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Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West
by Stephen C. Ambrose
Simon & Schuster, 1996, 511 pp., $27.50

Long before the Louisiana Purchase, Thomas Jefferson had supported plans for exploring the American West. As the leading American thinker of the Enlightenment, and an amateur scientist, he nourished an active interest in the Louisiana country and was fascinated by the native Americans, the geography, and the flora and fauna of the Western wilderness. When, in October 1803, through an unusual series of events, the Louisiana territory fell into American hands, Jefferson's plan for a full-scale expedition to explore what he had just bought was ready to be launched; earlier that year he had persuaded Congress to secretly appropriate money for such a venture. In December, President Jefferson dispatched his private secretary and fellow Virginian, Captain Meriwether Lewis, along with William Clark, co-commander and younger brother of the noted Indian fighter George Rogers Clark, on what was perhaps the most famous trek in American history.

In the spring of 1804 Lewis and Clark and a party of nearly forty men set out from the frontier town of St. Louis and followed the Missouri River northward. Guided by Sacagawea, fifteen-year-old pregnant wife of a French fur trader, they crossed the Rockies into then-uncharted territory and descended along the Columbia and Snake Rivers to the Pacific coast. They were instructed by Jefferson to keep careful journals about all the plants, animals, minerals and metals that they encountered, and to note all information about native inhabitants, prospects for trade, and viable routes for overland migration. Lewis had been groomed for the job, having undergone crash tutorials in everything from botany to zoology in preparation for the collection of such diverse data. His journals would stand as perhaps the most undervalued legacy of the expedition (much of their contents would not be published for nearly a century).

Although Lewis was hailed as a national hero upon his return to St. Louis in the autumn of 1806, and despite his subsequent appointment as governor of the territory he had charted, failures in his personal life led him to alcoholism and severe depression. He committed suicide three years after his return.

In *Undaunted Courage,* distinguished historian Stephen E. Am-

brose paints an original and readable portrait of Meriwether Lewis, and traces in vivid detail the hazardous odyssey that left an indelible mark on the American imagination. Drawing on new scholarship, Ambrose focuses on Jefferson's initial motivations for Western exploration. He documents the Lewis and Clark expedition, from its clandestine funding by Congress and the initial preparations—even before the vast territory was purchased—through the perilous journey to the soon-to-be "Oregon Country." Aside from the inherent drama of the trip itself, what makes this book so fascinating is Ambrose's ability to convey the sense of wonder experienced by the explorers as they encountered people and places never before seen by Euro-Americans. Ambrose also includes a portrait of Sacagawea, the remarkable young Shoshone woman who played a key role as guide and go-between during a critical leg of the journey.

Following recent trends in Jeffersonian scholarship, *Undaunted Courage* not only aids in re-establishing Jefferson's importance in American history but stands as an exhaustive and definitive study of Meriwether Lewis and the expedition that whetted American curiosity about the West.

Emerson Among the Eccentrics: A Group Portrait
by Carlos Baker
Viking, 1996, 608 pp., $34.95

If Carlos Baker is even half right, America's first philosopher of spiritual self-development and self-reliance was one of the nicest guys in the history of American literature: supportive, kind, gracious, a great listener, generous—at times self-sacrificial in saving some of his more improvident friends from financial dilemmas—a hard worker on the public-speaking circuit (his principal source of income), long suffering toward his semi-invalid wife, kind and loving toward his children, possessed of a sense of humor even regarding his own mental decline in old age ("I am an imbecile most of the time," he wrote). One almost yearns for a thorn in this rose bush.

His only flaw might be a tendency toward coolness, an inability to truly or passionately love —unlike his friend Hawthorne, who for all his inwardness was warmly devoted to his wife Sophia. Thoreau, on the other hand, was embarrassed, shy, and awkward around women to the point that it sometimes made him blush to walk through a room where they were present. The beak-nosed, irritable author of *Walden* —the most elegant single document of Transcendentalism—did, however, have a natural affection and easy relationship with Lidian Emerson, Waldo's wife. Indeed, Baker suggests that at times Thoreau, working in Emerson's household or living nearby, was more of a soulmate to Lidian than her frequently absent husband.

