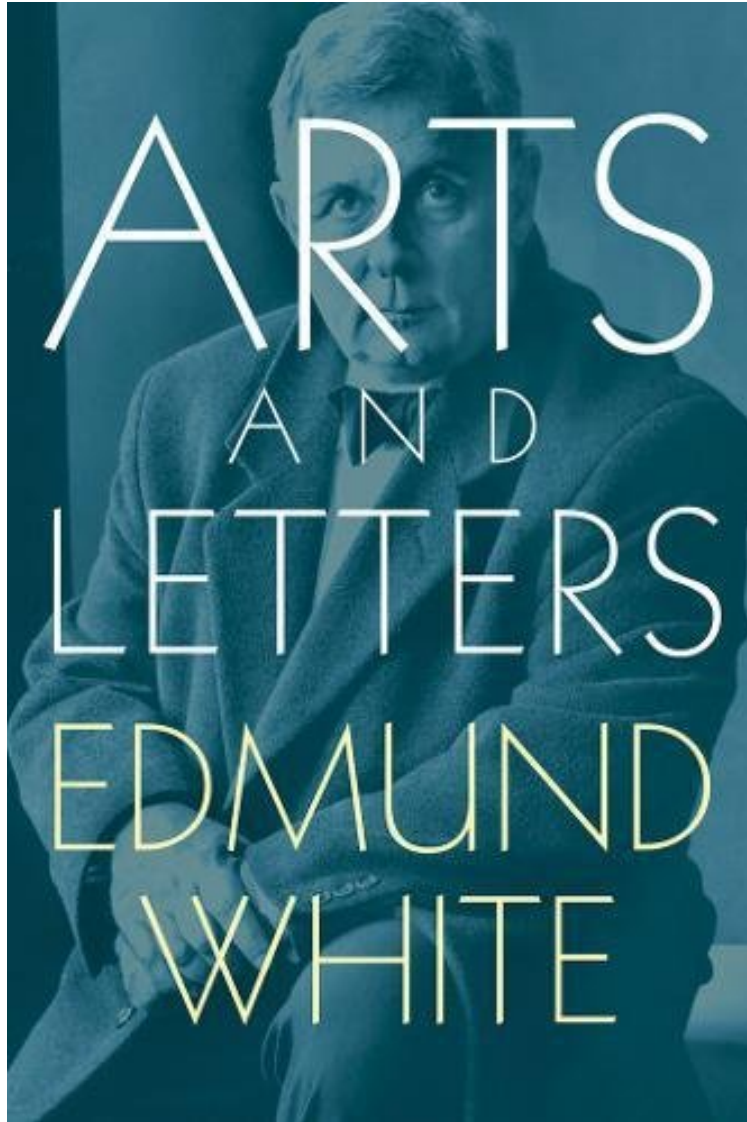


Arts and Letters

Edmund White

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Edmund White : Arts and Letters before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Arts and Letters:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A delightful mistakeBy Christopher RobinsonNot exactly what I thought: I bought this book while sleepy, thinking it was a collection of essays by E. B. White. My bad. However, it turns out that Edmund White wrote beautiful essays capturing interesting aspects of different characters (and movements); he adds fascinating tidbits that add splashes of vibrant colors, while also including his own voice (personal experience) into the narrative. It's sort of like having a one-way conversation with a brilliant, eccentric,

eloquent professor who has done it all, and he's giving the best dish he has on his favorite people; thereby, capturing them literarily for posterity as only Edmund White knows them and you want to know them. For me, this was a delightful mistake. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Open the door, open my mind. By Nicholas J. Faust White makes it seem so easy. Reading these essays-portraits, White's intimacy draws me close, as if his words were meant for me, alone. No artifice, no verbal gymnastics intrude on our relationship. White reveals his thoughts, illuminates his subjects, and directs my attention with an honest and serenely focused candor. He's clear, richly cultivated, but never shouts; he leads me into a realm of thought and understanding that inevitably opens his subjects with a casual yet critical deference for me to meet, greet, and ponder the relevance of their lives and art. He opens the door, and, therefore, opens my mind. After reading these essays, I search for the works he's introduced and am grateful. Reading this terrific book is like visiting with a buddy who's been a close, close friend for a very long time. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Edmund White talks about famous people he has known. By Garrett A. Phelps A very literate book. Not for someone looking for a light read or an entertaining read. This is serious stuff. Probably best read by English teachers, etc.

