

# Books, Articles, and Items of Academic Interest

*Compiled, with commentary, by Carol Iannone*

## The Fighting Spirit

In the process of analyzing the considerable intellectual shortcomings of Louis Menand's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Metaphysical Club*, former *AQ* editor Thomas Short also exposes the shortcomings of much contemporary book reviewing. "Sham Scholarship," *Modern Age* (Fall 2002). Also in *Modern Age* (Summer 2002) is "Academic Suicide," R. V. Young's vigorous examination of the defects and omissions in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, published in 2001.

Two articles on the discipline of American Studies: Alan Wolfe, "Anti-American Studies," *The New Republic* (6 February 2003) argues that "the third generation and the fourth generation of scholars in the field not only reject the writers who gave life to the discipline, they have also developed a hatred for America so visceral that it makes one wonder why they bother studying America at all." Richard M. Huber renders a useful history of the discipline, contrasting the viewpoints of the Traditionalists and the Revisionists. "Contending Viewpoints: Rethinking American Cultural Studies," *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* (Fall & Winter 2001).

*Precepts*, the weekly newsletter of the Claremont Institute, recently featured an article criticizing the eagerness of younger conservative writers to embrace aspects of our degraded popular culture. In "A Conservative Generation Gap," (10 January 2003), author Spencer Warren questions the "aesthetic relativism" that allows young reviewers in the *Weekly Standard* to "endorse violent, vulgar and even obscene movies that have no redeeming aesthetic values." The estimable J. Bottum, the *Standard's* Books and Arts editor, answered with a witty riposte that nevertheless does not really engage the issue. "The Warren Report: J. Bottum has fun with Spencer Warren and our friends at the Claremont Institute." *Daily Standard* (21 January 2003). Both are available online.

## Troubled Schools

"How I joined Teach for America—and Got Sued for \$20 million," by Joshua Kaplowitz," *City Journal* (Winter 2003) reveals the horrendous conditions that a teacher must face in Washington, D.C.'s inner-city schools, and lays responsibility on cowardly bureaucrats and irresponsible parents.

Also on early education is *Class Warfare: Besieged Schools, Bewildered Parents, Betrayed Kids and the Attack on Excellence*, by J. Martin Rochester (Encounter Books, 2002). Rochester pinpoints many of the problems in contemporary K-12 education, such as “the clash between excellence and equity” and the “therapeutic classroom.”

### Professors Reflect

Joseph Epstein, “Goodbye Mr. Chipstein,” *Commentary* (February 2003), closes his teaching career with reflections, including some on the deterioration of student ability during his years as a professor of literature.

Stuart Rojstaczer’s book, *Gone for Good: Tales of University Life after the Golden Age*, was noted in *B&A* (Fall 2000), where we commented on his astuteness in assessing academic decline and his complacency in the face of it. Now, in the *Washington Post*, “Where All Grades Are Above Average” (28 January 2003), Professor Rojstaczer seems to have been roused from complacency by the problem of rampant grade inflation. “I recently handed in my grades for an undergraduate course I teach at Duke University,” he writes. “They were a very limited assortment: A, A-minus, B-plus, B and B-minus. There were no C’s of any flavor and certainly no D’s or F’s . . . . The C, once commonly accepted, is now the equivalent of the mark of Cain on a college transcript.” Professor Rojstaczer observes that as a result of such grade inflation, today’s classrooms “suffer from high absenteeism and a low level of student participation.” He concludes on a warning note: “In the absence of fair grading, our success in providing this country with a truly educated public is diminished. The implications of such failure for a free society are tremendous.”

### The Failure of the Left

Thomas de Zengotita, “Common Ground: Finding Our Way Back to the Enlightenment,” *Harper’s Magazine* (January 2003). It dawns on the author, a teacher at New York City’s upscale private academy, the Dalton School, that the Left may have undercut its own purported goals with its postmodern critique of the Enlightenment’s claim to universal truth. “Here is what it comes down to,” he summarizes:

Progressives don’t want to break with the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment because, if they do, if they explicitly reassert modern principles of a secular and universal humanism, they might have to face the possibility that the modern Western tradition has a real claim—a superior claim—upon the allegiance of humanity after all . . . . A case in point: how many people who think of themselves on the left have lapsed into virtual paralysis in relation to the

war on terror because they are privately wondering things about Islam that would be difficult to bring up publicly, for the reason just mentioned?

Coming from a more conservative viewpoint, Kay S. Hymowitz makes a similar argument about “progressives,” in this case, feminists, who are unwilling to face the awful treatment of women under Islam. “Why Feminism Is AWOL on Islam,” *City Journal* (Winter 2003). Hymowitz argues that the

combination of sentimental victimhood, postcolonial relativism, and utopian overreaching has caused feminism to suffer so profound a loss of moral and political imagination that it cannot speak against the brutalization of Islamic women. [This] is an incalculable loss to women and to men. The great contribution of Western feminism was to expand the definition of human dignity and freedom. It insisted that all human beings were worthy of liberty. Feminists now have the opportunity to make that claim on behalf of women who in their oppression have not so much as imagined that its promise could include them, too.

The failure of feminism to respond to the oppression of women under Islam is evident, and Ms. Hymowitz is instructive in pointing out the reasons for it. In her apparently sincere belief that the “great contribution of Western feminism was to expand the definition of human dignity and freedom,” however, she gives feminism more credit than it deserves. It has become increasingly obvious to many observers that American feminists have been less interested in the freedom of women than in destabilizing the normal order and attacking the men of their own culture.

### **The Great Tradition**

William Calin argues earnestly, if not quite convincingly, that the newer critical approaches—postcolonialist, new historicist, feminist, and queer—are “exciting” and can enhance our insights into the Great Books. “The Great Books: A Canon for the Twenty-First Century?” *South Atlantic Review*, Journal of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association (Winter 2002).

*Literary Imagination* offers more tips on teaching literature in non-ideological fashion in Stanley Corngold’s “Teaching Fiction to Undergraduates: Tropes in Stendhal and Kafka” (Fall 2002).