

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

292

Volume 299

Contemporary Literary Criticism

A Retrospective Covering the Year's
New Authors, Prizewinners, and Obituaries

Jeffrey W. Hunter
PROJECT EDITOR



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Contemporary
Literary Criticism
Yearbook 2009

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Preface

Contemporary Literary Criticism Yearbook is part of the ongoing *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series. After a ten-year hiatus in which no *CLC Yearbook* volumes were published from 1998-2007, the *CLC Yearbook* will again publish once annually, beginning with Volume 280, a retrospective of 2008. *CLC* provides a comprehensive survey of modern literature by presenting criticism on the works of novelists, poets, playwrights, short story writers, scriptwriters, and other creative writers now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. A strong emphasis is placed on including criticism of works by established authors who frequently appear on syllabuses of high school and college literature courses.

To complement this broad coverage, the *Yearbook* focuses more specifically on a given year's literary activities and features a larger number of currently noteworthy authors than is possible in standard *CLC* volumes. *CLC Yearbook* provides students, teachers, librarians, researchers, and general readers with information and commentary on the outstanding literary works and events of a given year.

Format of the Book

CLC Volume 299: *Yearbook 2009*, which includes criticism on nineteen authors, is divided into three sections—"New Authors," "Prizewinners," and "In Memoriam" entries.

New Authors— This section introduces six writers who received significant critical recognition for their first major work(s) of fiction in 2009 or whose work was translated into English or published in the United States for the first time. Authors were selected for inclusion if their work was reviewed in several prominent literary periodicals.

Prizewinners— This section begins with a list of literary prizes and honors announced in 2009, citing the award, award criteria, the recipient, and the title of the prizewinning work. Following the listing of prizewinners is a presentation of seven entries on individual award winners, representing a mixture of genres and nationalities.

In Memoriam— This section consists of critical essays, reminiscences, tributes, retrospective articles, and obituary notices on six authors who died in 2009. In addition, a brief Obituaries section follows the six "In Memoriam" entries. The brief Obituaries provide information on other deceased prominent literary figures who died during 2009.

Organization of the Book

The *CLC Yearbook* consists of criticism drawn from literary reviews, general magazines, newspapers, websites, books, and scholarly journals. *Yearbook* entries variously contain the following elements:

- An **Author Heading** in the "New Authors" and "Prizewinners" sections cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, and the title of the work discussed in the entry (if applicable); the "In Memoriam" section includes the author's name and birth and death dates. The author's full name, pseudonyms (if any) under which the author has published, nationality, and principal genres are listed on the first line of the author entry.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- A brief **Biographical and Critical Introduction** to the author and his or her work precedes criticism in the "New Authors," "Prizewinners," and "In Memoriam" sections.
- A listing of **Principal Works** is included for all entries in the "Prizewinners" and "In Memoriam" sections.

- The reprinted **Criticism** represents essays selected by editors to reflect the spectrum of opinion about a specific work or about an author's writing in general. The criticism is typically arranged chronologically, adding a useful perspective to the entry. In the "New Authors," "Prizewinners," and "In Memoriam" sections all titles by the author being discussed are printed in boldface type, enabling the reader to more easily identify the author's work.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation**, designed to help the user find the original essay or book, precedes each selected piece of reprinted criticism.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- **Cross-references** have been included in the "New Authors," "Prizewinners," and "In Memoriam" sections, when applicable, to direct readers to other useful sources published by Gale. An annotated bibliography of **Further Readings** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

Other Features

The *Yearbook* also includes the following features:

An **Acknowledgments** section lists the copyright holders who have granted permission to reprint material in this volume of *CLC*. It does not, however, list every book or periodical reprinted or consulted during the preparation of this volume.

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in the series as well as in other Literature Criticism series.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *CLC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *CLC* volume in which their entry appears.