A dazzling collection of profiles and interviews by the preeminent American cultural essayist of our time. In these 39 lively essays and profiles, best-selling novelist and biographer Edmund White draws on his wide reading and his sly good humor to illuminate some of the most influential writers, artists, and cultural icons of the past century: among them, Marcel Proust, Catherine Deneuve, George Eliot, Andy Warhol, Andr Gide, David Geffen, and Robert Mapplethorpe. Whether he's praising Nabokov's sensuality, or critiquing Elton John's walk (as though he's a wind-up doll that's been overwound and sent heading for the top of the stairs), or describing serendipitous moments in his seven-year-long research into the life of Genet, White is unfailingly observant, erudite, and entertaining.

"A fascinating book." -- New York Sun, Oct. 19, 2004 "By marrying biography and criticism [Arts and Letters] achieves a grand social critique." -- Andrew Solomon, author of *The Noonday Demon*, winner of the National Book Award "Edmund White's 39 reviews, interviews and essays...are a shocking display of friendliness, optimism, openness and tact." -- Los Angeles Times Book , January 23, 2005 "White's new essay collection offers a rare treat." -- Bay Area Reporter, Oct. 14, 2004 "[A] fine collection by this admirable American writer." -- Washington Post Book World, November 14, 2004 About the Author EDMUND WHITE is the author of 17 books, including a trilogy of autobiographical novels: *A Boy's Own Story*, *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, and *The Farewell Symphony*. His most recent novel is *Fanny: A Fiction*. Other books include the novels *Forgetting Elena*, *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*, *Caracole*, and *The Married Man*, as well as a collection of short stories titled *Skinned Alive*. White lived in Paris for many years and wrote *The Flneur* and *Our Paris* about his time there. He won the National Book Critics Circle Award for *Genet: A Biography* and has also written a short biography of Proust and a collection of essays, *The Burning Library*. A regular contributor to *The TLS*, *The New York Times Book* , and *Vanity Fair*, Edmund White is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and is the director of the creative writing program at Princeton University. He lives in New York City. From *The Washington Post* While reading this wide-ranging collection of Edmund White's occasional journalism -- essays on George Eliot and Grace Paley bump up against appreciations of Jasper Johns, Yves Saint Laurent and Jean Genet -- I happened to look at the writer's jacket photo. There, wrapped in a heavy overcoat and sporting a bow-tie, the author of *A Boy's Own Story* and 16 other books looks dapper, jowly and a bit somber. Having been impressed by White's insight into the rationale behind Robert Mapplethorpe's once shocking photographs, I wondered what this particular image said about its particular subject. Was it, for instance, a formal portrait of the writer as a Wilsonian man of letters? After a riotous youth (*States of Desire: Travels in Gay America*), followed by years as our leading gay novelist and essayist, White is now director of the creative writing program at Princeton. Or might the photograph be an allusion to the famous Snowdon shot of Nabokov draped in a thick blanket and looking soulful? After all, the author of *Lolita* has no more fervent admirer -- and not only because the Russian master praised White's first novel, *Forgetting Elena*. Both of these are possible interpretations, though one shouldn't overlook the less exalted fact -- mentioned by White himself in his profile of Catherine Deneuve -- that he is sensitive about his weight and just might want to hide some extra pounds. Yet as I studied the picture I began to think again about the essays in *Arts and Letters*. What earlier free-spirited writer always spoke so fervently about sexual pleasure, blithely commingled biography and fiction, adored gossip and social life and fashion and the theater, toyed with bisexuality and, after early years of marginalization, emerged as arguably the finest prose stylist of her generation? That "her" gives it away. Colette, too, appears in her late photographs thickly swathed in swirls of cloth, plump-cheeked, looking very wise. I don't want to press this comparison too far -- the French writer's diction is far more sensuous than White's relatively plain prose -- yet both are great celebrants of eros the bittersweet, of friendship as a bulwark against life's sorrows, and of work as the salve and salvation of human existence. When Edmund White produces a celebrity profile of, say, Elton John or David Geffen, he brings to bear much the same focus and attention that he delivers in his reflections on the "new historical novel" or in critical appreciations of James Merrill and James Baldwin. Such professionalism carries its own baggage. Some pages of *Arts and Letters* sound altogether slick, as