Baker's book fleshes out the idea, set forth in the now classic *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* by F.O. Matthiessen (1941), that the age of Emerson, roughly the 1830s through the '60s, was a particularly vital and coherent era in American literature. Baker generally convinces us that the Transcendentalists and their fellow

travelers were important to each other: Bronson Alcott, schoolteacher and idealist; Thoreau, naturalist and ornery philosopher of simplicity; Margaret Fuller, feminist and revolutionary (and in some ways the most romantic personality among them); Nathaniel Hawthorne, handsome, dour novelist; poets Jones Very and, at a distance, Walt Whitman; the Henry James, Sr., family, including sons William and Henry, Jr. Often living near each other (Thoreau's Walden Pond shack was on Emerson's land), having extended visits with each other, writing long and articulate letters to each other, at times reading and criticizing each others' works, the Concord/Boston group formed a coherent intellectual community.

Not that they all agreed with or liked each other. Hawthorne and historian Charles Eliot Norton, were frustrated and perplexed by Emerson's tendency to float off into Neoplatonic clouds in the face of hard questions. In Norton's words, he "refused to entertain instances of misery or crime." However, in a time when publicly turning one's back on organized religion could be thought "dangerous," Emerson's persistent optimism was surely useful. Summarizing his effect on American thought and culture, Oliver Wendell Holmes, who was even more of a free thinker than Emerson, called him "an iconoclast without a hammer, who took down our idols from their pedestals so gently that it seemed like an act of worship."

Ship Fever and Other Stories
by Andrea Barrett
Norton, 1996, 254 pp., $21

The widespread phobia about science among literary types has often led to its depiction in fiction as a ruinous force. In this striking story collection, Andrea Barrett investigates science's place in our lives, but she does so with a respect—almost reverence—for the field that many of her predecessors have lacked. Her goal is "to write about the love of science and the science of love." She achieves it by sucessfully coupling these seemingly disparate subjects—love and science.

"The Littoral Zone" tells of two marine biologists who have an affair at a research station on an island off the coast of New Hampshire. As they look back on their relationship, they wonder if their love is worth the pain they have caused their families. In "The Behavior of the Hawkweeds" the wife of a mediocre genetecist who reveres Mendel contemplates what it means to live a life of disappointment. Mendel's work takes on significance to her as well; his theories of heredity were apparently disproven when he encountered hawkweeds, plants that do not pass "their traits serenely through generations." The young Canadian doctor in "Ship Fever" uses his medical training to care for sick Irish immigrants fleeing the Potato Famine. Though the scientific knowledge of the day proves useless in the face of one of the world's worst typhoid epidemics, the doctor learns that love and kindness can be more effective remedies.

Barrett is the author of four novels, and her stories often seem novelistic in scope and technique. Several of them employ historical settings and multiple points of view, and combine real historical figures with imagined

characters—practices more common in the novel. These techniques give heft to Barrett's stories and set her apart from the scores of authors still under the influence of minimalism. The result is a memorable collection that glorifies scientific knowledge rather than indicting it.

Equation for Evil
by Philip Caputo
HarperCollins, 1996, 488 pp., $25

In his latest book Caputo, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Rumor of War,* as well the acclaimed *Horn of Africa* and *Indian Country* tries to transcend the detective novel genre. Unfortunately, the novel is more ambitious than it is successful. Though the ostensible theme of *Equation for, Evil* is a metaphysical inquiry into the nature of human evil, most of the book is dedicated instead to endless, nail-biting detective work.

The story begins with the mass murder of a school bus full of Asian-American kids. The killer, neo-Nazi Duane Boggs, blurts out one last unintelligible screed and blows his brains out. As a response to the public outcry over the apparently racist-motivated mass murder, Gabriel Chin, Chinese-American Special Agent for the California Department of Justice, and Leander Heartwood, W.A.S.P. forensic psychiatrist, are appointed to investigate Boggs' crime. Together they muddle through the racism and paranoia of post-L.A. riot California, unravelling the mystery of his complex motives from end to beginning and speculating on the origins of evil.

