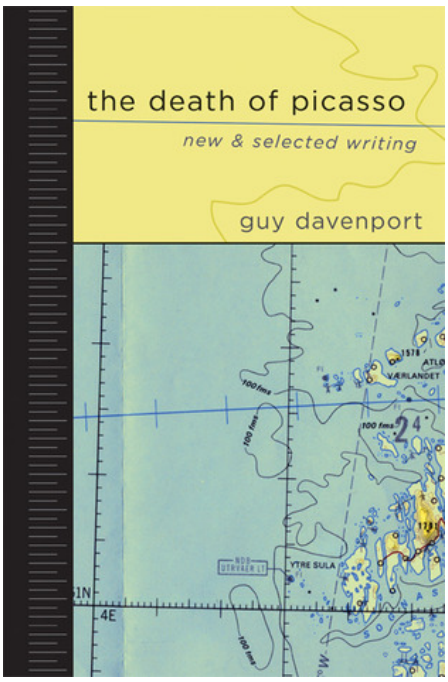

The Death of Picasso: New and Selected Writing

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For *The Death of Picasso,* Guy Davenport has gathered 27 essays and stories from throughout his career. The whole stands as his choice of the pieces he would have us read today if we are curious about what he's been up to all this time. The result is an exciting and invigorating selection, a testament to one of the prose masters at work today. As the *Louisville Courier-Journal noted,* "Guy Davenport has few peers. Who can match his broad erudition, his mastery of forms—poetry, short fiction, essay, translation—and his wizardry with language?"

The Death of Picasso: New and Selected Writing Details

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From Reader Review The Death of Picasso: New and Selected Writing for online ebook

Fionnuala says

This should have been a review of The Geography of the Imagination, the Davenport book I set out to read some years ago after a friend had said it was his favourite collection of essays by a contemporary author. I bought that book soon afterwards when I found myself on one of those wonderful London streets full of bookshops that are like islands of calm in the middle of an ocean of billboards and buses. Later, back home again, and far from English language book shops, another friend who reads a lot had a birthday coming up. I wondered what I could give him at short notice, and the still pristine Geography of the Imagination with its beautiful illustration of an ancient map of the world on the cover seemed like the perfect present. And so it proved to be.

But I still hadn't read any Davenport essays so I looked online for a replacement copy and found that The Geography of the Imagination had increased in price to one hundred and fifty euros; the copy I had given away had cost less than twenty. Another book of Davenport essays was available at a fraction of the price but sadly, with only a fraction of a map on the cover. Still, I ordered it anyway and finally got to read some Davenport essays.

There are around thirty pieces in The Death of Picasso, some eight of which are fiction. That was a surprise - I hadn't expected fiction and I certainly hadn't expected the kind of fiction Davenport delivers. Most of the fictional pieces are set on the coast of some Scandinavian country and they resemble a bunch of islands in an archipelago, connected by theme and characters but yet separate from each other. However, if we looked for this archipelago on a map of Scandinavia, we might not find it because even if the stories are set in the twentieth century, the atmosphere Davenport conjures is more that of ancient Greece, some Arcadia of knowledge and sexual freedom where the moral codes we live by in our contemporary world don't exist, a place as private and free as our imagination. It's a place where young boys are initiated into their sexual lives by older men, themselves occupied with debating philosophy, both ancient and modern, when not instructing their young partners in sexual matters. There are women in these stories too, lusty women who are complicit in the sexual education of the youngsters as well as in the pleasures of the elders, but mostly the women serve as bearers, yes, of more young children to be eventually initiated.

There's a refreshing air about these stories; they are like the salty tang of the wind coming in from the sea, but they are as ragged and uneven as the coastline of the archipelago of islands on the cover of the book. Sometimes while reading, I was impatient with the various ins and outs of boys' sweatpants, the interminable descriptions of their odour, not to mention the focus on the intricacies of the stitching on underwear. I might have appreciated it all more fully if I'd understood the bedrock on which the stories are built but my knowledge of German and Greek philosophy is slim. So I cannot quite say, along with Freud, *Wo es war, soll Ich werden* (Where it was, there must I begin to be), as the title of one of the stories goes, because my knowledge of Freud is as limited as my knowledge of German and Greek philosophy. But that particular story did impress me more than the others; it was like a door opening into the impossible, so perhaps I had begun to understand the essence of the Freudian Davenport message unbeknownst to myself.

The essays on the other hand were a complete delight. Reading them was like finding myself in one of my favourite cities: I knew my way around and recognised all the landmarks. Davenport writes on art and literature in a way I really relate to. There are essays on Ruskin, Thoreau, Kafka and Picasso. Van Gogh, Gauguin, Proust, get a mention too. Davenport interweaves their work and their art in a very erudite but surprisingly accessible way.

