

Cultural Amnesia: Necessary Memories from History and the Arts

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Forty years in the making, a new cultural canon that celebrates truth over hypocrisy, literature over totalitarianism.

Echoing Edward Said's belief that "Western humanism is not enough, we need a universal humanism," the renowned critic Clive James presents here his life's work. Containing over one hundred original essays, organized by quotations from A to Z, *Cultural Amnesia* illuminates, rescues, or occasionally destroys the careers of many of the greatest thinkers, humanists, musicians, artists, and philosophers of the twentieth century. In discussing, among others, Louis Armstrong, Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Franz Kafka, Marcel Proust, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, James writes, "If the humanism that makes civilization civilized is to be preserved into the new century, it will need advocates. These advocates will need a memory, and part of that memory will need to be of an age in which they were not yet alive." Soaring to Montaigne-like heights, *Cultural Amnesia* is precisely the book to burnish these memories of a Western civilization that James fears is nearly lost.

Clive James

(1939-2019), author of the best-selling *Cultural Amnesia* and *Poetry Notebook*, was an Officer of the Order of Australia and a Commander of the Order of the British Empire. His writing appeared in the *New York Times Book Review*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Atlantic*. Starred Review. From Anna Akhmatova to Stefan Zweig, Tacitus to Margaret Thatcher, this scintillating compendium of 110 new biographical essays plumbs the responsibilities of artists, intellectuals and political leaders. British critic James (*Visions Before Midnight*) structures each entry as a brief life sketch followed by quotations that spark an appreciation, a condemnation or a tangent (a piece on filmmaker Terry Gilliam veers into a discussion of torturers' pleasure in their work). Sometimes, as in his salute to Tony Curtis's acting or his savage assault on bebop legend John Coltrane's penchant for "subjecting some helpless standard to ritual murder," James's purpose is just bravura opinionating. But most articles are linked by a defense of liberal humanism against totalitarianisms of the left and right-and ideologues who champion them. He lionizes prewar Vienna's martyred Jewish cafe intellectuals; castigates French apologists for communism-especially Sartre, who "could sound as if he was talking about everything while saying nothing"; and chides Borges for not noticing Argentina's descent into fascism. This theme can grow intrusive; even in an entry on children's author Beatrix Potter, he feels called upon to denounce Soviet children's books. But James's brilliantly aphoristic prose, full of aesthetic insights but careful not to let aesthetics obscure morality, makes for a delightful browse suffused with a potent message. Photos.

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