

ROBERT CHRISTGAU BOOK REPORTS

A Music Critic
on His First Love,
Which Was Reading

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In memory of Marshall Berman

1940–2013

who read more books than anyone I've ever known

except maybe Simon Frith

(and Jonathan Lethem)

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Have I forgotten anybody? Of course not, just saved her for last. Adoring gratitude to my wife, Carola Dibbell, who improved the manuscript discreetly from “The Informer” to “My Friend Marshall” and kept thinking about it when she had far more urgent matters on her mind. It’s my dearest hope that I can return the favor sooner rather than later, and my nagging regret that I didn’t scare up the chutzpah to devote a chapter here to her novel, *The Only Ones*, a cult hit I know very well indeed.

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Introduction

I learned to read first week of first grade and never looked back. By age seven I was reading everything I could get my eyes on, with a major in baseball journalism and a minor in ladies-magazine fiction. But soon I loved books even more, meaning the youth classics and middlebrow bestsellers a culturally aspirational lower-middle-class family had around the house (plus baseball novels from the holy Queensborough Public Library). In high school, rock and roll slowed me down some, but only some—the Bantam *Grapes of Wrath* I read on the 7 train to my college interview so impressed my designated alumnus it helped get me into Dartmouth. And there I quickly decided that I wanted to be a writer rather than a lawyer and dove into Literature with a capital L: all-lit all-the-time coursework augmented with moderns in the summertime, when I cheated on my parkie hours to lap up *U.S.A.* and try to love *Steppenwolf*. I kept three or four books in my backpack as I hitchhiked the country in 1963—a novel or two, some American studies theory, and my complete Yeats. And in 1964, while somehow managing to spend less than I took home at a Chicago encyclopedia company as I failed to write a decent short story or get through *The Charterhouse of Parma* in French, I discovered the journalism collection, which changed my life as much as English 2.

First came a fifty-cent Pocket Book called *The Best of Red Smith*, a sports-writing generalist whose casual lucidity, calm morality, and unassuming punch lines I'd been drawn to young by my baseball major. But thanks to Hemingway and Mailer, I was also interested in boxing, so I picked up a Grove paperback called *The Sweet Science*, where *New Yorker* press-food-pugilism critic A. J. Liebling quickly surpassed Hemingway and Mailer as a role model. Think about it—why shouldn't the path to rock criticism lead through sportswriting? Sportswriting celebrates popular pleasures and rewards colloquial color; the symbolic events it details gain resonance in a

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telling that's most telling when it exploits veins of vernacular unavailable to hard-news hardnoses and back-of-the-book art arbiters as well as most litterateurs. And before long journalism collections by Pauline Kael, Tom Wolfe, and Susan Sontag were excavating such notions with more intellectual force than Liebling had the stomach for.

Sontag's *Against Interpretation* explicated thinkers of daunting complexity with humbling clarity and then flipped the switch by climaxing with not only "Notes on Camp," written for the *Partisan Review*, but "One Culture and the New Sensibility," initially published in none other than *Mademoiselle*. Enlightening young women who envied her haircut as well as her IQ, Sontag postulated not only that the "crudely put" C. P. Snow distinction between "literary-artistic" and "scientific" cultures was "plainly unwarranted," and that the "most interesting and creative art of our time is not open to the generally educated" (who I didn't then see might include me), but that "the affection many younger artists felt for the popular arts wasn't a new philistinism," because what Sontag declined to call pop was "a new, more open way of looking at the world"—although never (ever) did she articulate exactly what the name-checked Beatles, Supremes, and Dionne Warwick saw when they looked. Her opposite number was Wolfe, whose *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* delivered hi-res reports on pop exotica like stock car racing, Phil Spector, and Cassius Clay as well as tonier arcana like a MoMA opening and an ad man visiting his son on Avenue B, all translated into wild-style rhetoric whose excitable pizzazz and overstated punctuation were as inspirational as his content.

