



Longer Views: Extended Essays

Samuel R. Delany

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"Reading is a many-layered process — like writing," observes Samuel R. Delany, a Nebula and Hugo award-winning author and a major commentator on American literature and culture. In this collection of six extended essays, Delany challenges what he calls "the hard-edged boundaries of meaning" by going beyond the customary limits of the genre in which he's writing. By radically reworking the essay form, Delany can explore and express the many layers of his thinking about the nature of art, the workings of language, and the injustices and ironies of social, political, and sexual marginalization. Thus Delany connects, in sometimes unexpected ways, topics as diverse as the origins of modern theater, the context of lesbian and gay scholarship, the theories of cyborgs, how metaphors mean, and the narrative structures in the Star Wars trilogy.

"Over the course of his career," Kenneth James writes in his extensive introduction, "Delany has again and again thrown into question the world-models that all too many of us unknowingly live by." Indeed, Delany challenges an impressive list of world-models here, including High and Low Art, sanity and madness, mathematical logic and the mechanics of mythmaking, the distribution of wealth in our society, and the limitations of our sexual vocabulary. Also included are two essays that illustrate Delany's unique chrestomathic technique, the grouping of textual fragments whose associative interrelationships a reader must actively trace to read them as a resonant argument. Whether writing about Wagner or Hart Crane, Foucault or Robert Mapplethorpe, Delany combines a fierce and often piercing vision with a powerful honesty that beckons us to share in the perspective of these Longer Views.

Longer Views: Extended Essays Details

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Rambling Reader says

excellent analysis of donna haraway's seminal "cyborg manifesto"

K says

Samuel R. Delaney = love. Well-written essays that make you wish you were as smart and insightful as he is.

Nathanial says

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me."

Was that chant prevalent in your grade school? Who said it? Who heard it? Who repeated it? In the dialogical criticism of Longer Views, where the critiques respond to their own premises of exposition at the same time that they consider varied objectives, motives, and means of essay, "a stick" is not a stick but "words" are always words. Like a really smart schoolkid defusing the playground bully, Delany's essays remind the ready listeners - the active readers who write between the lines - to distinguish between words and their effects, ideas and their origins, actions and their motives, institutions and their consequences.

"Rhetoric is the ash of discourse," begins "Shadows," chronologically the first essay in the book, but here placed at the end as an appendix. Since sticks and stones are not just sticks and stones, but also laser-guided missiles and policies of economic sanctions, the aim of Delany's explorations is to provide a model with which we can decipher the orders that deploy the sticks - to elaborate a counter-narrative that can remove the aura of inevitability around a discourse and reveal the rhetoric at its base.

"Every utterance," says Ken James at the end of the first section of his five-part Introduction, "no matter how much it evokes a transcendental system of authority to legitimate itself, can always be traced back to an individual or group with a historically, socially, and materially specific position." Words can never hurt me, but they can be used to dissuade me from investigating where people got those sticks. What's more, the absence of words can occlude sight of the fact that sticks and stones hurt worst when people throw them.

It's more than okay, suggests this collection, to use words to illustrate the contingency of specific positions - that's also the inherent task of science fiction. By extension, an essay of dialogical dimensions can accomplish the same goal by employing formal tropes that tend towards the unfolding revelation that all things, including the essay itself, were at one time or another made, and can also be un-made - or is that a faulty premise?

[continued below]

