



# **Bound to Please: An Extraordinary One-Volume Literary Education**

*Michael Dirda*

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## **Bound to Please: An Extraordinary One-Volume Literary Education** Michael Dirda

Surveying the dizzying universe of classic books, Michael Dirda, the Pulitzer Prize-winning literary essayist, proves himself to be one of the most engaging critics of our time—and great fun to read. Opening with an impassioned critique of modern reading habits, he then presents many of the great, and idiosyncratic, writers he loves most. In this showcase of one hundred of the world's most astonishing books, Dirda covers a remarkable range of literature, including popular genres such as the detective novel and ghost story, while never neglecting the deeper satisfactions of sometimes overlooked classics. Short-listed for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award for criticism, *Bound to Please* is a glorious celebration of just how much fun reading can be.

## **Bound to Please: An Extraordinary One-Volume Literary Education Details**

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# From Reader Review Bound to Please: An Extraordinary One-Volume Literary Education for online ebook

## Rachel Terry says

From the Introduction: "Corny as it sounds, I believe that unless we try to familiarize ourselves with the best that human beings have thought and accomplished, we doom ourselves to be little more than mindless consumer-wraiths, docile sheep waiting to be shorn by corporation or government, sad and confused dwellers on the threshold of a palace we never enter."

And so the rest of the book consists of reviews of "the best that human beings have thought and accomplished," and Dirda's writing is as good as that in any of the masterpieces he recommends. I love his rich vocabulary and imagery: "her writing is so tight that if you shake the book nothing falls out."

Dirda covers some classics everyone has heard of, but I'm looking forward to reading many of these authors that are new to me. My only complaint about this book is that it's a little too heavy to comfortably read in the tub.

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## trav says

I really enjoyed this book. It was my first Dirda and won't be my last.

I have picked up two books based on Dirda's recommendations. Though both were good, I didn't enjoy it as much as he did. But I guess everything is better when consumed with an expert's palate?

Dirda's writing is great and inspiring. It's kind of like reading book about books. Except there are stories about stories. He has definitely opened my eyes to more authors writing outside of my own country.

Well worth picking up for anyone who enjoys the written word and wants to see what else is out there.

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## Simon says

Here are all the books in Bound To Please in one bookshelf, at least the ones reviewed and then some mentioned in the text:

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/list...>

This is a rich, monumental, entertaining tour through the world's recorded words, witty and wise, but flawed by its choice of review topics of biographies and exotic tastes.

The list of valuable books we'd like to read seems infinite, and exploring it one by one only slowly gives us a

picture of its diversity, one singular voice and focus at a time. With this volume, in a little over 500 pages you quickly get an immensely wide overview of what there is to read and each book's special character. After this you have at least an idea of most of the great writers' ideas. He frequently gives great quotations so that you witness the writer's own language as well. And Dirda, who seems to have read almost every book on the planet, is a great source of literary criticism to give you this picture.

My biggest criticism of the volume is the choice of review topics: A large part of Dirda's reviews is writer's biographies, not their works. Out of 109 essays, 39 are about biographies. Judging from Dirda, we should read one 700-page biography after another to familiarize ourselves with literature. Is an author's biography really more important than his writing? Of course it can give you a better understanding of his work, but should we read every biography of every author we want to read before his works? I'm rather on Roland Barthes' side, that the work can be evaluated independently of the author.

And some may criticize the missing presence of the established greats in this literary education. Where's *The Odyssey*, *The Magic Mountain*, *Ulysses* (he admits he didn't dare review it yet), Virginia Woolf, Italo Calvino, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*? Well, at least some of the greats are covered with Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, Dostoyewski's *Crime and Punishment*, Borges, etc. And he does cover a lot of contemporary literature.

Of course these reviews and their subjects were done and chosen for a newspaper, *The Washington Post*, so often it's probably just what he happened to read at the time, was published or seemed interesting in his day. Some of these essays should have been cut from the volume or rewritten in my opinion. But the advantage of the essays stemming from the collected work of years of newspaper criticism is that they contain a tremendous amount of time and work, and it shows. You couldn't write this collection of essays in a year or so.

There are other questionable choices of review subject: *The Firbank Complete Short Stories*, which Dirda himself admits "only a small amount of his topnotch work appears in", "made up entirely of juvenilia". And it's not clear what other works by Firbank, which he seems to admire greatly, he recommends instead. For Wodehouse he chooses a collection of letters which "not surprisingly, display only a glimmer of his wit". There's a biography of the creator of Tarzan, which is apparently racist pulp fiction. A biography of a minor Oxford Latin scholar, Housman.

