

Wrestling With Old Heroes - Again: Fourteen Familiar Letters on Classic American Literature

Jesse Green

Xlibris (September 2008)

Softcover \$11.23 (240pp)

978-1-4363-5319-9

This beautifully written book takes readers back to a time when there was time—time to consider ideas and deepen understanding. Jesse Green has written letters of reflection on some of the great writers of the nineteenth century: Emerson Thoreau Whitman Poe Hawthorne Melville and Dickinson. In so doing he has both contemplated our American literary heritage and also reminded us that these dead white males and one woman still have much to offer.

His epistolary style further anchors the book in the nineteenth century and creates a vehicle for a familiar easy relationship with the reader. This however does not lessen the scholarly depth of the work. A professor of English at the University of Cincinnati and then at Chicago State University Green has a long-term relationship with these authors and this quickly becomes evident. Apt and liberal quotes illustrate his points; endnotes provide references. He pursues interesting and unexpected angles: humor in Thoreau what's fact and fiction in *Moby Dick* Hawthorne's "psychological romance with passionate and adventurous women" through *The Scarlet Letter* *The Blithedale Romance* and *The Marble Faun*.

He is also open and honest about his struggles with some aspects of these authors something that his epistolary style facilitates. He confesses that "of all the writers revisited in this project the one [he has] had the most difficulty settling down with is Emily Dickinson." Ultimately however he explores her work with the same depth of thought as any other author in this collection.

The book is physically pleasing. The rust red cover is textured with black giving it a three-dimensional feel. Green's other writings include two books about Frank Hamilton Cushing and numerous articles in such publications as the *New York Review of Books* *Modern Fiction Studies* and *Contemporary American Literature*. His credentials are sound.

This book could serve a couple of audience groups. One is a niche market of readers who are interested in these literary figures or who wish to reconsider our American literary heritage. The other is a wider market of readers who are relatively new to critical literature including undergraduates taking a survey course in nineteenth-century American literature.

This work reflects Green's love of these authors and of American literature. Because it is well written and accessible it can be re-read dipped into for a letter or two and enjoyed just for the sake of its writing.

ALINE SOULES (December 4, 2008)

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