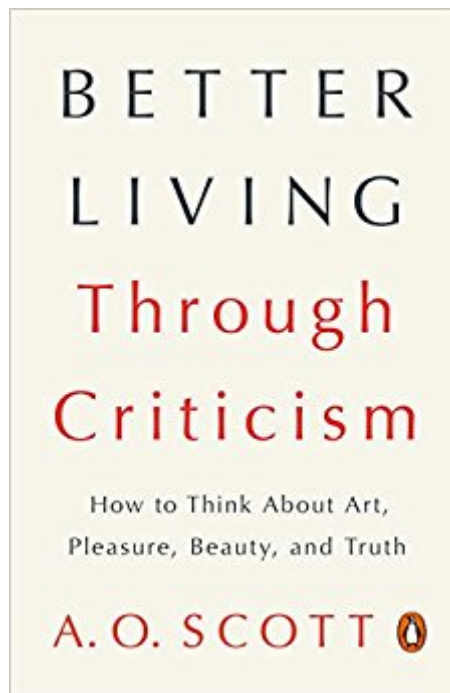




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Better Living Through Criticism: How To Think About Art, Pleasure, Beauty, And Truth



Synopsis

The New York Times film critic shows why we need criticism now more than ever. Few could explain, let alone seek out, a career in criticism. Yet what A.O. Scott shows in *Better Living Through Criticism* is that we are, in fact, all critics: because critical thinking informs almost every aspect of artistic creation, of civil action, of interpersonal life. With penetrating insight and warm humor, Scott shows that while individual critics--himself included--can make mistakes and find flaws where they shouldn't, criticism as a discipline is one of the noblest, most creative, and urgent activities of modern existence. Using his own film criticism as a starting point--everything from his infamous dismissal of the international blockbuster *The Avengers* to his intense affection for Pixar's animated *Ratatouille*--Scott expands outward, easily guiding readers through the complexities of Rilke and Shelley, the origins of Chuck Berry and the Rolling Stones, the power of Marina Abramovich and 'Ode on a Grecian Urn.' Drawing on the long tradition of criticism from Aristotle to Susan Sontag, Scott shows that real criticism was and always will be the breath of fresh air that allows true creativity to thrive. "The time for criticism is always now," Scott explains, "because the imperative to think clearly, to insist on the necessary balance of reason and passion, never goes away."

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Customer Reviews

Maclean's Non-Fiction Bestseller "In this book, as in his reviews, Scott's voice is genial, reasonable and self-aware. He elucidates complex ideas with snappy language.

He's funny, but not cynical or snarky. What he does especially well is explain how art develops and why our varied responses to it matter, pinpointing where criticism fits into the

equation. "Mr. Scott is very intelligent. What may matter more is that Mr. Scott is fun to read. [Scott] says that the simple questions always with complex answers that criticism poses are: "Did you feel that?" "Was it good for you?" "Tell the Truth." He reminds us that critical judgments, like art itself, demand intellectual and sensuous, even sexual, responses. Mr. Scott answers his own demands. "Wall Street Journal" "Rousing and erudite." "San Francisco Chronicle" "Witty and thoughtful." Reading Scott's book is like watching the stiff-upper-lipped hero of a British 1940s thriller facing down his or her adversaries - modest, brave and utterly unflappable. "LA Times" "If we were looking for an intelligent, informed and often funny account of why we can't live comfortably with criticism (in any of the word's meanings), and can't live without it, either, we need look no further, and shall probably want to read this book more than once." "New York Times" "Impassioned and deeply thoughtful." Scott lays out a taxonomy of meaningful thought (and the meaning of thought itself). His disciplined reasoning, impressive erudition, and deep commitment to his art (as he defines it) are never less than provocative and elegantly articulated. A zealous and well-considered work of advocacy for an art too often unappreciated and misunderstood. "Kirkus" "This stunning treatise on criticism from New York Times film critic Scott is a complete success, comprehensively demonstrating the value of his art...a necessary work that may enter the canon of great criticism." - Publisher's Weekly starred review

From the Hardcover edition.

