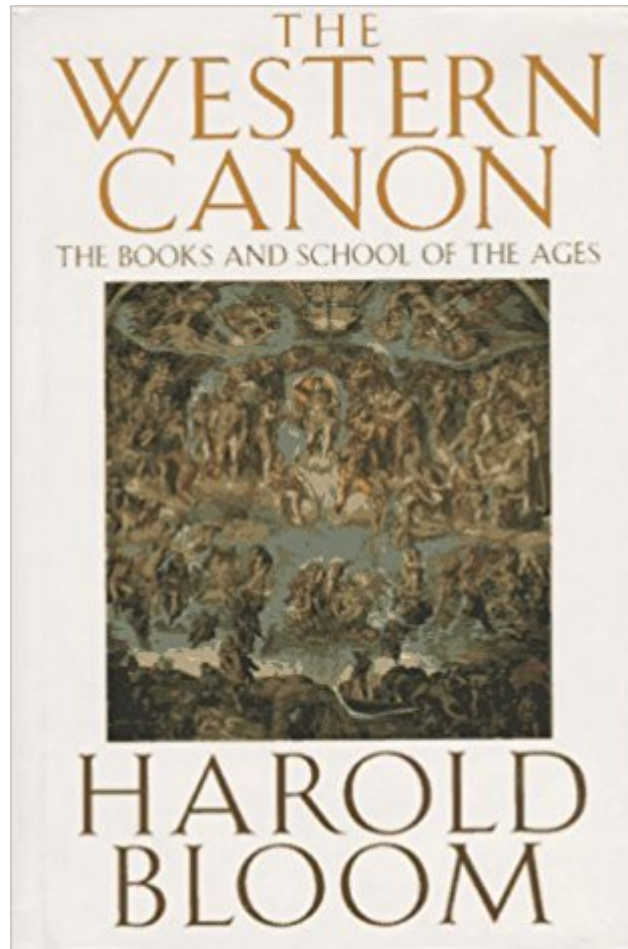


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The Western Canon: The Books And School Of The Ages



Synopsis

Harold Bloom explores our Western literary tradition by concentrating on the works of twenty-six authors central to the Canon. He argues against ideology in literary criticism; he laments the loss of intellectual and aesthetic standards; he deplores multiculturalism, Marxism, feminism, neoconservatism, Afrocentrism, and the New Historicism. Insisting instead upon "the autonomy of the aesthetic," Bloom places Shakespeare at the center of the Western Canon. Shakespeare has become the touchstone for all writers who come before and after him, whether playwrights poets or storytellers. In the creation of character, Bloom maintains, Shakespeare has no true precursor and has left no one after him untouched. Milton, Samuel Johnson, Goethe, Ibsen, Joyce, and Beckett were all indebted to him; Tolstoy and Freud rebelled against him; and Dante, Wordsworth, Austen, Dickens, Whitman, Dickinson, Proust, the modern Hispanic and Portuguese writers Borges, Neruda, and Pessoa are exquisite examples of how canonical writing is born of an originality fused with tradition. Bloom concludes this provocative, trenchant work with a complete list of essential writers and books - his vision of the Canon.

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Customer Reviews

I first read this book about nine or so years ago, and I reread parts of it almost every day. So why am I just now getting around to reviewing it? Well for one thing I didn't have internet access when I bought it. But, I figured it's time to give the master his due. This book has had the greatest influence on me of any book I have read in recent memory, for many reasons. To begin with, Bloom's

