

THE WORLD SPLIT OPEN: GREAT AUTHORS ON HOW AND WHY WE WRITE. Portland, OR: Tin House Books, November 2014. 208pp. \$18.95, paper.

Reviewed by Jonathan Liebson.

Jon Raymond's introduction may be excused for preaching to the choir. The question he opens with—"Does writing matter?"—is a ruse, as is his initial answer to it: a momentary assumption that it doesn't. He points out that literature endures "as a marginal cultural activity, at best," acknowledging that books have long been overshadowed by film, television, and video games. Yet in spite of these and other new threats, great writing survives. Literature has not yet suffered a death by a thousand cuts, and *The World Split Open: Great Authors on How and Why We Write* is a testament to that resilience. Raymond considers the book a "rebuttal" to the digital age, and although the nine essays included here "don't constitute a defense of 'literature,' per se," they nevertheless affirm a fundamental relationship that his readers, no doubt, will already share: "the passionate engagement of the human soul with the written word."

The essays constituting this book were originally talks given at the Portland Arts and Lectures series, and have been selected (with minimal editing) by the editors at Tin House Books in honor of the thirtieth anniversary of Literary Arts, the organization through which the series is run. (The works are presented alphabetically, not chronologically, with the earliest talk dating back to 1988, the most current to 2012.) Raymond, a former editor at *Tin House* magazine and current Literary Arts board member, refers to the organization as a "bulwark of bookish culture," an institution "devoted expressly to the fact that writing does matter." The book attempts to explain that significance in two ways: first, through philosophical exploration, with authors making arguments on behalf of literature's aesthetic and moral place in the modern world; second, through anecdote, with a look over the authors' shoulders at how writing has impacted their own lives—and helped shape the lives of their creations.

Marilynne Robinson's "On 'Beauty'" takes the first approach. Her writing often has a more formal quality that matches the rigor of an academic mind. She speaks of a four-hundred-year trend through science, industrialization, and World War I to "demystify" our existence, to make it seem as if many of the big questions about who we are have already been answered—or that those questions simply don't matter anymore. She refers to a "logical positivism" or "neo-utilitarianism" that has "foreclosed the possibility of grand new thought."

Readers familiar with modernism will be aware of post-World War I disillusionment, a belief in the defeat of belief itself. Robinson updates this cynicism to contemporary times, arguing that the demystified mind finds its perfect place in today's

capitalist society, where "Everything we are asked to look at is abrupt, bright, and loud . . . especially the evening news." She claims that the "intentional dumbing down of everything in our collective life" makes us more susceptible to mass-market fads and popular trends, and that literature is a needed countermeasure. The use of one's imagination becomes "an urgent business," in Robinson's opinion, because "Dreaming one's soul into another's" remains our best chance of buffering ourselves against the lowest common denominator. Only through fiction—only from the kind of journey one takes through narrative—can we resist complacency and cultural standards that very often feel like a race to the bottom.

Margaret Atwood's "Spotty-Handed Villainesses" is akin in rhetorical style to Robinson's essay. In spite of her warning against writers theorizing about their own trade, she meanders among the book's at-large questions on the role of writing, and the ambitions of the novelist, before she asserts what her companion authors would readily support: the novel is "not a moral tract" with clear behavioral guidelines. However, this view in no way rules out the novel's moral significance, and to make that point Atwood steers us toward her more specific topic of "bad" female characters. She testifies to the important role such women as Madame Bovary and Hester Prynne have played in advancing "explorations of moral freedom"—though she's quick to remind us of the inherent messiness in such ventures. If novels force us to confront distasteful or illicit subjects, history reveals that we won't always succeed. Rather than dictate virtue, novels purposely mislead and can be unreliable about the morals they present—as "slippery as a greased lawyer," Atwood says. Her view speaks to the complicated nature of desire, and no doubt to our often-complicated reactions to it.

By the time Robert Stone gets around to "Morality and Truth in Literature," the subject has begun to feel a little tired, and Stone himself fairly acknowledges the familiarity of his topic. He refers to a 1987 William Gass essay (written the year before Stone's own piece) and admits that Gass's premise—about the "mutually distant" aspirations of art and morality—is not exceptional. And yet Stone clearly wants to debate the idea. He turns over the same questions about what we require of art, and to what standard it should be held, before he ends up disputing Gass and taking issue with the supposed amorality of writers like James Joyce, William Burroughs, or Alain Robbe-Grillet. In Burroughs, for instance, whose writing depicts an almost insufferable and violent world of drug addiction, Stone views humor as a weapon of sorts. The "laughter" Burroughs incites is "a primary moral response": a "rebellion against chaos, a rejection of evil, and an affirmation of balance and soundness." Like Robinson, Stone believes novels are a way of "cleaning up our act," a way that we as a culture "collectively conspire . . . to transcend the grimmest of circumstances." By the end of his essay, he turns Gass's premise upside down, asking not whether fiction can be moral, but how it could ever be considered *independent* of morality.