The earliest of these three books, however, proved the best and most influential: *I Lost It at the Movies*. Not yet at *The New Yorker* when it was published in 1965, Pauline Kael was deeply into movies for love alone. I met her once at the Algonquin and didn't dig her queen bee act. But her secular intellect and honed prose, her brassy candor and democratic gusto, her nose for the laugh line and love affair with American English, her ideas as juicy as her descriptions, and her enthusiasm for artworks from *The Grand Illusion* to *The Sugarland Express* all rendered her an earthshaking critic. And except for *Raising Kane*, initially a very long *New Yorker* essay, every one of the dozen-plus books she published was a collection. I'm no Kael—nobody is. But I've always figured that if collections were good enough for her, they're good enough for me.

Book Reports is my eighth book, and all but the memoir *Going into the City* compile my journalism one way or another. What distinguishes *Book Reports* is that strictly speaking it isn't about music. Half of it is anyway,

of course: I'm a music critic, so editors assign me music books. That acknowledged, however, book reviews work differently. The music history laid end-to-end in the foundational section titled "From Blackface Minstrelsy to Track-and-Hook" expands on passing observations and isolated paragraphs in my music criticism proper. The rock-bio section examines personas more than music proper. And the laurels and brickbats I toss my coworkers in "Critical Practice" I've always kept to a minimum in my music writing except in the big annual essays I devoted to the *Village Voice's* annual Pazz & Jop Critics' Poll, where criticism criticism was part of the assignment. Hater hogwash that rock critics write for each other notwithstanding, I've always striven, with the occasional irresistible exception, to refer to my co-workers only when a fact or insight merits a credit. But that hardly means I never assessed their work—I've edited hundreds of rock critics and "mentored" dozens I'm proud I passed a few tips. So here I get to stretch out on a bunch who've published books and indeed collections of their own.

By stringing book reviews together, I also get to dive deeper into two themes I'm always returning to in my rock criticism. Regarding one I claim special expertise: bohemia, a realm so amorphous and declasse it's remained obscure as a scholarly byway even though many academics—as well as most of my readers and almost all musicians—have inhabited or at least brushed up against it. So in the "Bohemia Meets Hegemony" section the previously unpublished "Épatant le Bourgeoisie" surveys bohemia theory as of the late 1980s, Christine Stansell's *American Moderns* occasions a 2000 update, and 2010's "Bohemias Lost and Found" tops the story off, with a protoypical bohemian's memoir appended as an envoi and hippie-slash-counterculture variations arrayed in between.

And on the other hand there's politics, let's just call it, which unlike bohemia isn't my turf—thousands of journalists know more about it than I do. But few of these are also rock critics. Sure most of my colleagues lean left, just as most musicians do, but few critics and fewer musicians feel politics is intrinsic to what they do. This is often just as well—preaching to the converted risks message fatigue, preaching to the unconverted instant overkill. But such reticence has never been my way. I believe ignoring pop's tangled ties to capitalism is bad reporting. And since my main job as a critic is telling readers what I like and why I like it, I'm obliged to break down the moments when I'm drawn to a song's conscious compassion or militant outrage, succinct truth-telling or offhand gibes. As a critic as well as a citizen, therefore, I've always felt obliged to educate myself politically, leading some editors to figure I might have wound up with something fresh to say about the kind

of books covered in “Culture Meets Capital.” From the Marshall Berman review that sparked a lifelong friendship to my forced march through a million-and-a-half words about the banking industry, I’ve striven to put as much analysis, emotion, and entertainment value into these pieces as into my rockcrit.

Which leaves us with the college sweetheart I never got over: Literature with a capital L. Although roughly a third of the forty or fifty books I read a year are fiction, exactly what fiction has evolved. In my Kael-Wolfe-Sontag ’60s, which were also my movement-theory ’60s, I stubbornly remained an English Honors guy, catching up with Dickens and Austen and Faulkner and keeping up with Mailer and Burroughs and Barth. Beyond Olympia Press-style porn and less hifalutin smut, genre novels just weren’t in my program until in the early ’70s I finally heeded my own pop principles and began dipping into the sci-fi and detective novels that for decades now have constituted a major chunk of a fiction intake that in the past year has also included Balzac and Lessing, George Saunders and Yuri Herrera. And thinking about it, I’m struck by how the appetites reading sated when I was seven still sit there with their mouths open today: for language, information, ideas, narrative pull.

