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Literary Collections

Literary Capital: A Washington Reader
Christopher Sten, editor
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Literary Capital: A Washington Reader is a collection of narratives by residents of and visitors to Washington, DC. In other words, a real grab bag. Reach in and pull out goodies from Dickens, Emerson, and Melville, or put them back and retrieve more recent writings by Gore Vidal, Joan Didion, or Allen Drury.

The contents range from journal entries to short stories, poetry, excerpts from novels and autobiographies, slave narratives, and travel essays. Edited by Christopher Sten, an English professor at George Washington University, this anthology provides a handy guide to writings "that offer valuable insights into the character and history of the city." The pieces are loosely grouped by theme within chronological periods such as Early Impressions (1800-1860), Race, Slavery, Civil War (1830-1905), Reconstruction and National Expansion (1865-1910), Minority Reports (1880-2000), Private Lives and Public Views (1920-2010), Poetry and Politics (1920-2010), and Power, Corruption, and Crisis (1950-2010).

This reader is bound to appeal to history buffs as well as anyone with ties to the city or visitors who might want a souvenir of its literary output. There is a map showing where fifteen notable Washington, DC authors lived, including Frederick Douglass, Langston Hughes, and Walt Whitman.

Although in many cases the connection between an author and the city is tenuous, this book does bring together both native and naturalized Washington writers who are "careful observers of American culture." They provide informed views of the people and the political antics that have long driven the nation's capitol, from its founding to its present administration. As the editor notes, "What I have sought to create is a collection of representative writings in a wide range of genres … [in which] the author reveals a felt knowledge of the city or a lively connection with its past or present, real or imagined."

The collection offers the chance to sample works by writers you may never have read.

“The Congressman Who Loved Flaubert” by Ward Just, a *Washington Post* reporter turned novelist, is about a man who weighs the risks—and political payoff—of backing a resolution to end an unpopular war. It could just as well have been written today, speaking of Iraq/Afghanistan rather than Vietnam, and shows how little the legislative process has changed: “The resolution is redrafted into harmless form and is permitted to languish. The language incomprehensible, at the end it becomes an umbrella under which anyone could huddle.”

The national government serving as backdrop, or foil, to the featured lives of local residents is really what makes Washington writing an unusually rich, if sometimes schizoid, body of work, according to the editor. Although it’s a stretch to say that Washington “has always been a magnet for writers” in the sense of a literary mecca such as New York City, it still provides the setting of what Dickens once called the city of “magnificent intentions.”

Trina Carter