After a promising start, the story culminates in a Stallone-like, junkyard shootout complete with insipid one-liners. We never learn what the nature of evil really is, either through Chin's shallow existentialist theory or Heartwood's Freudianisms.Chin's contemplation of an extramarital affair is just one example of the unresolved subplots that appear and disappear throughout. Despite its good pacing, *Equation* falls flat on its face. More literary readers will be unimpressed by the pedestrian prose, and mystery lovers will be annoyed by the time-consuming speculation.

Ex Utero
by Laurie Foos
Coffee House, 1995, 199 pp., $16.95

One night, after a hard day of shopping, Rita sits up in bed and realizes that her uterus is missing. When she retraces her steps and discovers that she's misplaced it at the mall, she becomes a poster child for a society obsessed with media exposure and women's reproductive capabilities.

Rita's husband, George, becomes impotent, and spends his days drawing sad pictures of his wilted organ. Rita takes to wearing red high-heeled pumps. Since mall security isn't making much progress on her case, she agrees to appear on the Rod Nodderman program—a syndicated talk show hosted by a Donahue-like Lothario—to solicit the aid of the American public. Her appearance sparks a wave of hysteria among women and men alike. The Society for Fruitless Wombs holds demonstrations at the mall and the TV station. Security guards drool over artist's sketches of Rita's womb on

cable. Adele, the ultimate Nodderman fan, feels her vagina seal up in respose to Rita's story while she's making love in front of the TV. Lucy, another Nodderman viewer, experiences even more bizarre, sympathetic effects. And the malls can't keep up with the demand for the size-seven red high heels that have become Rita's trademark.

Rita eventually tires of the publicity and goes on the lam with Adele. The two hole up in a hotel room, eating bonbons and telling each other horror stories about childbirth—though neither of them has experienced it. However, when a young hemophiliac man, inspired by Rita's story, commits suicide with a plastic womb tied around his neck, Rita takes full responsibility and turns herself in. She is then rewarded by the return of her womb, only slightly the worse for wear, which she decides to keep—though not to use for its traditional purpose.

Foos' first novel is a delight of wit and invention. Although it invokes the tradition of the absurd, her satire is almost allegorical in its pointedness and consistency. Some readers may find the narrative explosion of a single joke to be tiresome. However Foos takes the notion of synecdoche —a part standing for the whole—seriously. "Never get the whole story," Nodderman tells his staffers. In this hilarious sendup of media, maternity and misogyny, Foos exploits Nodderman's technique for all it's worth.

The Unconsoled
by Kazuo Ishiguro
Knopf, 1995, 535 pp., $25

Ryder, a world-renowned pianist, arrives in an unnamed Continental city to give a concert. The city is at a crossroads in its history, at a point when it will either experience a renaissance or slide irretrievably into decay. As Ryder finds out, a group of community leaders has arranged his concert as part of a last-ditch effort to shore up the fortunes of the city. For these people, Ryder is nothing less than a savior.

Oddly unconcerned about the huge expectations laid upon him, Ryder wanders dream-like through his days in the city, meeting familiar people he can't quite place. In each case, he realizes after some time that he does indeed know these people—his wife, his child, an old school friend, a childhood playmate. His inability to immediately recognize them doesn't concern him, and there are no teary reunions when he realizes who they are. He continues to keep them at a safe distance.

Because Ryder's behavior and personality are so baffling, we never know for certain if he is delusional or if he is simply visiting a really odd town. The answer, probably, is both. As he did in *The Remains of the Day,* Ishiguro effortlessly inhabits his character, mimicking the stiff-upper-lip detachment and rational- ization of the British upper-middle class. But he's gone one step further here by placing Ryder in a world that is awry at a more basic level than that of *The Remains of the Day,* a world where space, time and perception don't work as we expect them to.

This is an extremely frustrating world, and at 535 pages, *The Unconsoled* gets long. In this self-consciously Great Book, Ishiguro spends

a lot of time showing off: even minor characters go on at length about their lives, their motivations, their wounds. In fact, the only character whose life we don't learn about in great detail is Ryder's—we find out only vague facts as he stumbles across them.