An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, films, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

Citing Contemporary Literary Criticism

When citing criticism reprinted in the Literature Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as University of Chicago Press style or Modern Language Association (MLA) style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

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Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." In *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*, edited by Mickey Pearlman, 41-52. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 276-82. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xv

NEW AUTHORS

Charles Bock 1970-	3
<i>American novelist</i>	
Michael Dahlie 1970?-	20
<i>American novelist, short story writer, and nonfiction writer</i>	
Mohammed Hanif 1965-	24
<i>Pakistani-born English novelist</i>	
Daniyal Mueenuddin 1963-	33
<i>Pakistani short story writer</i>	
David Small 1945-	40
<i>American memoirist, children's author, and illustrator</i>	
Jeannette Walls 1960-	44
<i>American memoirist, novelist, and nonfiction writer</i>	

PRIZEWINNERS

Prizewinners Announced in 2009	73
Sue Grafton 1940-	81
<i>American novelist</i>	
Yusef Komunyakaa 1947-	89
<i>American poet and playwright</i>	
Colum McCann 1965-	106
<i>Irish novelist and short story writer</i>	
Herta Müller 1953-	129
<i>Romanian-born German novelist, short story writer, essayist, poet, and autobiographer</i>	

Richard Price 1949-	144
<i>American novelist and screenwriter</i>	
Yasmina Reza 1959-	158
<i>French playwright and novelist</i>	
Elizabeth Strout 1956-	173
<i>American novelist</i>	

IN MEMORIAM

J. G. Ballard 1930-2009	187
<i>English novelist, short story writer, playwright, memoirist, and essayist</i>	
Mario Benedetti 1920-2009	219
<i>Uruguayan poet, short story writer, novelist, and playwright</i>	
Philip José Farmer 1918-2009	227
<i>American novelist, short story writer, and essayist</i>	
E. Lynn Harris 1955-2009	246
<i>American novelist and memoirist</i>	
Elmer Kelton 1926-2009	270
<i>American novelist</i>	
Frank McCourt 1930-2009	286
<i>American memoirist, playwright, and nonfiction writer</i>	
Obituaries	307
Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index	313
Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index	431
CLC Cumulative Nationality Index	451
CLC-299 Title Index	467

New Authors

Charles Bock

Beautiful Children

American novelist.

The following entry presents an overview of critical response to Bock's first novel, *Beautiful Children* (2008).

INTRODUCTION

Bock spent 11 years writing his first novel, *Beautiful Children*, at times worrying that his sanity was being compromised by the writing process and would be lost if the book failed to find a publisher. Those years appear to have been well spent, as the author and his friends have agreed in interviews that Bock needed to evolve as a writer before he could master the topic and narrative style of *Beautiful Children*.

Bock was born in 1970 and raised in Las Vegas, Nevada, apart from, but witness to, the mythos that makes up the town's tourist attractions. His parents owned a pawnshop (they now own two) and Bock and his siblings spent many hours in the back room, waiting for closing time so the family could go home. Bock has told interviewers that occasionally there was excitement, with desperate customers condemning his parents as "dirty Jews," but mostly the day-to-day scene in the pawnshop was one of despair or resignation. Bock's evocation of the "real" Las Vegas is rooted in these childhood experiences.

Bock honed his writing skills at Bennington College in Vermont, where he completed a Master of Fine Arts program in fiction. He has since taught fiction at the Gotham Writers Workshop in New York, where he lives with his wife and daughter. New York was his home during the writing of *Beautiful Children*, but he has told interviewers that he didn't see much of the Big Apple before the book was completed, spending days ensconced in his small apartment, focused obsessively on his writing. *Beautiful Children* received a barrage of critical attention, with many reviewers praising the book and others expressing consternation at its popularity. It was named a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year for 2008 and won the 2009 Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Also in 2009, Bock received the Silver Pen Award from the Nevada Writers Hall of Fame.

Beautiful Children revolves around the disappearance of twelve-year-old Newell Ewing, who goes out one night with his suspiciously older friend, Kenney, and fails to return. Alternating timeframes depict events leading up to and following Newell's disappearance, and the appalling reality of life as a runaway in Vegas is introduced through the stories of a host of grim and garish characters. The disintegration of Newell's parents' already fragile marriage is intertwined as well, an element that Bock says benefited from the years he spent refining the book. *Beautiful Children* also includes a resource list for runaways and their families; Bock has said that he hopes the book will serve as a conversation-starter for parents and teen or young-adult children with seemingly nothing in common.

Praise for *Beautiful Children* emphasizes Bock's skill with evocative characterization and rich scene description; his ability to place the reader on the Vegas Strip is almost universally hailed. However, the novel's narrative structure is a point of contention with reviewers: what some praise as a mosaic, melange, or whirling roulette wheel of storylines is to others disjointed, choppy, or disorienting. Some critics assert that Bock is obviously in control of the book's travels through time and among characters, while others argue that the book's lack of a single cohesive narrative arc marks the author as a novice.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Beautiful Children (novel) 2008

CRITICISM

Publishers Weekly (review date 27 August 2007)

SOURCE: Review of *Beautiful Children*, by Charles Bock. *Publishers Weekly* 254, no. 34 (27 August 2007): 58.

