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Literary Criticism

Second Reading: Notable and Neglected Books Revisited
Jonathan Yardley
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For every great writer there need to be equally great readers. Jonathan Yardley may be just that, willing not only to read a work once, but also to re-read it seven or eight times. Yardley has been a columnist and book critic for the *Washington Post* since 1981. He is also the author of six books and winner of a Pulitzer Prize for distinguished criticism. His reviews of notable and neglected books appeared in a column called "Second Reading." Idiosyncratic and wide-ranging, these reviews offer discussions of some well-loved books from the past. As "an ardent, constant reader" since the day he was old enough to read, he is unafraid to find merit in books that "the literati scorn."

One of the great pleasures of reading Yardley is that he doesn't pull his punches. He smacks J.D. Salinger and Ernest Hemingway around for having written "two of the worst" books in American literature, and finds Louis Armstrong "a remarkably talented writer" who "uses words like he strings notes together, artistically and vividly." Yardley revisits books that meant the most to him, from the Hornblower saga to the letters of Flannery O'Connor, essays of Nora Ephron, and stories of Peter Taylor that have fallen into neglect or gone underappreciated for too long.

In fact, reading these reviews has a way of making you want to reach for the book to savor it again. Even when he dislikes a writer, Yardley manages to sound fair; the tone is always balanced and inclusive of the reader. In his review of *A Moveable Feast*, he moves from an autobiographical point of view ("I remember very well its publication in 1964") to the editorial *we* ("Thus we find …") to the neutral, objective tone of critic: "However one may feel about the literary style that emerged from this protracted period of self-discipline and self-denial, there can be no disputing the seriousness of Hemingway's purpose or the dedication he brought to the task."

Taken together, these reviews read a little bit like a refresher course in Great Books.

They will appeal to many book groups looking for a guide to their own selections. Yardley makes a strong case for why a book captivated him first and then why it's held up over time. He often tries to set aside his modern, current impressions to see it the way contemporaries might have read a work, like *The Great Gatsby*, when it first came out. He also manages "to strike the right balance between story and self."

Fans of the classics will find great enjoyment in revisiting them here. As Yardley says, "I aim to continue on myself, as the pleasures of these books have never dimmed for me."

Trina Carter