Still, *The Unconsoled* offers a story like no other in recent memory, and provides no easy answers—this is not a *Bourne Identity* for the literary set. Ishiguro doesn't lead us to a climactic epiphany, when all the mystery and obfuscation are tidily resolved. In the end, none of the expectations laid upon Ryder when he came to town—that he would be a father and husband, that he would perform a concert, that he would redirect the destiny of a dying city—are fulfilled. Without remorse, Ryder leaves disappointment in his wake and goes in search of breakfast.

Is *The Unconsoled* an impressive achievement? Without a doubt. Is it so impressive that reading it is worth the effort? Possibly not.

The Hudson Letter
by Derek Mahon
Wake Forest, 1996, 63 pp., $8.95

The Hudson Letter is composed of the long sequence from which the collection takes its name, along with four other poems (an adaptation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, two poems by Mahon, and a translation of the Irish poet Nuala Ni Dhonhnaill) which have nothing in common with it. "The Hudson Letter" itself shines so brightly, however, that one is tempted to overlook the disunity of the collection.

Composed in eighteen sections, "The Hudson Letter" is an eloquent blend of high diction and slang, reminiscent of Hart Crane. Mahon works the expatriate Irish theme perfectly, his outsider's perspective capturing New York's cacophony and industry, as well as the violence at the core of its language. Isolation and solitude are the immigrant's predicament—and Mahon's most compelling subject. Mahon speaks in a wide variety of outsiders' voices—from Sappho's to Auden's, to an Irish immigrant girl's. His stark vision seems justified by his observation, "fine worlds are seldom humane."

The Spaces Between Birds: Mother/Daughter Poems, 1967–1995
by Sandra McPherson (with Phoebe McPherson)
Wesleyan, University Press of New England, 1996, 63 pp., $25.00 (cloth), $11.95 (paper)

Sandra McPherson's latest collection contains new and reprinted poems interspersed with previously unpublished poems by her daughter Phoebe. A preface details the horoscope cast at Phoebe's birth, and chronologically, the selections move from evocations of Phoebe's childhood to poems that describe Sandra's final acceptance of her daughter's difference: Asperger's syndrome autism.

In "Precious Metal" Sandra writes of her daughter's uncanny affinity for broken pieces of machines, which Phoebe collects and transforms into new machines, much as Sandra collects words and images and transforms them into poetry: "With each gadget/she translates into being,/ my floral wisdom loses a petal./ Then

with new and mystic/trust in welding, gains it back."

Phoebe's own poems, whimsical, beautiful and terrible, provide a naive counterpoint to her mother's: "I was trying to make this house shiny with laughter on the leaf," one of her shortest untitled poems reads; "This place is full of dogs and dumb meanings," says another.

McPherson admires her daughter's creativity, and her inclusion of the pieces with her own work isn't merely out of a compulsion to go public with private hardship. Phoebe's poems are better than curiosities, calm and wondering, in sharp contrast to those of her mother, which voice McPherson's frustrations in dealing with her more- and less-than-normal daughter.

Conceptually, the book is grounded in the idea of negative space, a way of viewing the world not by the boundaries of things, but by the spaces between them—the "spaces between birds." This is Phoebe's vision, backwards and arresting. As McPherson writes in the title poem, "I believe/if we all agreed/to follow each other/in a migratory V . . ./we would learn to hear the blank-ness/that forms the essence of our going on,/some puff we didn't/ mean to say but which/means *us*."

Accordion Crimes
by E. Annie Proulx
Scribner, 1996, 381pp., $25

Annie Proulx's new novel is a great book to disagree about. Some readers will love it, and for arguably good reasons. Like her previous much-feted *The Shipping News*, it is beautifully written sentence by sentence, as it describes the long life of one accordion, which is built by a craftsman in Italy, brought to America in the 1890s, and which then passes through the hands of many immigrants of various origins—German, Tex-Mex, Cajun, black, Polish, Norwegian, and others.

The immigrants' lives are described in ruthlessly tragi-comic terms, with even their momentary triumphs so woven into a fabric of high-velocity narrative that they move in the course of one sentence from success to despair or death. Proulx dispatches her characters with merciless regularity and speed, even at times resorting to parentheses to remind us in advance of the pitiful end of her poor immigrants.