A. O. Scott joined The New York Times as a film critic in January 2000. Previously, Mr. Scott was a Sunday book reviewer for Newsday and a frequent contributor to Slate, The New York Review of Books, and many other publications. He has served on the editorial staffs of Lingua Franca and The New York Review of Books. In addition to his film-reviewing duties, Mr. Scott often writes for the Times Magazine and the Book Review. He lives with his family in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Absolutely brilliant and sparkling with abundant common sense, rare characteristics among literary critics today. For ever and ever, I have read Scott's movie reviews (the most literate and literary of the last twenty years or so), and have learned so much for my own work as a formerly academic critic of Latin American literature. This book inverts his habitual process, going from the literary to cinema, art, food and just about all social aspects that demand criticism. As always, he is direct,

wittily funny, does not suffer political correctness lightly, and relays a goodness of spirit that is so absent at a time when many intellectual types have a "narrative" to which they do no justice. Thank you Mr. Scott, I have never waited so anxiously for a pre-ordered book, and "The Trouble with Critics" chapter should be the proverbial required reading and be included in every anthology of criticism. Sorry jargon mongers, after this book you need to think and get a life.

If you are seeking A.O. Scott's wisdom on select films from his fifteen years as movie critic of the NYTimes, this isn't the book for you. It is more Scott's philosophical ramblings on what criticism is. He has some interesting insights on how criticism is the triumph of Kant's categorical imperative. The good and the true must establish themselves without leaning on preexisting authorities. He also has an excellent chapter on what makes for poor criticism (the promiscuous hurling of adjectives, the fallacy of the decoy intransitive, etc.). He is a fan of H.L. Mencken's guidelines for criticism, and there is a interesting section on Frank Nugent, a film critic who ended up penning Ford's THE SEARCHERS. Scott writes well, and the book is interesting, but does read at points like a two-part NEW YORKER series that could have been done just as well in one. Still, he makes one think and he does provide insight into why he writes the way that he does.

Mr. Scott does an excellent job playing with the foundational tensions of art criticism, and aesthetics in general. Having never thought about these ideas in a concrete way prior to reading this, I found it fascinating. His erudition was evident throughout the pages, and his command of art/movies/literature and the english language is a delight to witness. I think the book really succeeds at showing the intense struggle between, for example, how the critic has to attempt to discover objective value, but also defend personal, contingent, subjective ideals. At times he battles himself on the pages in a socratic dialogue between his two selves: the established film critic vs. the critic of criticism. The last chapter was memorable because just when I thought one side wins the argument, the other side carves deeper into the argument and illuminates it further. I thought I would come away from the book with more answers, but I think now I better understand the true questions and tensions. Which is probably how it ought to be.

I read a movie review written by this author and it was so well written, I was jealous of his voice. I purchased this book to improve my vocabulary, and engage in something that would elevate my level of sophistication. I wanted to digest more of his expressions and descriptions, so that I could rise and flow with the other side. This book did not disappoint, but what I found was so much more- I

realized we are all the same. This book taught me that what makes criticism of any art so valuable is its ability to elicit a universal reaction. I had to re-read some lines and google a lot of terms but it was doable. You shouldn't feel like this book is written for the college grads who make a lot of money and go to museums and live in expensive brownstones or apartments in Manhattan. Read it, you will see they just use fancy words to say the same things we do. Use this book to learn their language.

Mr Scott here crafts disconnected, poetic arguments as to enduring and shape-shifting role of Criticism, since essentially the beginning of subjective thought. At points I was inspired by the message though that should come across as no surprise from a college educated liberal New Yorker. Its a casual read, thankfully lacking in academic density. In some ways it reads like advice on how to be a better human, in others like the transcript of a art school commencement speech. As a primer, I'd suggest reading Saul Bellow's essay, "There Is Simply Too Much to Think About." I'm sure there's some evidence of influence, either here or elsewhere in Scott's Times work.

Talked my book club into reading it. Funny, moving, edifying. The works!

This book presents an interesting take on the role of the critic and criticism in our culture. Scott attributes many ideas to critics. He may overstate his case but he is always interesting.

Good

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