And then he reviews a dozen or so detective novels, mystery stories (and not Kafka), and spy-agent thrillers. Not for me, but to each his own.

Dirda also has some strange tastes in subjects and what he considers witty language. There's a biography of some 19th century cultists (Madame Blavatsky's Baboons), he likes religious classics "as works of solace and as guides to living". To me there are better sources for that: literature celebrating life despite hardships like *Man's Search for Meaning* or perhaps *The Magic Mountain* or intelligent self-help books like Alain de Botton's *How Proust can change your life*. But again to each is own, and many probably share his attitude towards religious works.

Dirda has a strange love for book titles and weird wordplay, whose allure is often incomprehensible to me. To him, the title "The Immortal" (Borges) "shimmers with a sinister attractiveness". To me, it's just a word in the dictionary. "Just murmur some of his [Blackwood's] titles on a shadowy evening, and you'll begin to feel the shivers (...): "The Listener", "The Camp of the Dog", "Secret Worship" (...) - Sorry, I don't. "The Secret Doctrine" is to him the best example of the Theosophists having a way with booktitles. I only see that Dirda does.

According to Dirda, the most thrilling line in popular literature is "Mr. Holmes, they were the footprints of a

gigantic hound!"

There's an ever-present fascination with sexual writing and biography of almost all authors discussed, showing many examples, e.g. Pushkin's poem about two women brought to orgasm at the same time, in the Arabian nights, Rabelais, etc. It brings some interesting "erotic relief" to the reading.

One impression no one can fail to take away with from this volume is how incredibly well-read Dirda is. Dirda says "only Jarrell could remark, casually, in passing, 'after you have read Kipling's fifty or seventy-five best stories...'", but maybe also only Dirda could remark equally about Edmund Wilson "But I own all his books (...). I began reading Wilson as a freshman in college - (...) and continue to reread him to this day". Wilson has 26 original works and 10 posthumous publications. The last part of Wilson's journals that this essay recommends goes to 968 pages.

Or "Discovering so much enchantment in The Tale of the 1002nd Night, (...) I couldn't help wondering how it compared to some of Roth's other novels. So I read three more of them."

It may seem like the negative overshadows the positive in this review, but that is only because Dirda is playing at such a high level. And I can only testify how much I've learned and enjoyed this great work of criticism. It's hard to show how witty his essays are, to find it in a short quotation. But let's try this one on Thomas Bernhard:

All the reviews claimed these books were masterpieces. I wondered. At one point somebody gleefully told me that Bernhard's speech accepting the 1967 Austrian State Prize was so politically offensive that half the audience left in a rage, including the minister of culture. I liked the sound of that.

(...)

While reading Extinction I found myself smoothing down page after page, deeply content to be listening to Murau comment on anything, in tune with a book that matched my own taste for worldly observation, self-pity, and wistfulness. I've never been to Austria and Murau is something of a creep, but so what? His inexorable volubility is quite irresistible, like a confession of strange sins or a declaration of hopeless love. Ultimately what I liked was Bernhard's anguished vision of things, his late-Beethoven-string-quartet sensibility.

His general view of literature is explained elsewhere:

"All that the Western canon can bring one is the proper use of one's own solitude, that solitude whose final form is one's confrontation with one's own mortality."

Dirda provides the ideal finish to this review himself, explaining the value of the literary critic Randall Jarrell, which applies to Dirda just as well:

Jarrell was just someone who loved to talk about books. Yet his conversation was such that it encouraged a complicity between himself and his readers, so that after finishing pieces on Kipling or Malraux's *Voices of Silence*, or on Housman, Frost, and so many others, one wants to go directly to the library shelf and just read, read, read. All of Jarrell's criticism can be summarized as a description of the joy he had found in reading, followed by the command "Go thou and do likewise".

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## **Snake\_Danger says**

Opens with a (too?) familiar diatribe against the current state of reading, society, education, culture at large. How quickly we forget that every generation back to Plato's railed against the dumbing down of the next generation yet somehow, ignoring the odd Dark Age here and there, we've come down to the present more or less okay. This quibble aside, it only gets better from here and one can forgive a book-lover's impassioned introductory plea for us to all read more books. They are, after all, what Dirda has lived and breathed for the past 4/5 decades, and his loving tributes to the great books of many ages shines through and, importantly, imbues the reader with a deep desire to step from this volume directly into any number of great new books.