There is thematic purpose to it all: Proulx is showing in loosely connected segments the lives of filth and poverty that American immigrants led and continue to lead. Whatever our illusions, she is saying, the facts are harsh. Yet the author's virtuosity somehow overwhelms her subject. The book is so jammed with historic references, images, and little details that the reader eventually feels that he is watching a kind of fireworks display, designed almost entirely for spectacular effect. While the novel may be packed with the best research, the most dense verisimilitude, that the author's nerves and money could buy, Proulx seems to forget the people who are supposed to be its subject. There is little apparent selectivity, little breathing room in her zooming low-altitude narrative. When she slows down a little and allows a story to develop, as she does at moments in the novel, one sees what kind of superb writer of fiction she can be.

The virtues of this book are numerous; in places it is thrilling; but reading it, to me, is like being manhandled by a thousand-pound literary gorilla.

The Moor's Last Sigh
by Salman Rushdie
Pantheon, 1995, 435 pp., $25

"Ah, the legends of the battling da Gamas of Cochin! I tell them as they have come down to me, polished and fantasticated by many retellings. These are old ghosts, distant shadows, and I tell their tales to be done with them."

So Moraes Zogoiby, the protagonist of Rushdie's latest novel, begins to narrate his family history. At times fascinating, at times cartoonish, *The Moor's Last Sigh* is an absorbing family saga that slowly meanders through a century of Indian history.

Rushdie peoples his story with colorful characters, like the narrator, Moraes Zogoiby (the Moor), estranged son of a Catholic mother and Jewish father. He is an Indian child who, symbolically, arises out of this mix deformed, with a stump-like arm and a life that moves "double-quick": by the age of ten he is larger than his father, and by twenty-four, with white hair, he appears older than his mother. And there is Vasco Miranda, a family friend-turned-madman (he has a needle coursing through his veins, threatening to pierce his heart at any moment) who forces Moraes to narrate the da Gama-Zogoiby family history.

Moraes' life revolves around several charismatic and ruthless women. His mother, dominates his actions, even after her murder, as her spirit calls him to avenge her death. Then there is his love, Uma Sarasvati, whose treachery leads to his banishment from the family.

Rushdie's 430-page novel is crammed with misfortunes, grief, betrayal, history and magic. His observations on the spice trade, art, cricket, architecture, and the underworld all add flavor to the novel, while the hectic pace of Indian politics reanimates the story when it threatens to become too lethargic.

The Best American Short Stories 1995
Edited by Jane Smiley
Katrina Kenison, Series Editor
Houghton Mifflin, 1995, 366 pp., $24.95

With the 1995 *Best American* anthology, Jane Smiley has assembled a vibrant collection of stories—offbeat and refreshingly unpretentious.

One of the best pieces here is Steven Polansky's "Leg," about a father who, in a desperate attempt to communicate with his son, intentionally lets his injured leg become infected and gangrenous. Despite the grotesque plot, the story does not come off as gimmicky. Instead, the father's actions make the reader first question, then reflect on the extremes to which even ordinary people will go, given the right circum- stances.

Andrea Barrett's "The Behavior of the Hawkweeds," is a complex tale of scientific intrigue. In "Hand Jive," a story about growing up, Andrew Cozine turns a potentially ludicrous-seeming compulsion into a cause for readers' sympathy. Edward Falco's "The Artist" has all the elements of a bad "Miami Vice" episode: guns,

drugs, and the frozen body of a dead cop. Yet readers will be amazed and delighted when they discover how Falco has shaped all these elements into a fine story about escaping one's past.

The stories in the 1995 anthology are marked by their originality and their riskiness. You may not like all of Smiley's choices, but you won't close the book feeling like you've read it all before.

An Actual Life
by Abigail Thomas
Algonquin Books, 1996, 252 pp., $16.95

Thomas is the author of a previous story collection, *Getting Over Tom.* In that book she described, with fine comic touches, the lives of pregnant daughters and neglectful mothers, middle-aged loneliness and the pain of unrequited love. Her first novel, *An Actual Life,* is the sad yet funny story of Buddy and Virginia, two characters introduced in the earlier book.