erudition is staggering. That he could read all that he has, and in addition retain and catalogue all of it, is simply beyond my comprehension. Bloom focuses on 28 authors he considers canonical and provides extensive descriptions and quotations from their work. If I understand Bloom correctly, he regards these authors as comprising the Western Canon, but he also has an appendix listing hundreds of authors that, I think, comprise the national canons of different countries. Whatever. But Bloom's importance lies in providing vivid enough descriptions of some major works so that one is motivated to read them. In my own case, at least, he has succeeded brilliantly. Solely because of this book, in the past few years I have done all of the following, which I might not otherwise have done: 1) Read Goethe's "Faust," Parts I and II. Part II is absolutely wild, and is every bit as great as Bloom says. 2) Read "Bleak House" by Charles Dickens, which Bloom regards as the greatest English novel. It probably is. 3) Seen a production of "Endgame" by Samuel Beckett. Not my cup of tea, but it piques discussion at least. 4) Read several novels by Cormac McCarthy, beginning with "Blood Meridian." Bloom regards McCarthy as one of many successors to Shakespeare. Bloom is right; McCarthy is a powerful writer. I don't think I had ever heard of him before I read Bloom.

Harold Bloom has been, arguably, the world's best reader, the most wide-ranging and the most retentive. Some people believe his book, *The Western Canon*, verges on the audacious since Bloom dares to list what Western literary works are canonical as well as what ones will be. While the appendices, with their lists of books, are the section of *The Western Canon* that provokes the most argument, these take up relatively few of the book's 578 pages. Bloom begins with a "Preface and Prelude," then indicates the mood the book will assume in "An Elegy for the Canon." Adopting Giambattista Vico's theory of history, Bloom then goes on to discuss twenty-six writers from different ages of literature. From the Aristocratic Age: Shakespeare, Dante, Chaucer, Cervantes, Montaigne, Molière, Milton, Johnson and Goethe; from the Democratic Age: Wordsworth, Austen, Whitman, Dickinson, Dickens, George Eliot, Tolstoy and Ibsen; and from the Chaotic Age: Freud, Proust, Joyce, Woolf, Kafka, Borges, Neruda, Pessoa and Beckett. Just before the appendices is the "Elegiac Conclusion," in which Bloom says he has "very little confidence that literary education will survive its current malaise," but he hopes that there will be "literate survivors." Early in the book, Bloom tells us that he is not interested in the debate among those who want to preserve the Western canon and those who want to destroy it. Instead, Bloom is interested only in literary aesthetics and he claims that canonicity comes "only by aesthetic strength, which is constituted primarily of an amalgam: mastery of figurative language, originality, cognitive power, knowledge, exuberance of diction.

Bloom adopted Giambattista Vico's cyclical theory of history for organization of the western canon. Vico proposed that history is divided into three ages: an age of gods, an age of heroes, and an age of men followed by a chaos out of which a new historical cycle will begin. After his introductory Elegy for the Canon, Bloom skips the Theocratic Age, proceeding to the Aristocratic Age, the Democratic Age, the Chaotic Age, and his Elegiac Conclusion. Each age has 6-8 chapters, each chapter devoted to an author or group of authors. The authors are, in order: Aristocratic: Shakespeare, Dante, Chaucer, Cervantes, Montaigne, Moliere, Milton, Samuel Johnson, and Goethe; Democratic: Wordsworth, Austen, Whitman, Dickinson, Dickens, George Eliot, Tolstoy, and Ibsen; Chaotic: Freud, Proust, Joyce, Woolf, Kafka, Borges, Neruda, Pessoa, and Beckett. He begins with Shakespeare whom he calls the center of the canon. Bloom exalts Shakespeare almost to a godlike state in his aesthetic zeal. In fact, every other author in the book is related to Shakespeare in some way. For example, Chaucer's Pardoner, he says, was a prototype for Shakespeare's Iago and Edmund. Tolstoy, he says, could not handle the influence of Shakespeare in his works so much so that he had to disavow him in his essay What is art?. The reason Freud believed Shakespeare was really the Earl of Oxford is that he could not himself reckon with Shakespeare's greatness and Freud's reading of Shakespeare was really Shakespeare's reading of life. Bloom can appear at times a little too radical in some of his statements. For example he claims that the Jesus of the American religion is not the true Jesus of Nazareth, of the Crucifixion, or of heaven but only the Jesus of the Resurrection.

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