If I had one other criticism, I would mention that this is, by and large, simply a collection of books that Dirda, as a reviewer for the Washington Post, has had come across his desk — primarily from the early 70's to the late 90's. This doesn't limit it to bestsellers; indeed he has intentionally dug deeper than that here and included many new translations of classic works, interpretations of same, and biographies and memoirs as well as current(ish) fiction. While this does tend to make the reader want to go further afield from either the bestseller list or the books commonly considered canon, it by design does not include very much at all of what one would consider, pretentiously or not, in bold THE WESTERN CANON. As such, the title is a little misleading as this could not be considered a one-volume literary education at all in my opinion (or, if it were, it would be a poor one as you would have hardly ready anything one would typically consider the great literature of the ages — no Shakespeare, Milton, Melville, Hemingway, well, you get the picture). I felt Dirda did a much better job explaining this in a follow-up volume titled Classics for Pleasure, in which he acknowledges that he intends the book to be augment a traditional introduction to classic literature and recommends (as do I) Fadiman's Lifetime Reading Plan. Additionally, I recommend Harold Bloom's The Western Canon, even if it is somewhat more stuffy and academic (but no less passionately written) than either of Dirda's books. Whew, deep breath, that was a long-winded criticism of a small issue — approach the book as an extended look at some overlooked but wonderful books by authors you may not have heard of and you will be well-rewarded with a laundry list of future library loans and book store finds. Keep a pen handy because by the end of this book you'll have pages of recommended authors you are just dying to check-out.

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## **Yune says**

I didn't feel like running out and buying every single book Dirda reviewed, but there were a fair number; and I felt I gained something from even the reviews of books I probably wouldn't bother pulling off a shelf. He has a gift for choosing interesting tidbits -- whether quotes or biographical facts -- that both enlighten and intrigue. And it's hard to point at a tone that could be more learned and affectionate at the same time; Dirda's enthusiasm for his reading material has the infectiousness we know from that one awesome college prof whose course became a revelation despite first joining our schedules because of some tedious general requirement.

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## **Tim says**

Finally finished Michael Dirda's book, Bound to Please (search for it on Amazon with the author's name or

you will end up with less savory titles). It has sat on my nightstand and I have fallen asleep to it off and on over the last several months. That is not a comment on the quality of the writing, which is engaging because Dirda so loves the books that he reviews.

The book is a collection of various longer book reviews Dirda has completed, subtitled "An Extraordinary One-Volume Literary Education." That might be overstatement, but the reviews are exceptionally wide-ranging, Herodotus to Kingsley Amis, and have substantially added to my lists of books to search out and read. The reviews themselves are generally three to five pages and work to open up the larger world of the author being addressed (or to introduce an author whose biography or collected letters are coming to market). They seem to follow a similar format of anecdotes, quotations from the texts involved - Dirda revels in the language, and light critical apparatus. The previous comment is not a criticism, because it seems Dirda's goal is to encourage reading, not to prove any critical points of his own. For the books he reviewed that I already own (and even have read) it is a delight to see his enthusiasm (these are not negative reviews - at their worst he notes authors have done better work) and for those I have not read, his enthusiasm is contagious. It is also good that while the collection includes high-brow and more obscure (at least to me) foreign works, Dirda also does not eschew genre works like suspense, detective, fantasy, and science fiction. All in all wonderful nightstand reading. I do feel more educated having completed it.

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### **Krisette Spangler says**

This book is a gem. Dirda begins with a plea for us to look beyond the best seller list and discover the world of great reading. The book is a collection of the essays and reviews he's written over the years. He leaves out many of the established classic authors and introduces us to many that are a little more obscure. I found it very engaging and many of the authors I hadn't heard of. He covers everything from ancient classics to science fiction, and so there's something for everyone.

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### **Maria says**

Dirda writes great reviews of a lot of books I've never heard of and am glad to learn about, but also a lot of books I would never read and some that seem very unimportant/unappealing. This volume seems extremely heavy on biography and light on fiction.

