangling a gnarly thicket of roses and kudzu.

Many have stated that the "Dune" novel is "unfilmable"—a legitimate point made in the wake of the "Smithee" debacle. If you want examples of "unfilmable," read any Carl Hiaasen novel or the Bermuda Triangle that is "A Confederacy of Dunces." As scattershot and inconsistent as Villeneuve's version might be, he has proven that "Dune" is indeed filmable.

Sadly, "filmable" doesn't equate to riveting or engaging storytelling. It just means that it's understandable and somewhat cinematic. At points, the visuals are undeniably breathtaking. Set in multiple worlds, one rain-soaked and green and another arid and engulfed in sand, it offers superb contrast. While all of the buildings are the size of stadiums, most appear starved and monochrome. The human characters are dwarfed by their surroundings and, as a result, a huge emotional disconnect sets in.

The central character Paul Atreides (Timothée Chalamet) is frequently referred to as a would-be messiah. He's an almost otherworldly being who will ultimately save the universe. This same type of character was realized with greater clarity and pizzazz with Neo in "The Matrix."

**Herbert's Vision, Way Ahead of Its Time**

After taking in and absorbing Villeneuve's movie, one can't help but think that Herbert's novel was far too ahead of its time. With all due deference to Jules Verne, Herbert delivered something no one had ever imagined and, as literature, it was groundbreaking. It inspired other like-minded individuals looking to reinvent sci-fi, and they beat both film versions of "Dune" to the punch.

The most apparent of these are the many incarnations of "Star Trek" and "Star Wars," where humans interacting with nonhumans—some evil, some not—always have friction over an inanimate object. In the case of "Dune," it's "spice," referred to in the book as "melange." It is a medicinal (also euphoric) compound extracted from the sands of the desert planet, coveted by everyone and the source of all conflict.

**Only Diehard Fans Can Ensure a 'Part 2'**  
When COVID-19 hit full-stride earlier this



The central character Paul Atreides (Timothée Chalamet) needs to be more clearly defined.

year, Warner Bros. and HBO Max made the iffy decision that all of their 2021 titles would be released on the same day at theaters and online platforms. This once clever, now arcane marketing decision all but killed the box office take on "The Sopranos" prequel, "The Many of Newark," as most "Sopranos" fans were used to viewing it on small screens.

The early international receipts indicate that "Dune" is on its way to at least a break-even finish, yet if the movie doesn't exceed its budget with lots of room to spare, there will be no "Part 2."

If you're a "Dune" fan and want to ensure that the second installment gets made, go watch it in a theater. It will cost more and will rob you of your creature comforts, but you'll see the film the way it was intended and perhaps save the franchise in the process.

*Originally from Washington, D.C., Michael Clark has written for over 30 local and national film industry media outlets and is ranked in the top 10 of the Atlanta media marketplace. He co-founded the Atlanta Film Critics Circle in 2017 and is a regular contributor to the Shannon Burke Show on FloridaManRadio.com. Since 1995, Mr. Clark has written over 4,000 movie reviews and film-related articles.*

The landscapes in the film can be breathtaking but dwarf the characters.

**'Dune'**

**Director**  
Denis Villeneuve

**Starring**  
Timothée Chalamet, Rebecca Ferguson, Oscar Isaac, Josh Brolin, Stellan Skarsgård, Jason Momoa

**Running Time**  
2 hours, 35 minutes

**Rated**  
PG-13

**Release Date**  
Oct. 22, 2021

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

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-IMDB REVIEWER

**INTERVIEW  
WITH THE ANTICHRIST**