



Essays for All of Us

BOOK REVIEW



By William Peniston, MD

Our reviewer somehow cannot resist a writer who is merely humorous, poignant, thought-provoking, a bit seductive, and extremely interesting.

EX LIBRIS: Confessions of a Common Reader, Anne Fadiman; Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York, 162 pages, \$10.00

I AM MADLY IN LOVE WITH Anne Fadiman. Well, perhaps there's a bit of hyperbole in that statement. Let's just say I am madly in love with her writing, which I think is humorous, poignant, thought-provoking, occasionally a bit seductive, and *extremely* interesting.

In my previous review of *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, I tried to describe how well she pictured both sides of a strong and emotional controversy in a sympathetic and yet very objective manner.

In *Ex Libris*, we have an entirely different book, a collection of essays, written with all of the elements described in my second sentence; but in addition it is very subjective and sometimes a little educational.

Some reviewers have described *Ex Libris* as a book for bibliophiles, and surely it is about private libraries, reading, words, how books are treated, and plagiarism. But as you read it, you will also learn her opinions about her parents, brother, husband, children, feminism, and Gladstone, about whom she says, "...as a writer, he may be the only man in history to have written a long-winded twenty-nine-page book."

As for educational tidbits, did you know that "Macaulay was probably the greatest reader of all time. He started reading at age three, died at fifty-nine with an open book in front of him, and in between, as his nephew observed, read books 'faster than other people skimmed them, and skimmed them as fast as anyone else could turn the leaves.'" For more, see the chapter "You Are There."

Generally speaking, her humor is gentle and sprinkled throughout the book, but the chapter "The Catalogical Imperative" is well larded with such comments as, "I hasten to mention that I have never actually solicited a catalogue. Although it is tempting to conclude that our mailbox hatches them by spontaneous generation, I know that they are really the offspring of promiscuous mailing lists, which copulate in secret and for money."

Her opinions regarding feminism are clearly defined in "True Womanhood," in which she discusses a book that had belonged to her great-grandmother.

The book was written by a priest who had been chaplain of the Irish Brigade of the Army of the Potomac during the Civil War. It extolled the virtues of the "the weaker sex" and claimed her "entire existence...must be one of self-sacrifice." Needless to say, Ms. Fadiman takes issue with this in her typically gentle, humorous way.

A chapter on feminism in language is "The His'er Problem." One interesting aspect of the chapter is her musing on some of the difficulties of writing sentences that flow easily using gender neutral words. But there also are intriguing episodes such as Harrison Salisbury's review of a book written by Theodore H. White and Fadiman's mother. In it, Salisbury mentions White 19 times and her mother once. Fadiman wrote to him about this and he responded with "Oh, oh, oh! You are totally right. I am entirely guilty." She also has some comments about the sexism in her father's writing and her discussing them with him.

One of my favorite chapters is "The Joy of Sesquipedalians," in which she describes a book about cats "written in 1920 by Carl Van Vechten, a novelist and jazz critic whose prose style, if not actually purple, can certainly be described as mauve." While reading this book, she wrote down 22 words whose meaning she not only had no idea of, but she also "couldn't remember even seeing them before." Among other things, she submitted the list (you'll have to read the book to learn the words) to her friends and family members with interesting results.

Last year, I had the opportunity to hear Ms. Fadiman when she spoke at UC Davis, and I wish to report that she was just as entertaining a speaker as a writer. I also found her very ingenuous and good-hearted. Later, I decided to download an audio version of the book, but on listening to a sample I found the audio very unattractive. The narrator, who I'm sure is excellent for other books, was so totally out of Anne Fadiman's character that I found no enjoyment in listening to her.

So my opinion is that this book may for bibliophiles but it also is for the rest of us. The subtitle is "Confessions of a Common Reader." I feel grateful to Ms. Fadiman that she has placed herself in a class with me - a "Common Reader."

peniston@mcn.org

Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society
5380 Elvas Avenue #100 • Sacramento, CA 95819
916.452.2671 PH • 916.452.2690 FX • Email: info@ssvms.org

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