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### **Jen Davis says**

I love Michael Dirda's reviews. While our taste isn't always aligned, I enjoyed this compilation of his work. I heard of many authors I've not previously noted, and I continued to enjoy his style. Oddly enough, I've found that his voice has changed over time. When he was younger, he appeared to have more of a need to "show his stuff" with literary language and Britishisms. These days, he seems to have realized that everyone knows he's smart - no need to strut. Either way, he's a critic I'll always seek out and enjoy.

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## Emily Sorrells says

Was able to pull 20+ books to read from this (as if I needed to) and am curious to see how well they hold up to Dirda's amazingly written essays.

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## Lisa Sweet says

Oh man, I have just expanded my reading list five fold. This is a wonderful collection of literary criticism which offers a brief survey of vital literature through the ages. Even if I don't end up picking up a lot of these books, I feel as if I know much more than when I started. Perfect for a dilettante like me!

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## Rose says

Though the subtitle seems a little "hype-y," it really is a great collection covering literature from the classical era until the present with short essays on numerous books. The pieces have an engaging tone that made me reluctant to come to the end. It will illumine aspects of those books covered that you have read, and is guaranteed to lead you to some new titles.

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## Arun Lakshmanan says

He makes u fall in love with books. Book of books. I found many authors courtesy him like Algernon Blackwood, John Hay, Bruce Chatwin. I loved short 4 page essay form and that it can still be so detailed..

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## Bruce says

...At long last, and having experienced untold enjoyment from it, including my introduction to many marvelous authors whom I had not previously known, I finished Michael Dirda's book, *Bound to Please*, an eclectic romp through many centuries, many cultures, many genres. Dirda's book is a collection of his literary reviews, most being enthusiasms for books and authors which have delighted him and which he is eager to share with us, few if any being negative criticisms – one senses that if he does not like a work or author, his strategy is to condemn by ignoring, a reasonable approach, I suppose. At any rate, I have found his book to be the source of many suggestions for reading and reminders of works and authors I've already read and enjoyed. My "to-read" list now includes works by Jan Potocki, Italo Svevo, Flann O'Brien, Avram Davidson, Robert Aickman, Martin Amis, Russell Hoban, Joseph Roth, and Sandor Marai, to name only a few. But learning about new and unfamiliar works is only half the pleasure of reading Dirda; the other half is reading his own writing itself. How can one not enjoy such writing as this, and how can one resist picking up the book he so seductively describes?:

*"The Letters of Nancy Mitford and Evelyn Waugh* is quite simply the most amusing correspondence of our time. Strong readers will portion out the book in small servings so that it lasts for weeks and weeks; others – frail, fallen creatures like myself – will sybaritically gobble up these 500 pages, heedless of measure and



propriety, forgetful of all but their own selfish pleasure. If they read any books on the island of the Lotos Eaters, this is bound to be one of them.”

Read Dirda’s book for insights and suggestions. Read it for its delights. Above all, read it.

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## Mark Feltskog says

Michael Dirda’s magisterial collection of critical essays, *Bound to Please*, carries the subtitle *An Extraordinary One-Volume Literary Education*. I confess that subtitle aroused my skepticism; however, I can report quite happily that this is not an example of that unfortunate tendency in American culture of hyperbole to surpass substance. Mr. Dirda’s book *is*, in fact, an extraordinary one-volume literary education.

It’s safe to say that Michael Dirda is a critic’s critic. His prose is energetic and rigorous, yet unforced. He is a gloriously catholic reader who conveys news from literary worlds that many if not most of his readers have not explored, and probably in many cases didn’t know existed. I particularly appreciated his writing on science fiction, which is edifying and has aroused my own interest in the genre. Furthermore, Mr. Dirda is *au courant* on translations and editions (his remarks on editions, out-of-print books, and used bookstores divulge, I think, the fact that he is, unsurprisingly, a bibliophile in the sense that he loves books as objects as well as the prose they contain) and this information will no doubt aid those in search of the books and authors he reviews.

Other than Edmund Wilson and the critics I read for my college thesis—e.g. Rene Wellek, Joseph Frank, and Mikhail Bakhtin—I confess to a paucity of knowledge about the field. I have found a great deal of contemporary academic criticism opaque and self-indulgent—redolent of what George Jean Nathan once said about criticism: that it is “...the art wherewith a critic tries to guess himself into a share of the author’s fame.” Michael Dirda commits no such offense here, but rather elucidates for the common reader the great books and authors of all time and for all time.

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