Married out of "necessity" in the 1960s, after Virginia's polite expulsion from college due to her pregnancy, Buddy and Virginia are virtually strangers. Virginia comes to this realization slowly and painfully, upon the birth of their daughter Madeline. The young family temporarily moves in with Buddy's Aunt Dot while Buddy finishes school. Unfortunately, their residence in Buddy's hometown of Hadley, New Jersey, brings them into close contact with Irene, Buddy's high school sweetheart. Though Irene is now married to Buddy's best friend, Chick, the emotional bond that still exists between Irene and Buddy is apparent to Virginia, and takes its toll on both couples.

Told from Virginia's point of view, the story anatomizes all the hopes and fears involved in marriage. If Virginia recognizes her mistake in marrying Buddy, her sense of humor in light of her predicament provides us with a deeper understanding of what it means to learn to live with our choices.

The Trial of Jesus
by Alan Watson
University of Georgia 1995, 219 pp., $24.95

Watson, a Roman law historian, undertakes in this book to discover the most plausible tradition describing Jesus' trial and death. Why was Jesus executed, he asks. What parts did the Hebrew high court, the Sanhedrin, and the Roman authorities play in his trial? Why didn't the Sanhedrin execute Jesus? Did Pilate regard him as innocent yet condemn him nevertheless? In order to answer such questions, Watson sketches a fascinating and dispassionate portrait of Jesus.

He begins by declaring his agreement regarding the generally accepted provenance of Mark—Rome, A.D. 60—and its role as the primary source for the other Synoptic Gospels, Matthew and Luke. He feels that because the writer of Mark was a Roman citizen, he might naturally be inclined to shift the blame for Jesus' death as far from Rome as possible. John, he feels, was written in Jesus' home country some sixty years after Mark, which is also a fairly common view among biblical scholars.

As described in Mark, Jesus ran increasingly afoul of the Jewish educated professional class of Pharisees (scribes, lawyers, etc.) by being arrogant toward them, breaking Sabbath law, and assuming the authority of God—blasphemous behavior in their eyes. Moving into a crisis point in his ministry, he continued to perform miracles—an activity, whether real or counterfeit, that was so widely accepted as to seem almost mundane. During his ministry, he struggled against becoming merely a healer and miracle worker. As time went on, he be-came increasingly incomprehensible in his parables, and frustrated with those who didn't accept him. He shared with charismatic leaders of all ages the desire to divide his followers from their families (in Luke going so far as to say that in order to follow him one had to "hate" his family), as well as a long list of other characteristics, including making the prediction that his followers would be persecuted.

When Jesus went to Nazareth, his home town, those who had known him and his family were astounded by the power of his preaching yet offended and confused by him. Jesus was aggressively critical of what to him was Pharisaic nitpicking—their tendency to forget the basic precepts of Jewish faith and to obfuscate the spirit of the law with useless proscriptions. His charismatic influence seriously challenged their authority.

After his triumphant reentry into Jerusalem, Jesus went into the Temple, overturned tables and ran out moneychangers and the sellers of animals for Passover sacrifice. From the perspective of the Jewish authorities, this was an egregious act, offending not just the scribe class but also the Sadducees, the elite class of priests who controlled the Temple. In John this act occurs at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, one of several pieces of evidence, according to Watson, for the greater plausibility of the chronology in Mark, since anyone doing such a thing would have little chance of escaping with his life.

Watson believes that Jesus, who prophesied his own death at least three times came back into Jerusalem fully intending and expecting to be condemned and stoned to death by the Sanhedrin—their usual method of execution. While the Sanhedrin did find him guilty during an emergency (and illegal) night meeting, the next day, possibly fearing riots, they decided to pass the buck to the Romans. Pilate gave the crowd their choice of one prisoner to be released, and they chose Barabbas. Because Jesus was not interested in secular politics, his death was a genuine tragedy, as he suffered a meaningless execution by crucifixion at the hands of Romans, for whom he cared nothing.

Watson writes plainly and concisely about one of the most important trials in Western history and in doing so produces a fresh portrait of the accused.

