

Book Review: A Critic's Take on Life

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Better Living through Criticism: How to Think About Art, Pleasure, Beauty, and Truth. A. O. Scott. Penguin Press, 2016. 304 pp. \$17 paperback.

If you're looking for someone to teach you how to write a snappy movie review, New York Times film critic A. O. Scott is not your guy—at least not in his new book, *Better Living Through Criticism: How to Think About Art, Pleasure, Beauty, and Truth*.

If, however, you want a crash course in the history and nature of criticism, stretching back to the Greeks, Scott delivers with gusto. He's a distinguished professor of film criticism at Wesleyan University, and in this book he lays out the foundations of criticism, peppered with self-deprecating asides and piercing remarks about 21st-century arts and culture. He gracefully links Samuel L. Jackson to Aristotle and then to Susan Sontag. He spots an avatar for himself in Anton Ego, the restaurant critic in the Pixar film *Ratatouille*. He squints at the future of digital discourse, just like the rest of us.

Better Living through Criticism is structured to give the casual reader a balance between academic inquiry (the heavy lifting of "The Critic as Artist and Vice Versa" chapter, for instance) and a more light-hearted examination, such as when he quizzes himself in a Q&A format. The latter is a charming break from the former.

Scott's biggest theme is his examination of his profession, warts and all. He observes that critics are easy—sometimes deserved—targets. When asked, "How is that a job?" by an inquisitive 13-year-old boy whose parents are "respectfully and usefully employed," Scott considers the downsides of his career. These include having to scowl his way through *Kung Fu Panda* and knowing that some people see him as a snob, a weirdo, or a wannabe.

Nevertheless, Scott calls out the mealy-mouthed, as well as critics who give in to the unflattering human desire to "seek out the guilty thrill of contempt." For two particularly grisly bits of evidence of the damage critics can do, Scott turns to the tales of poet John Keats and novelist Herman Melville, who were arguably killed (Keats) and ruined (Melville) by harsh criticism.

Scott lets no critic—least of all himself—off the hook in his call to aim higher. "The horizon of perfection is as far away as it has ever been, and therefore the work of criticism, properly understood, is endless," he counsels.

And if you really must have a writing tip, Scott offers this tart advice: "The first habit of highly ineffective critics is the promiscuous hurling of adjectives. Some of us seem to keep

an alphabetical list taped to the wall above our desks: Astonishing Beautiful Captivating
Deadly Execrable,” wrapping up his list at “Yummy.”

He elegantly sums up the book's thesis by adding: “These are all just synonyms for
'good' and 'bad,' and like those bland, childish words they push a writer off the stony slopes
of argument and into the clammy bog of assertion.”