



Burning Down the House: Essays on Fiction

By Charles Baxter

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Graywolf reissues one of its most successful essay collections with two new essays and a new foreword by Charles Baxter

As much a rumination on the state of literature as a technical manual for aspiring writers, *Burning Down the House* has been enjoyed by readers and taught in classrooms for more than a decade. Readers are rewarded with thoughtful analysis, humorous one-liners, and plenty of brushfires that continue burning long after the book is closed.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

For fiction lovers, history and social commentary on the genre is a thought-provoking addition to reading. Novelist Charles Baxter's essays on contemporary fiction dissect the connections between life, values, and art with unerring and insightful precision. Baxter compares the dysfunction in contemporary fiction to the removal of the villain from politics. He decries the prostituting of epiphany as a commercial product that turns fiction into a pseudo-instruction manual, and he reveals the magic within Donald Barthelme's innovative prose, created with a generosity "almost unseen" in American letters. This is a powerful companion to Baxter's short story collections.

From Library Journal

Baxter, a novelist (*Shadow Play*, LJ 12/92), short story author, self-described ex-poet, and instructor of writing, has revised lectures he originally gave for a MFA program, addressing storytelling concerns dear to his heart. Baxter uses a quote from Richard Nixon as the point of departure in his first essays to explore how "deniability" has crept even into contemporary writing, robbing it of its interest and complexity. Baxter makes a strong case for reviving narratives with "mindful villainy" and an "imaginative grip on the despicable." Elsewhere, Baxter delves into the short fiction of Alice Walker, Flannery O'Connor, and James Joyce to trace shadows of the antagonist and defends the "guilty pleasures" of this "unserious" mode now fallen out of fashion. While Baxter can sometimes sound like a rule-wagging schoolmaster, there is a freshness to his roundabout method of deflating clichés taught at writing programs; his work will appeal to serious writers and readers of fiction. —Amy Boaz, "Library Journal"

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From Kirkus Reviews

In nine repackaged essays, novelist and short-story writer Baxter (*Believers*, p. 76, etc.) scorches such fictional, and social, trends as mandatory epiphanies, preachified characterizations, and the absence of villainy. To touch on his sore spots about current fiction and "the storytelling of everyday life," Baxter often opens with overtly mundane scenes, such as funeral eulogies, gossip parties, or the Disney movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, before moving on to sometimes slender fictional parallels. A Dow Chemical flack's actual description of the physical side effects of a chemical spill as a "vomiting-type thing" aptly starts off an appreciative essay on Donald Barthelme's humorously fractured and irrational portrayals of the modern world. But more often, Baxter crankily stretches his conceits without producing much tension: Observations about Jimmy Swaggart's resemblance to an abusive father appear in a study of melodrama; and in an exploration of the cults of victimhood and deniability, he cites such disparate examples as Jane Smiley's novel *A Thousand Acres* and the memoirs of Richard Nixon ("the greatest influence on American fiction for the last twenty years"). His complaints seem to be less with bad writing than with "the postmodern impatient, middle-class Puritan" (whoever that may be) and American culture's expectations of revelations, action, and moralized "human clichés" in contemporary fiction. His generalized social commentary aside, Baxter's aesthetic criticism has some modest insights (e.g., the recurrence of gum-chewing in *Lolita*). Typically, though, it's pedestrian, and occasionally it's self-serving. When he tries to get additional mileage out of such canonical standards as *The Great Gatsby* or *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, there is little that seems fresh or startling. Much as he tries to challenge conventional taste, Baxter often gets stuck halfway between his idiosyncratic aesthetics and his narrative dislikes. -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Vicky Bowman:

A lot of people always spent their own free time to vacation or even go to the outside with them household or their friend. Were you aware? Many a lot of people spent these people free time just watching TV, or playing video games all day long. If you wish to try to find a new activity that's look different you can read the book. It is really fun to suit your needs. If you enjoy the book which you read you can spent all day every day to reading a e-book. The book Burning Down the House: Essays on Fiction it is extremely good to read. There are a lot of those who recommended this book. These folks were enjoying reading this book. In the event you did not have enough space to create this book you can buy typically the e-book. You can m0ore simply to read this book from the smart phone. The price is not too expensive but this book possesses high quality.

Brandon Jenkins:

Playing with family in the park, coming to see the ocean world or hanging out with close friends is thing that usually you have done when you have spare time, after that why you don't try thing that really opposite from that. 1 activity that make you not feeling tired but still relaxing, trilling like on roller coaster you have been ride on and with addition of knowledge. Even you love Burning Down the House: Essays on Fiction, you may enjoy both. It is fine combination right, you still would like to miss it? What kind of hang-out type is it? Oh can happen its mind hangout guys. What? Still don't have it, oh come on its named reading friends.

Bobbi Brunner:

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Catherine Lyons:

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