though they were meant to be published in *Vanity Fair* or *Talk* -- and indeed that's where they first appeared. ("I asked her directly if she felt like a queen and told her I'd met three crowned heads and was aware of their special problems.") Others were obviously first spoken aloud at conferences or readings and haven't quite lost a distinct oral discursiveness. Still others began as book reviews or introductions, with the restrictions inherent to those forms. Whatever their source though, everything White publishes is ingratiating and intelligent, building on wide, even unexpected learning, an instinctive turn toward the autobiographical and anecdotal, and a firm desire to remind us that writers and artists and performers must be understood in the light of the historical moment. White repeatedly contrasts how gays felt before and after Stonewall, notes how the 1970s -- the so-called golden age of promiscuity -- affected the arts, and points out how the rise of identity politics has gradually led to new forms of fiction by gay authors. The 19th-century French critic Hippolyte Taine used to emphasize that literary history should address "le race, le moment et le milieu" -- that is, writers' genetic or cultural inheritance, the historical era to which they belonged, and the social background of which they were a part. Edmund White certainly practices just this sort of criticism. Frequently White leads us toward writers or artists we might have forgotten or underestimated. Of Knut Hamsun, he says, "I know of no one who writes better than he about passion -- the sting of physical desire, the fear of rejection, the tragicomedy of courtship." Paul Bowles, he calls, "one of the four or five best writers in English in the second half of the twentieth century." He discusses with properly nuanced but genuine enthusiasm the work of Djuna Barnes, Ivan Bunin, dance critic Edwin Denby, the composer and diarist Ned Rorem and many others. White is also adept at summing up a life in a line: In his middle years Marcel Duchamp "supported himself giving French lessons to attractive women." Compared to himself, he writes, Bruce Chatwin "was far more handsome and famous and looked ten years younger, but whatever envy I might have had was eliminated by his physical generosity -- a strategy I recommend to the enviable everywhere." In an earlier essay on Michel Foucault -- included in *The Burning Library* (1994) -- White spoke frankly about the French savant's sexual preferences (he was a bottom, a slave) and defended him against his various attackers. But 10 years later he now simply offers a moving tribute: "Of the few great people I've met, he was the most modest. During his last spring, for instance, although he was already very ill, he gave a large buffet dinner party in Paris for William Burroughs, and Foucault passed every dish and drink to every guest with his own hands. Despite his crushing work schedule, he served as a tireless and attentive adviser on many Ph.D. dissertations in the United States. In Paris, he taught at the Collge de France, where he was the reigning thinker, but he scrupulously refused to take on the role of guru. In private life, his influence over his circle of young friends (who include some of the most gifted writers in France) was subtle, indirect, but radiant. Like a modern Socrates, he brought out what was best in other people; he never imposed his ideas on anyone. His life was exemplary." Perhaps that encomium hints at White's greatest achievement: He has allowed his readers some insight into the particular gift (and burden) that is a gay life. Above all, he reminds us -- as does Catherine Deneuve in her interview -- that pleasure is never to be despised. "Sex," White laments though, "cannot be esteemed by Americans as an art, a form of dalliance, an expression of affection; no, it must stand for a transcendent search, a quest for self-revelation or self-perfection. The early Christian martyrs excoriated the flesh in the name of the spirit; the modern American puritan united the flesh and the spirit and excoriates both." Many of the figures discussed in *Arts and Letters* have been recurrent icons for White. If you compare the contents of this collection with *The Burning Library*, you will see the same names. Not surprisingly, this author of a long biography of Genet and a short one of Proust is bound to send one on to, or back to, those two masters more than any others. Nonetheless, Nabokov elicits White's most sympathetic and shrewd assessment: "It is Nabokov's genius (as one might speak of the genius of a place or of a language) to have kept alive almost single-handedly in our century a tradition of tender sensuality. In most contemporary fiction tenderness is a sexless family feeling and sensuality either violent or impersonal or both. By contrast, Nabokov is a Pascin of romantic carnality. He writes in 'Spring in Fialta,': 'Occasionally in the middle of a conversation her name would be mentioned, and she would run down the steps of a chance sentence, without turning her head.' Only a man who loved women as much as he desired them could write such a passage." Certainly, anyone who loves "arts and letters" even half as much as Edmund White will enjoy this fine collection by this admirable American writer. Copyright 2004, The Washington Post Co. All Rights Reserved.