[In the following review, the critic presents a brief, mostly positive assessment of Bock's *Beautiful Children*.]

A wide-ranging portrait of an almost mythically depraved Las Vegas, this sweeping debut [*Beautiful Children*] takes in everything from the bland misery of suburban Nevada to the exploitative Vegas sex industry. At the nexus of this Dickensian universe is Newell Ewing, a hyperactive 12-year-old boy with a comic-book obsession. One Saturday night, Newell disappears after going out with his socially awkward, considerably older friend. Orbiting around that central mystery are a web of sufferers: Newell's distraught parents, clinging onto a fraught but tender marriage; a growth-stunted comic book illustrator; a stripper who sacrifices bodily integrity for success; and a gang of street kids. Into their varying Vegas tableaux, Bock stuffs an overwhelming amount of evocative detail and brutally revealing dialogue (sometimes in the form of online chats). The story occasionally gets lost in amateur skin flicks, unmentionable body alterations and tattoos, and the greasy cruelty of adolescents, all of which are given unflinching and often deft closeups. The bleak, orgiastic final sequence, drawing together the disparate plot threads, feels contrived, but Bock's Vegas has hope, compassion and humor, and his set pieces are sharp and accomplished.

David A. Berona (review date 1 October 2007)

SOURCE: Berona, David A. Review of *Beautiful Children*, by Charles Bock. *Library Journal* 132, no. 16 (1 October 2007): 56.

[In the following review, Berona praises *Beautiful Children* as a moral wake-up call.]

With blunt and sometimes uncomfortable descriptions of abuse and squalor, [*Beautiful Children*] addresses the harrowing issue of this country's runaway children. Set in the sex-charged city of Las Vegas, the spellbinding plot centers on missing 12-year-old Newell Ewing, covering both the hours surrounding his disappearance and the situation's devastating effect on his parents. Complex characters playing a role in Newell's disappearance occasion a stark look into the grimy world of hustling, strip clubs, and a porn industry drawing transient and desperate teens. Among these characters are the spoiled Newell; Kenny, whose low self-esteem makes him hook up with a younger boy; Cheri, a high-class stripper involved with a scuzzy predator named Ponyboy; a pitiful comic-book artist named Bing; and a host of homeless teenagers like Danger-Prone Daphney—

pregnant, doped up, and from an upper-middle-class family. This powerful indictment of a culture of "people hurting people for no reason" promises to shake up the moral conscience of every reader. A comprehensive drama; highly recommended for every collection.

Kirkus Reviews (review date 1 October 2007)

SOURCE: Review of *Beautiful Children*, by Charles Bock. *Kirkus Reviews* (1 October 2007): np.

[Below, a reviewer presents a mixed assessment of *Beautiful Children*, finding it to be a promising but somewhat convoluted debut.]

[*Beautiful Children*] shows plenty of ambition and promise but could use a streamlining of subplots.

The author casts his native Las Vegas as a microcosm not only for America, but for the human condition as well. At the hub is the Ewing family, Lincoln and Lorraine and their 12-year-old son, Newell, who all appear conventionally (if a little complacently) happy until Newell falls through the city's cracks. Though the central chronology documents the night of Newell's disappearance, flashbacks (and flashes forward) show that the boy wasn't that happy after all. If he were, he'd be the only one in this novel who is.

There are many spokes to the plot, most of them tangential. There is the stripper and her boyfriend (verging on pimp), who urges her to get breast implants and coaxes her toward a porn shoot. There is a geeky graphic artist, with the improbable jazz-homage name of Bing Beiderbixxe, who has a scheme that involves both 3-D tattoos and the stripper. There is the dead-end high-school kid who receives encouragement from Bing and who befriends Newell. There is a hallucinatory episode among a homeless pack including a nameless girl with a shaved head, a pregnant girl, a dog and a vampirish hustler. Many of these people converge on a late-night punk-rock bacchanal in the desert, which serves as a sort of climax without bringing the plot full circle. And there are Lincoln and Lorraine, who come to suspect that their son was the only thing holding their marriage together. The tone varies from titillating close-ups of the adult-entertainment industry to background information on runaways that sounds like a public-service announcement. (It's 11 o'clock. Do you know where your children are?) On some