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H. L. Mencken on American Literature

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Reading H. L. Mencken's book reviews feels like a
secret indulgence. One relishes in Mencken's frequent barbs at the famous and would-be famous (and is thankful that Mencken never reviewed one's own work). Mencken once called Edith Wharton a "charming and excellent writer," but when The Age of Innocence failed to live up to her earlier promise, he dismissed it by writing: "It is, of course, not bad in the sense that Dreiser's writing is often bad, but it lacks all character, all distinction: any literate person might have done it." Such comments continue to sting eight decades after they were written.

Reading Mencken is a secret indulgence, of course, because he has fallen so far out of favor in the decades since his death. While he was once considered one of the most respected and feared reviewers in America, a wit of the highest order, today he is more often presented as a cranky elitist, with racist and misogynist undertones: a dead white male of the worst sort. Of course, there is a fair degree of truth in such a judgment. "I am," he writes in one review, "as my customers are probably by this time aware, one who holds the basic democratic doctrine in considerable suspicion, and no admirer, surely, of concrete democrats." Part of the beauty of Mencken, of course, is that one is never completely certain when he is in Swiftian mode and when he is deadly serious.

For this collection, the editor has gathered reviews and columns spanning more than two decades. He has grouped the reviews according to the author being discussed, so readers can easily follow Mencken's championing, for example, of Sinclair Lewis or Willa Cather. In addition to the reviews of the major writers of the era that one would expect to see, Joshi has included a section devoted to Mencken's reviews of the lesser talents of the day, such as Marjorie Benton Cooke (Mencken would surely suggest that "lesser talents" is a label far too generous in its politeness). It is here that Mencken's full wit and fury are released and the contemporary reader begins to understand the fear that authors must have felt when hearing that Mencken was going to review their latest book.

The editor of two previous collections of Mencken's work, Joshi has once again done a fine job of sorting through the author's prodigious body of writing. An essential volume for those interested in Mencken, or American belles lettres in the age of Modernism.
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