

An illustration of a woman with reddish-brown hair, wearing a light blue dress, lying on her side on a sandy surface. She is holding an open book and looking down at it. The background features rolling green hills, a small blue stream, and a large, gnarled tree trunk on the right. The sky is a deep purple. The overall style is painterly and evocative.

BOOKS *of the* CENTURY

A Hundred Years of Authors, Ideas, and Literature

From
The New York Times
Edited by Charles McGrath and the staff of the
Book Review

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARK SUMMERS



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Introduction

TO READ THROUGH one hundred years of *The New York Times Book Review* is to be reminded, forcefully, that almost nothing lasts. The ninety-nine blue-bound volumes containing the *Book Review* so far are crammed together on metal shelving at the back of the *Times*'s editorial library, some of them unopened for years. They're a monument to continuity of a sort—to one hundred years of serious and careful attention to books, a record unequaled by any other publication—but they are also a chastening and depressing catalogue of once-famous books and authors now utterly forgotten. In those yellowing newsprint pages, mighty literary reputations rise and fall—Santayana, for example, and James Gould Cozzens—while redoubtable publishing flagships like Boni and Liveright sail bravely for a few decades and then sink, unnoticed, beneath the commercial waves. The haberdashery in authors' portraits changes, with frock coats giving way to the tweed jacket and Shetland sweater and then the T-shirt and the miniskirt, and so does the nature of the goods purveyed by the *Book Review*'s extra-literary advertisers. In the early days these pages used to sell bookcases and lessons in elocution, etiquette, and deportment; now there are ads for litter boxes, sex videos, and depilatory devices. For years, the *Book Review* is chastely black and white, and then, with a sudden splash, there's color. Meanwhile, books come and go—hundreds of thousands of them, giant forests' worth—some making an impression for a season or a year, even a generation, and many more slipping away unnoticed.

Book reviews are, by their very nature, even more transitory, more forgettable, than the books they purport to evaluate, and there's something slightly self-defeating about creating yet *another* book, eventually to be forgotten, by

assembling within hard covers writing that was never intended (as most reviews are not) to be more than of the moment. If you look at enough reviews, though, and at reviews over a long enough period, amid the accidental changes you can spot some trends or alterations that seem instructive, if not reliably permanent. The dramatic emergence, for example, of that generation of writers—Hemingway, Dreiser, Fitzgerald, et al.—who in the years right after the First World War transformed the literary landscape and shifted its center to America. Or the flowering, in response to the baby boom, of children’s literature in the ’50s and ’60s; the outpouring of extraordinary and original fiction in the ’70s, and the great age of biography that seemed to sweep along afterward. Most evident of all, perhaps—if you look at *The New York Times Book Review*—is the gradual maturation of book reviewing itself. In the beginning the *Times* offered unsigned, often sniffy “notices” and “appreciations”; gradually, bylines and reviewer identifications began to appear and so, eventually, did true criticism, informed and readable and aimed at a discerning general audience. In a way, the *Book Review* grew up, and became more sophisticated, just as the American readership did.

In putting together this centennial volume, we’ve tried to demonstrate some of these changes, but the book, it should be emphasized, is not a comprehensive history of twentieth-century literature. It’s not even a completely reliable index to changes in taste or to the ups and downs of critical reputations, or to the role of the literary marketplace. There are good and important books that get short shrift here, as they did in the *Times* originally, and there are others whose significance has perhaps been inflated. You will have to look very carefully here—or read between the lines—to discern some of the great changes that have surged through the publishing industry in the last hundred years; and you will look in vain for any consistent overview, any sense of where we and our literature might be headed.

What this book offers instead, we hope, is a vivid, entertaining, and at least occasionally enlightening sense of literary immediacy—of what it was like, of initial and immediate reaction, when some of the most important or most influential books of the century first came into view. The whole volume could easily be called, as we have called one of our features here, “First Impressions.” It’s a record, if you like, of some of our collective and instinctive responses—of how things first struck us—and, not surprisingly, it’s often as interesting in its hesitations and uncertainties (what to make of W. E. B. Du Bois, for example, back in 1903) as it is in its outpourings and enthusiasms (as in the first, astonishingly prescient review of *Ulysses*).

