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The Western Lit Survival Kit: An Irreverent Guide To The Classics, From Homer To Faulkner



Synopsis

A side-splitting tour that makes it a blast to read the Western literary canon, from the ancient Greeks to the Modernists. To many, the Great Books evoke angst: the complicated Renaissance dramas we bluffed our way through in college, the dusty Everyman's Library editions that look classy on the shelf but make us feel guilty because they've never been opened. On a mission to restore the West's great works to their rightful place (they were intended to be entertaining!), Sandra Newman has produced a reading guide like no other. Beginning with Greek and Roman literature, she takes readers through hilarious detours and captivating historical tidbits on the road to Modernism. Along the way, we find parallels between Rabelais and South Park, Jane Austen and Sex and the City, Jonathan Swift and Jon Stewart, uncovering the original humor and riskiness that propelled great authors to celebrity. Packed with pop culture gems, stories of literary hoaxes, ironic day jobs for authors, bad reviews of books that would later become classics, and more.

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Customer Reviews

"How can one book be totally irreverent and incredibly informative at the same time ? Must be a trick. And Sandra Newman pulls this trick off with laugh-out-loud humor." -Thomas Cathcart & Daniel Klein, authors of *Plato and a Platypus Walk Into a Bar: Understanding Philosophy Through Jokes*"Sandra Newman extends a lifeline to those drowning in what others told us was the Western literature necessary to read. This is about what is needed to live. " -Evan Dobelle, Author /

Researcher of "Saviors of our Cities" and President of Horace Mann's Westfield State University, "The People's College"

Sandra Newman is the author of the novels *Cake* and *The Only Good Thing Anyone Has Ever Done*, and a memoir, *Changeling*. She is the coauthor of *How Not to Write a Novel and Read This Next*. Newman lives in Brooklyn.

I've read most of the authors Ms. Newman roasts here, and while she deliberately goes for the funny as often as possible, I found myself agreeing with 95% of her evaluations. This book is especially useful for younger people contemplating becoming English majors (bad choice! choose anything else!), for this book offers a entertaining, informative overview and will serve as a reality-check from time to time if you're foolish enough to pursue a degree in Western lit.

Very entertaining and witty. No doubt I will read a few more "classics" as a result of this book.

The subtitle of Newman's book reads "An Irreverent Guide to the Classics, from Homer to Faulkner," a statement which is absolutely true and almost everything you need to know about this book. Sandra Newman has put together a wry, funny and delightful journey from the Classical literature of the Greeks to meta-fiction in the twentieth century, and along the way she sneaks in an abundance of fascinating bits of history, biography, and literary criticism; but she manages to do it so well that you don't even realize you're learning anything. Entertainment that makes us smarter--this is definitely a book I'll be keeping on my shelves to read, refer to and recommend to friends over and over again. One of the things I appreciated about the book is that Sandra Newman was able to be irreverent without being disrespectful. While she is not afraid to tease the pedestal right out from under some of our sacred authors, it is always done with love, and more importantly, with knowledge. For example, when she writes of Henry James that his sentences are "a sort of literary Great Wall: while other, similar, structures exist, none are quite so long with so little apparent reason. (In fact, some sentences in *The Golden Bowl* can be seen from space)" it is as a lead-in to a discussion of the multiple layers of feeling and perception which can be found in these sentences. Of course the discussion, as with the rest of the book, is all tongue in cheek, which is what keeps this subtle literary lecture absolutely engaging. Newman employs a rating system in each chapter (or for each author); and each work gets graded on a scale of 1 to 10 in the areas of importance, accessibility, and fun. I found that the ratings Newman gave works with which I was familiar was

about the same as the ratings I would give, making her a trustworthy guide (for me, at least). I am sad to say that after reading The Western Lit Survival Kit my own "To Be Read" list has grown considerably simply on the basis of her recommendations. This is not to say that everything about the book was perfect, but the imperfections I found were fairly insignificant when taken with the book as a whole: I was never sure if she is rating works against other works in the same category, or against the entirety of the Western canon. In some chapters she rates a work's "accessibility" but in others it is rated as "difficulty," making it hard to know if an 8 is a good or bad rating. There were authors who did not seem to rate a rating for whatever reason (Flaubert and Tolstoy most notably) which had me wondering if it was intentional or an oversight. But all of these small faults were nothing compared to the amount of enjoyment I got from this book. Perhaps the best way to recommend this book (which I absolutely and strongly do) is to let Newman speak for herself. Here are 3 reasons (although these are not the only reasons, not by far) to read The Western Lit Survival Kit: "[Mark Twain] began his working life at eleven, when his father died. (Conrad and Melville's fathers also died when they were eleven. While this may seem like a trivial coincidence, our eleven-year-old readers who are serious about a writing career should take no chances. You know what you have to do.)" -From the chapter "We Also Begin To Have Americans" "In a time when women were still acceptable birthday presents, Sappho's status was unprecedented." -From the chapter "Greece, The Cradle of Greek Civilization" "Among other matters, the present author, like almost everyone else, would be happier if Western literature were not quite as white and male as it is. Like almost everyone else, however, there is nothing I can do about it, except try not to let it bother me, and drink. C'est la vie, which as everyone knows, is not a bowl of cherries. And if it were, in past centuries, white men would have eaten all of them, while the rest of us would have had to wash the bowl. Still, when they were full of all that healthy cherry energy, those white guys wrote some pretty good books." -From the Introduction If you are already a lover of literature or simply someone who has always wanted to know more about the "Great Books", and if these quotes have made you chuckle even a little bit, then you absolutely must read this book.

I adore this book. If you are considering getting an English Lit degree, why not just memorize this instead? You'll save time, you'll laugh more, and you'll still be able to chat knowingly about Restoration Drama when it comes up (as it does). Oh, did I mention you'll laugh? You will. A lot. I sometimes strongly disagree with Newman, and you probably will too, but I prefer literary criticism with personality rather than some ridiculous pretense of objectivity. I really can't recommend this book highly enough, to those who are interested in this

sort of thing. **SAMPLE PARAGRAPH** The other Jamesian keynote is the convoluted sentence. These sentences are a sort of literary Great Wall: while other, similar, structures exist, none are quite so long with so little apparent reason. (In fact, some sentences in *_The Golden Bowl_* can be seen from space.) Multiple feelings and perceptions are layered in each of them, in a syntax that seems to flow in every direction but forward. To give you an idea, here's one from *_The Ambassadors_*: "Nothing could have been odder than Strether's sense of himself as at that moment launched in something of which the sense would be quite disconnected from the sense of his past and which was literally beginning there and then." You will never catch Henry James writing "The dog barked." It will always be: "Had the dog not been, from the moment at which she entered the room in the perplexed flush of expectation in which she had been left by the hints of Mr. Westcott, barking..."

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