Narrative pull is the vaguest and most elusive of these; my wife, a novelist and critic who reads many more novels than I do, believes it’s not the pull but the (discrete) world, not the pace but the (imaginary) place. But I read more history, criticism, and biography than she does, and while I acknowledge that momentum is a rarer and less compelling thing in nonfiction, I also insist that it’s present by definition in any book you finish of your own free will. That’s why I strive to generate forward motion in every sentence I write. Writing, pal, is supposed to *move*.

Information is the grubby one. Although it’s obviously the point of any but the most elevated and abstract nonfiction, fiction mavens get miffed at practical seekers who use novels to educate themselves about unfamiliar landscapes, folkways, and historical moments. Tsk-tsk though you may, however, cultural orientation was one of the reasons I downed Raymond Queneau’s *Zazie in the Metro* and Romain Gary’s *Momo* a/k/a *The Life Before Us* (a/k/a *Madame Rosa*) before I visited Paris last year, and *The Leopard* and Leonardo Sciascia on a 2005 vacation in Sicily. Sciascia, I should mention, writes procedurals, which are excellent for this purpose—check out Archer Mayor if you ever visit Brattleboro, Vermont.

Ideas weren’t yet a priority for me when I was seven, but as a brainy kid in a church where biblical inerrancy was bedrock, I was into abstraction early,

with memorable impetus from a book in the church library called *The Chaos of Cults*, which helped undermine my faith by holding that Roman Catholicism was no less a cult than Christian Science and thus damned adherents like my mother's parents to hell. So in high school and college, the strictly philosophical passages of *Crime and Punishment*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *Notes from Underground* were formative for me even if Hermann Hesse wasn't.

But as I started to clock dollars as a public intellectual, a professional idea generator soaking up abstract speculation from record reviews to Marx, from Hannah Arendt to Fredric Jameson to for a few lost four-page hours even Jacques Lacan, the ideas and information in Literature proper got harder to tell apart. So grant that fiction by its very nature generates ideas in at least two crucial realms: identity and language. I mean identity in the narrow sense of human character formation but also as the p.c. catchall it's become. Not only did I know more about Turks after reading Orhan Pamuk's *Snow*, I knew more about young female publicists, hundreds of whom I'd encountered in real life, after reading Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*. And any white person who gets spiritual sustenance from African-American music (like you, say) should devote time to African-American fiction: Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker and John Edgar Wideman, Walter Mosley and Iceberg Slim. But as for language, well, that's another paragraph.

When I was seven, language meant vocabulary. Because I loved reading, I loved words, and became competitive about mastering as many as I could. Style I never thought about, not consciously. Looking back at my special favorites *Treasure Island* and *Tom Sawyer*, in fact, I see I was so entranced by their narrative pull that I barely noticed their narrative voices—Stevenson's first-person teenager touched indelibly with the author's Victorian fustian, Twain's third-person vernacular evoking a mischievous Midwestern teenager more than the literary lion who made him up. But as writing became my calling I felt pulled in many stylistic directions—first-person vernacular in my stabs at fiction and declarative clarity in the college papers where I first incubated my discursive strategies, but also Hemingwayesque understatement and Faulknerian fustian and lesser strains, until finally I made my decision for the hyped-up Americanese of Liebling, Kael, and Wolfe—only with partner Ellen Willis edging me toward Sontag's abstraction and then wife-for-life Carola Dibbell prodding me to squeeze out some more juice already.