This book is essentially an expansion of the centennial issue of the *Book Review*, which appeared in October 1996, on the occasion of the *Book Review*’s

100th anniversary. We've included a number of reviews that we didn't have room for back then, and also some nonreview material (the annual Editors' Choice selections for the twenty-five years 1972–1997, letters, essays, and commentary) intended to suggest a fuller sense not only of what the *Book Review* was actually like from week to week but also of some of the larger cultural issues that helped shape the literary climate at various points. But the editorial principle is the same in both the newspaper and book-length versions. In selecting material to reprint, we looked for two things: for books (or for controversies about books) that have in some way made a difference—by changing the way we think or by bringing us important news of ourselves and others—and for writing that is stylish and interesting enough to bear rereading. The latter is considerably harder to come by than the former, but, luckily, the two sometimes overlap. At least since the '20s, even in the *Book Review*'s dreariest issues, great books have often managed to elicit good (which is not necessarily to say favorable) reviews.

Often, but not always. Tastes alter, and as the material here abundantly testifies, critics are fallible. (If this book can be said to have a subtheme, in fact, it's that reviewing is not a science but, rather, an uneasy combination of description and opinion.) If a book that you deem an essential classic is not included here, it's possible that we overlooked it, but it's more likely that the original review failed to rise to the occasion, either by missing something essential or, more often, by being accurate but unmemorable. If there are fewer poetry reviews here than there ought to be, it's because for a long time the *Book Review* didn't pay a great deal of attention to poetry. If there's a noticeable scarcity of women reviewers, that's because in the *Book Review*'s early history women weren't invited to contribute very often. On the other hand, the present volume pays insufficient attention to translators, and for that those of us who put together the original centennial issue are to blame.

Though the years from 1896 until World War I saw no shortage of great books published, we had a hard time finding many reviews from that era that seemed fit to print again—though the fault here may not be so much the *Times*'s as the very nature of prewar critical prose. (Almost all the reviews, by the way, have been cut from their original lengths, some more drastically than others.) We had an equally hard time choosing among the many brilliant reviews that appeared in the late '60s and early '70s—a period that, from this distance, begins to look like a Golden Age of the *Book Review*, and perhaps of publishing in general. And when it came to the more current books—those from the late '80s and the '90s—we more or less threw up our hands and settled on ones that seem of particular relevance right now. When the enlightened and liberated editors come along to put together the second centennial volume of the *Book Review*,

they will no doubt find many of our choices quaint, not to say incomprehensible. All those late-twentieth-century books on feminism and feminist issues, for example. What was *that* all about?

Nothing lasts—except, one hopes, the impulse that compels some people to write books and others to try to spread the word about them. The *Book Review* may not be the single most advantageous window from which to look back at the last one hundred years, but neither is it an entirely accidental one. It's a window inward as well as outward. Here, in one way or another, are our fears and anxieties and, more important, our longings and our dreams. This is really how we thought about what we thought, how we felt about what we felt.

The original, newspaper version of this centennial collection was put together by the editors of the *Book Review*, assisted by a SWAT team of freelance researchers who, equipped with magnifying glasses and ampules of injectable No-Doz, ventured back into the mustiest regions of the archives. The effort left many of us spent and blurry-eyed, and so for this book-length version we enlisted the services of Ken Emerson, who bravely took it upon himself to go back, one by one, through those same blue-bound volumes. Mr. Emerson is a former Articles Editor of *The New York Times Magazine*, an occasional contributor to the *Book Review* and the author of *Doo-dah!: Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture*. Fortunately (and reassuringly), what he came back with mostly conformed to our original editorial judgments. He didn't find too many worthy reviews that we hadn't at least considered, that is. But he uncovered troves of valuable material—letters and essays, and some early glimpses of talent on the horizon—that we have gratefully included. For this edition of *Books of the Century*, we thank Julie Just, the deputy editor of the *Book Review*, for rounding out the century with well-chosen selections from 1998 and 1999.

This may also be an appropriate moment to acknowledge the succession of talented editors who for the last half-century or so have overseen the *Book Review* and maintained its tradition of fairness and excellence. They are, in order, Francis Brown, John Leonard, Harvey Shapiro, Mitchel Levitas, and Rebecca Pepper Sinkler.

—CHARLES MCGRATH

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