

A Backward View: Older Books and the Culture of the Now

For almost twenty years, I have written book reviews for a weekly newspaper in Western North Carolina.

In general, reviewers take an interest only in new books. This makes some sense, as older books have already received their accolades or their slings and arrows. A few critics—Nick Hornby in his collection of reviews *Ten Years In the Tub*, and the great Michael Dirda of the Washington Post—do revisit older books, but this is rare.

Yet our prejudice as reviewers for the new is unfortunate, especially in regard to good literature.

This summer I read Jon Hassler's *Rookery Blues*, a novel centered on some professors and administrators at a state college in Minnesota. One instructor, a former worker in the oil fields, organizes a faculty strike. Two more fall in love playing music together. A shy pianist, dominated by his mother, finds fulfillment in a faculty band playing blues and jazz. A budding novelist has little talent for writing and none for teaching.

Rookery Blues was published in 1995, which means that readers under the age of forty will become acquainted with Hassler only by stumbling onto his novels in their library or local bookstore, or by someone's recommendation.

Consider Larry Woiwode's *Beyond the Bedroom Wall*, a rich, lyrical novel about the Neumiller family in North Dakota. I was working in Boston's Old Corner Bookstore when this book was published in 1975. Like many others, I was blown away by the story and the quality of the writing—Woiwode was first a poet, and blends those skills into his prose—and subsequently I read everything by the man I could get my hands on. (While writing this paragraph, I opened my neglected copy of *Beyond the Bedroom Wall* and marveled at Woiwode's staying power. His account of a death touched my heart when I first read it.

Today, four decades later, with so many deaths and losses behind me, these same passages moved me to tears.)

Because this novel is forty-three years old, most readers under the age of fifty may never discover what some critics regard as a great American novel.

And unlike Hassler's works, *Beyond the Bedroom Wall* is out of print, available only from libraries, secondhand bookshops, and online.

We live today in a culture of the immediate. We live in the Now. A flood of information daily inundates us, burying in silt many treasures from the past. Many of these treasures are of higher writing quality and often contain lasting truths that many of the new materials with which we're bombarded. The problem is, will our fixation on the Now cause us to lose sight of those truths?

In order to ensure such a thing doesn't happen, it's helpful to know how to sift through the silt and find those riches. Here are several tips:

First, browse libraries and bookshops. Explore the shelves, pulling whatever titles strike your fancy. In our age of hustle-and-clatter, you may find satisfaction in this slow approach to discovering fine literature.

Next, investigate online sites like goodreads.com. At such sites, you'll find book-lovers reviewing thousands of books.

Ask older readers for a list of their favorite books and authors. Go online and track down their suggestions.

Finally, read books about books. Hornby and Dirda are wonderful guides. Look for such helps as Jane Mallison's *Book Smart* or George and Karen Grant's *Shelf Life*. Your public library should have an ample supply of such guides.

In Nina George's *The Little Paris Bookshop*, a fine romance about love and literature, bookseller Jean Perdue says "Books aren't eggs, you know. Simply because a book has aged a bit doesn't mean it's gone bad."

Look for the old, and you'll find some gold.