Originating from the same lecture series, the essays in this collection all seem fitted to a length requirement that some fulfill more naturally than others. Stone's essay isn't the only one that takes its time to heat up, or that bakes its cake a little too long. Chimamanda Adichie and Edward P. Jones both unwind their string a little slowly as they explain what brought them to their respective subject matters, and how they grappled with their fiction over time.

Russell Banks's "No, But I Saw the Movie" might also benefit from a bit of condensing, as he takes us inside the actor's studio to discuss novels adapted to the big screen. If films are considered a direct threat to literature, and filmmaking a process that often exploits the writer, Banks appears to have been surprisingly well rewarded by his own experiences. He writes optimistically about a happy convergence between serious novelists and independent filmmakers like Quentin Tarantino and Atom Egoyan (who directed the film adaptation of Banks's *The Sweet Hereafter*), both of whose work has helped emancipate films from the Hollywood standard of linear plots and conventional stories. The result has been more complicated narrative structures—and thus more faithful representations of the novels involved—delivered to a more thoughtful audience.

Throughout *The World Split Open*, the essays pivot between a larger, communal sense of writing and a more individualized, deeply personal relationship writers have with their craft. The sometimes playful, sometimes cerebral pieces by Ursula Le Guin ("Where Do You Get Your Ideas From?") and Wallace Stegner ("Fiction to Make Sense of Life") offer interesting observations culled from personal experience. Jeanette Winterson and E. L. Doctorow open the doors to their personal lives even wider, and the book benefits greatly. These two authors provide moving accounts of when reading first took hold of them in childhood and how writing slowly insinuated itself into their lives.

Winterson's "What Is Art For?" does pay tribute to the book's major thematic questions, but after stating that "art gives us a sense of ourselves," she locates us more specifically in her own life: "I was brought up poor, in a mill town, in the north of England." The sentence itself reads like the start of a novel, and Winterson goes on to describe the strict religious household of her adoptive parents, in which education was distrusted and all books except the Bible needed her mother's approval. Winterson's idea of reading as "an act of free will" is powerfully expressed through her personal story, much more so than through theoretical argument alone. Equally powerful are the threats to that freedom, as recounted in how Winterson would literally have to "smuggle" books into her home and stash them under her mattress, aligning them as best she could to keep the mattress looking level. For a while she is able to keep her mother's suspicion at bay, until one day she comes home to see the discovered books going up in a cruel bonfire in her yard.

Winterson's resolve is shared by her fellow authors. If reading is their first portal to the world, the written word eventually becomes a form of survival. Such value is seen symbolically in a young Doctorow, whose recovery from a near-fatal burst appendix seems at least partially dependent on the pile of books his parents dutifully replenish at his bedside table. This memory is more than just touching; it holds as much claim on the novel's lasting importance as any other idea floated in the book. A fictionalized version of Doctorow's Bronx childhood appears in his novel *World's Fair*, but his essay ("Childhood of a Writer") goes further to explain how his immersion in books slowly transformed itself into his lifeblood as an author. He writes of a crucial "imprinting" that takes place when we read, whereby we not only inhabit the book but "run with the author as well—this wild begetter of voices . . . this noble creature . . . whose linguistic lope over any sort of terrain brings it into being." The inspiration here is from Jack London, and the Doctorow who receives it is nine years old, but the process described by Doctorow-the-elder brings into sharp focus what every other author here has strived to explain.

In essence, that description makes writers of us all. Whereas Marilynne Robinson states that our "appetite for narrative" can save us, and Robert Stone declares storytelling to be as "necessary" to us "as bread," it is the collection's many personal moments that certify the absolute truth: narrative avails. Storytelling becomes its own best argument, and *The World Split Open* proves most resonant when it shrugs off the question "Does writing matter?" and simply shows us its abiding importance to any one author. If readers expect this book to crack the mantle and dig deep down to some artistic truth, they may come away somewhat disappointed. But they will still be persuaded—in a less earth-shattering way—of writing's value in addressing our needs and concerns. Perhaps Wallace Stegner states this most beautifully, in comparing the writer's task to the work done by sculptors. He refers to the efforts of both as a "probing of real and troubling human confusions," but then suggests that all any artist can do is chisel away slowly at the "mystery implicit in the stone."

