

Essays from the Nick of Time: Reflections and Refutations

Mark Slouka

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"The empire of facts will have its say," Mark Slouka says. "Although Octavio Paz may have been right when he suggested that Americans have always preferred to use reality rather than to know it, we may yet have that acquaintance forced on us." Far from seeming forced, Slouka has a delightful, thought-provoking relationship with reality. He finds in light moments a grain of darkness, and in serious ones a glint of humor—the empire of facts, it seems, is a democracy, not a tyranny. *Essays from the Nick of Time* is full of his revelations, arguments, and realizations. From Hitler's couch to the crumbling World Trade Center, Slouka seeks out landmarks in human history and examines them as closely as St. Julian eyed a holy hazelnut.

A natural essayist, Slouka balances the personal with the political, traveling from his own experience to history and back again. Given his pithy style, it's no surprise that he is a contributing editor to *Harper's Magazine*. The essay form in particular requires balance, an ability to maneuver along the slippery axes of diametrically opposed ideas. Slouka draws easy parallels between popular culture and the profane, politics and psychology. Musing on our noisy, technologically over-advanced world, he says: "Capable of differentiating between the cheeps and chimes of the cell phones, portable phones, baby monitors, pagers, scanners, laptops, car alarms, and so on that fill our lives, we've grown adept, at the same time, at blocking them out with sounds of our own, at forcing a privacy where none exists." Yet, rather than condemn the noisy world, Slouka seems to pull out his iBuds and perk up his ears. His sensitivity to his environment—and his willingness to live a fiercely examined life—make him the ideal writer of personal essays. He presents the world in a comprehensible way, addressing both its idiocy and its literature.

Slouka's no showboat. There are but a few empty flourishes in *Nick of Time*; his sentences are packed tight without being florid, and the layering of images and phrases falls easily on the reader's ear. Even his invective is comprehensible: Slouka's feelings, however palpable, do not compromise his craft. "What we need to talk about, what *someone* needs to talk about, particularly now," he says, "is our ever-deepening ignorance (of politics, of foreign languages, of history, of science, of current affairs, of pretty much everything) and not just our ignorance but our complacency in the face of it, our growing fondness for it."

Essays from the Nick of Time celebrates the mixed blessing of living with awareness in the world. Slouka raises a sometimes cynical glass to the chaotic party that surges around all of us—the mad mix of humanity, history, and hope.

CLAIRE RUDY FOSTER (January / February 2011)

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