

Mutual Impressions: Writers from the Americas Reading One Another

Ian Stavans

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“This is a book about neighbors: not about who our neighbors are but about who we imagine them to be.” In his introduction to *Mutual Impressions*, Stavans points out that our social concepts revolve mainly around how different our cultures are. In his home country of Mexico, “we are who we are by distinguishing ourselves from the gringos.” The falseness of our social ideas, however, is often exposed in the essays collected here. For instance, Stavans relates how John Updike revealed to him in conversation that he learned of Nathaniel Hawthorne, a great influence on his work, through a lecture given by Jorge Luis Borges in Buenos Aires in 1946. If a South American can teach a North American about his own countryman, then perhaps their worlds are not as far apart as they think.

This collection is divided into two halves: the first is south reading north and vice versa in the second. Borges’ treatment of Hawthorne is among the essays in the first half, as are prose from Mario Vargas Llosa on Ernest Hemingway, Gabriel Garcia Marquez on William Faulkner and Pablo Neruda on Robert Frost. The second half includes comments from William H. Gass on Borges, Robert Coover on Julio Cortazar and Susan Sontag on Machado de Assis. A note about the author prefaces each piece, and often the author reveals as much about himself in the essay as about the figure he is discussing.

This is a collection of impressions. The pieces illustrate one literary figure’s thoughts on another. They started out as lectures, notes, comments and musings about another author. They are not meant to be grand intellectual explorations of each other, just honest impressions. This is not a boring textbook of ivory tower papers, but a spirited journey into the world of writers enjoying one another and having an impact on each other.

The book would be sure to spark interesting dialogue in a Latin American or cross-cultural literature class or seminar. In addition to *Mutual Impressions*, Stavans has edited numerous collections, including *The Oxford Book of Latin American Essays*, and has also authored a number of nonfiction and fiction books, including *A Cartoon History of Latinos in the U.S.*

CHRISTINE CANFIELD (January / February 2000)

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