The Oxford Companion to American Literature
Sixth Edition
Edited by James D. Hart, revisions and additions by Philip W. Leininger
Oxford University Press, 1995, 779 pp., $49.95

The Oxford Companion to English Literature
Fifth Edition
Edited by Margaret Drabble
Oxford University Press, 1995,
1171 pp., $49.95

The revised editions of these two hefty references include updates of previous entries, as well as new entries (over 180 for the *Companion to American Literature*, 59 for the *Companion to English Literature*) designed to bring them up to the minute and to broaden their scope. Both volumes have considerable bookshelf presence—dignified but vividly hued jackets, with details from the cover art reproduced on the spine. Each includes an appendix, a literary chronology, in which publishing events are arranged side by side with sociopolitical ones, to provide a historical context for the literature. *The Companion to English Literature* also lists, in additional appendices, poets laureate of England and winners of major literary prizes.

The stated purpose of the two books is, as Drabble puts it in her Preface to the English *Companion*, to "quickly, easily and clearly satisfy the immediate curiosity of the common reader, and direct that reader, where appropriate, to further sources of information." Both *Companions* have been fulfilling that purpose admirably for over fifty years. Additions to the *Companion to American Literature* include entries on such relative newcomers to the American literary scene as Tim O'Brien, Louise Erdrich, Rita Dove and Wendy Wasserstein. There are new entries on popular writers, like Louis L'Amour; also on important peripheral figures —historians (William Manchester), critics (Richard Ellman, Camille Paglia), etc. Not surprisingly, the jacket blurb for the American *Companion* advertises more multicultural entries—something the publicity for the English Companion does not do, by the way. The more conservative revisions to that volume include entries on significant "new" British writers (Martin Amis, Peter Ackroyd, Salman Rushdie), genre writers (P.D. James, Ruth Rendell) and foreign writers (Robertson Davies, Toni Morrison, J. M. Coetzee).

Whether you're just browsing, or seeking specific answers, you'll find both books informative, well edited and carefully cross-referenced. You'll also find them very different. To say that the English *Companion* is very English and the American *Companion* is very American may be too reductive, but in many ways it's true. Sir Paul Harvey's original 1932 *Companion to English Literature* was an encyclopedic endeavor that attempted to encompass the grand tradition of literature—a labor of love which included classical allusions, entries on British and Irish mythology and "allusions commonly met with, or likely to be met with, in English literature." Though Drabble cut many of the more far-flung entries in her 1985 edition, she has retained the spirit of Harvey's reference, "highly conscious," as she writes, "of the responsibility of revising a much-loved volume." In addition to providing information about British authors and their published works, *The Companion to English Literature* continues to offer entries on British and Celtic mythology, classical authors (but not classical mythology), literary maga-

zines and publishers, and major foreign authors, especially—but not limited to—those writing in English. A small proportion of the entries are devoted to non-literary figures who have had a significant impact on English literature.

While the scope of Drabble's *Companion* is admittedly narrower than that of Harvey's, it is nevertheless considerably more comprehensive than that of James Hart's American *Companion*. Hart died in 1990, and the revisions and additions have mostly been made by Philip Leinin-ger, a consulting editor at Oxford University Press and an experienced editor of literary reference books. *The American Companion* demonstrates the extent to which the themes and conflicts in American literature are homegrown—and evidences the strong American pride in that fact. You won't find Aristotle here, but you'll find substantial discussions of many American presidents, and others of such historical events as the Civil War. (Kings don't generally rate in the English Companion unless their names are the titles of literary works, and there are no entries for either of the World Wars in Drabble's volume, despite their profound impact on British literature.) Foreign authors aren't included in Hart's reference, except in very rare instances. Dickens gets a paragraph because he toured the U.S. and wrote about it. Flaubert and Zola, whose influence on American Naturalism was seminal, don't get their own entries, though they are briefly mentioned in the discussion of that literary movement. On the other hand, Hart is somewhat more willing than Drabble to assess the critical reputation of authors.

Each of the two volumes provides a wealth of reliable information about literature in English, and related subjects; however necessity demands that a reference book of this kind omit more information than it includes. At almost fifty dollars apiece, the Oxford *Companions* make expensive bookends. If you're thinking of investing in one, take some time first to browse through it, to make sure it's the reference book you need.

Reviews by:
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