Yet though by now I've arrived at a style of my own that mixes in all of the above, I still find myself knocked hither and yon by the infinite possibilities

of prose exemplified by whatever novel I happen to be reading. Tasked with revisiting 1984 before it was too late, I immersed in Orwell, and observed among other things that “the clarity, candor, and common sense of Orwell’s style made a kind of transcendent ideal of ordinary English decency”—a sentence that was written, like the entire review, in the thrall of said style. Or take the modern French classics above—less *Momo*, which merely opens new vistas of intelligent ignorance for its young vernacular narrator, than *Zazie in the Metro*, which even in translation convinced an aged critic besotted with the idiomatic that, done right, besetting your sentences with non-words like “congenei,” “forrard,” “hormosessual,” and “Sanctimontsonian” is a dandy way to affiance the roto-reader, meaning me.

The main reason the title I came up with here was *Book Reports* rather than *Book Reviews* is that *Book Reports* has some cheek to it—it’s hookier. But it was also to honor that seven-year-old, who grew up to favor a pragmatic, just-the-facts approach when he wrote about books—to always describe and evaluate the work whose title provided the review’s header. So in this collection you’ll find only three of those exhaustive multi-volume *New York Review of Books*-style disquisitions I envied as a youngblood—on bohemia, blackface minstrelsy, and Raymond Williams, each gestated over years. Moreover, there’s not much up-and-down here—while making room for half a dozen polemics and one joke, I avoided pans because who cares anymore. Hence the stylistic pull of these books can be assumed although I expect few readers will find even the supplest and smartest academic musicology as gripping as I do. There aren’t many mixed reviews, either—several that were in my original proposal gave way to more consequential stuff.

That “consequential” does give me pause, however. I am the guy, after all, who assembled this book hard upon preparing a rock criticism collection anchored to the premise “Forget good *for* you—art should be good *to* you.” That can certainly be said of every novel praised herein, and many of my nonfiction authors are a serious pleasure to read, as I detail in cases that include Marshall Berman and Terry Eagleton, Peter Guralnick and William Finnegan, Lester Bangs and Nick Tosches, Bruce Springsteen and Richard Hell, and at stubborn length the lumpily indefatigable Williams. But the majority just write what is called “well,” meaning they know how to make their content *move*. And embarrassingly, the master stylists among them are John Leonard, Jonathan Lethem, and best of all Dave Hickey, authors of the three collections it seemed only natural to begin mine with. Figure these guys are critical essayists like me, only better—like Pauline Kael, say. But that doesn’t make their three books my top picks in any up-and-down sense. It’s easy and

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obvious enough, if arguable, to say music should be good to you. Nonfiction is a trickier case. But I loved reading before I loved music without ever believing those two loves felt the same. Music happens foremost to the body, reading to the mind—even if some books do take you for quite the ride.

So in the up-and-down sense and leaving fiction out of the competition, what are my very favorite books here? Oops, one is a collection—Hickey’s *Air Guitar*, right at the top with Berman’s *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*. Still, if I were grading these things, Ned Sublette’s *Cuba and Its Music* and Jerrold Seigel’s *Bohemian Paris* and probably Samuel Delany’s *The Motion of Light in Water* and conceivably Dylan’s *Chronicles: Volume One* or even Springsteen’s *Born to Run* would be A plusses too. And with almost every selection my underlying motive is out in the open in the lead piece, which hangs the title “The Informer” on a review of John Leonard’s *When the Kissing Had to Stop* and dislocates a sentence of his to sum up his and my task at hand: “I read this stuff so you don’t have to.”

Ultimately, this is a book about the adventures of an autodidact. I’ve reprinted these polished, pruned, and occasionally revised reviews and essays because my standard method is to condense, interpret, and contextualize what the book at hand has to tell my readers that they didn’t know, which I generally didn’t know either. That is, to inform. I want you to know this stuff. And then, if something interests you enough, I want you to read the book in question and not only deepen your knowledge but find out whether you get what I do from it. Because let’s face it—you probably won’t, not exactly. And then we go on from there.

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