

Poetry and Prose: The Farther Reaches

The Alphabet

Ron Silliman

University of Alabama Press, Hardcover

\$85.00 (1,062pp) 978-0-8173-1618-1;

Softcover \$39.95, 978-0-8173-5493-0

The first sentence of Silliman's forty-years-in-the-making opus, "If the function of writing is to 'express the world,'" is unfinished to a strict grammarian. But Silliman goes on to do just that, and the world he expresses (and pricks, probes, inverts, analyzes, and aphorizes) is America in the raw and polished, of his own times and beyond...and unfinished. "Write first / and ask questions after, / exact trace / of anxiety / does not 'make the man.'" Silliman inverts even this instruction, often writing the answer, leaving the reader to ask the question. Poetry and prose alternate, and the words in bold print in the latter sometimes suggest a hidden message. He is endlessly inventive: subtle segues hide what present as dissociative leaps from one topic to another: "Mathematics is finished language (I heard Finnish)" ... "High tea before haiku."

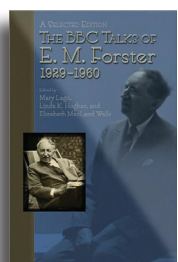
The reader is plunged into an ethnography of captured moments that capture us:

"Woman on the treadmill at the gym wears dark glasses and a Walkman, hermetically sealed, striding toward a future that never arrives." "Hermetically sealed" is powerfully observed in a society whose desperate plea (and endeavor) is "Only connect."

Silliman is a poet-philosopher of the possible in language and imagination: just see it; just dream it! He writes it and exhorts us: "Engage the page."

Brief terminal notes provide useful information on the differing circumstances and methods of creation of the twenty-six sections.

Also recommended: *The End of the World Book: A Novel* by Alistair McCartney (University of Wisconsin Press, 978-0-299-22630-5) is the young author's insightful, far-ranging assembly of irreverent sent-ups and put-downs of popular culture. Mortality is a constant—and an interesting mind is at work here, though McCartney is perhaps overly concerned with his sexuality.



Great Communicators

The BBC Talks of E.M. Forster, 1929-1960: A Selected Edition

Mary Lago, Linda K. Hughes, and

Elizabeth MacLeod Walls, editors

University of Missouri Press, Hardcover

\$59.95 (512pp) 978-0-8262-1800-1

Mesdames Lago, Hughes, and Walls, in their excellently edited volume of E.M. Forster's radio-talk scripts, take us back to a golden age of low-key, quietly thoughtful, and gently mind-broadening book talks: no celebrity-driven ratings and sales desperation here. E.M. Forster (1879-1970), with his quintet of enduring novels behind him, became a BBC contributor, presenting books over three decades; some seventy fifteen-minute book-talk scripts from 1929 to 1960 are presented here. They have the charm and immediacy of a personal chat to a group of like-minded friends—an unhurried catching-up on the book-news of the day. Forster was a humanist of refined sensibilities, a friend of meritorious but under-acknowledged work, and fully engaged in the thought, the economy, and social and political worlds of the day.

Forster's greatest strength is acuity of intellect combined with perception. In discussing the prophetic, didactic element in D.H. Lawrence's novels, the refugee-host tensions that drive Arthur Koestler's *Scum of the Earth*, or the debunking biographies of Lytton Strachey, Forster brings us refreshing insights. His reach is broad: India (where he had lived), art, music, and the contexts of literary creation all are grist to his mill. This book is worth a dozen Comp. Civ. or Lit. Crit. courses—it is to be savored.

Also recommended: *The Norman Maclean Reader: Essays, Letters, and Other Writings*, edited by O. Akan Weltzien (University of Chicago Press, 978-0-226-50026-3). We can only regret that Maclean—justly admired for his late-life *A River Runs Through It*—did not complete his General Custer book, but we must be grateful for what we learn of truly fine writing from this compilation.



Midlife: Essays and Stories

Small Comforts: Essays at Middle Age

Jeffrey Hammond

Kent State University Press, Softcover

\$19.95 (170pp) 978-0-87338-946-4

"The cloud of midlife unknowing," Hammond writes, "brings sublime compensation in the freedom to be oneself. This is why it is so important to know who that self really is. Aging grants us license for just the sort of goofiness and eccentricity that can flourish once we no longer need to impress or control anybody..."

With wry humor and penetrating comment, Hammond, a liberal arts professor, takes us through the discovery of who "that self" really is—how it developed in a Midwestern Protestant all-American boy, and how it fits together as he works his way through midlife. He recounts early dreams of wandering through vast mansions in search of a "room of my own" and records escaping into self-explored Egyptology. The "nonbonding type," he avoids becoming a Boy Scout but has a brief flirtation with the Indian Guides; he is perplexed about the ranking of God and the Great Spirit.