One of the most interesting pieces is a meditation on Kafka's short story, 'The Hunter Gracchus'. It prompted me to find the story and read it. Davenport uses excerpts from Kafka's diaries and from the text of the story itself to create a setting into which he invites us, a setting that is decorated with paintings we may have heard of, such as Böcklin's Isle of the Dead:
(view spoiler)
or de Chirico's Piazza d'Italia:
(view spoiler)
Davenport continually makes connections and correspondences throughout the essay for us to follow, Joyce here, Mallarmé there, Cézanne elsewhere. I loved it; the other four essays on Kafka were a treat too.

In the essay on Thoreau called 'The Concord Sonata', Davenport again uses journal extracts interspersed with his own commentary to create a scene in which we get to view Thoreau at work: *Thoreau was most himself when he was Diogenes*. In essays such as this one, we feel as if we are inside a painting of a scene, walking about and looking in all the cupboards.

There are other gems in this collection too such as 'The Anthropology of Table Manners':
Ruskin and Turner never dined together, though an invitation was once sent. Turner knew that his manners weren't up to those of the refined Ruskins, and said so, explaining graphically that, being toothless, he sucked his meat. Propriety being propriety, there was nothing to be done, and the great painter and his great explicator and defender were damned to dine apart.
Or this:
Manners, like any set of signals, constitute a language. It is possible to learn to speak Italian; to eat Italian, never.

Many of the essays have just such an aphoristic quality. Davenport likes to experiment with form so his essays don't follow a standard model; one is written entirely in blank verse, others fictionalise their real life subjects. In 'Dinner at the Bank of England', Davenport recounts the visit by the philosopher, George Santayana, to London. He begins that piece in the third person and switches to first in the last paragraph in a nicely dramatic finish.
The idiosyncratic WWI artist, Stanley Spencer, gets a similar fictionalised treatment; Davenport sets that piece at a Henley Regatta and allows the reader to follow Spencer about as he gathers inspiration for the composition of his unusual painting, 'Christ Preaching at Cookham Regatta' which can be seen along with much of his other work in the Stanley Spenser Museum in Cookham, near London.
As I don't know how to finish this review I'll take example from Stanley Spencer and settle for leaving it as...
(view spoiler)

Kyle Muntz says

guy davenport was the last real modernist. one gets the impression he was trying to write as the culmination of the entire tradition of western history/literature--both to embody it and perfect it. he writes with a density that recalls joyce; a breadth of knowledge that recalls borges or pound; a virtuosity that recalls all of them. i'm not nearly as interested in this kind of maximalism as i was in the past, but davenport was very, very good at what he did

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Douglas Dalrymple says

3.55 stars. I'm rounding up.

There’s generally something to appreciate in each of Davenport’s essays and non-fiction pieces. His fiction, by comparison, is uneven. I could personally do without the adolescent homoerotic fantasies he so enjoyed writing. “The Owl of Minerva,” for instance, is an odd opening to the volume, and missing (in my opinion) any note of Davenport’s best prose. This is more than made up for, however, by the inclusion here of “The Concord Sonata,” “The Hunter Gracchus,” “Belinda’s World Tour,” “Mr Churchyard and the Troll,” “Pergolesi’s Dog,” “Horace and Walt in Camden,” and “The Anthropology of Table Manners.” Each of these I could read, and will, again and again.

James says

Guy Davenport is a treasure for readers who are interested in words and ideas and combinations of thoughts that have never appeared before nor will again. His writing almost defies description as do most of his pieces in this collection whether they are essays or stories or aphorisms.
The collection opens with "The Owl of Minerva" a playful set of variations on Hegel’s lament that the owl of Minerva-wisdom-flies only at dusk, when events have begun to fade. It can’t describe how the world ought to be. This story is followed by "The Playing Field" in which the same characters who appear in the first story, Magnus and Mikkel, figure as a variation on the theory about love that Plato puts into Aristophanes’s mouth in “The Symposium.” Set in bright, chilly Denmark, they move backward and forward in time around a central parable-like story about an orphan named Mikkel and the wise teacher who took him in, loved him, and gave him a last name.
The brief essay titled “And” attempts to read a first-century papyrus bearing the words of Jesus as he stands by a river, only to give up. The paper is so faded that “It’s as if we are too far back to hear well.” Davenport comes to rest on the papyrus’s last image, Jesus throwing a handful of seeds into the river:

“Trees, first as sprouts, then as seedlings, then as trees fully grown, grew in the river as quickly as one heartbeat follows another. And as soon as they were there they began to move downstream with the current, and were suddenly hung with fruit, quinces, figs, apples, and pears.
That is all that’s on the fragment.
We follow awhile in our imagination: the people running to keep up with the trees, as in a dream. Did the trees sink into the river? Did they flow out of sight, around a bend?”

Throughout the collection stories present connections of ideas that oh so subtly encourage me to reread the stories in search of new ones. For example, the second story has a reference to Leonardo da Vinci's bicycle. Much later in the collection there is a long short story "The Bicycle Rider" which echoes this reference. The Greeks are seemingly omnipresent from Parmenides on, but perhaps that is part of the illusion created by this dazzling collage of writings. The result of all the pieces included is a book that requires close reading, sometimes from an uncommon angle of perception, to experience the exceptional conceptions of Davenport's genius.

Doc says

Astonisishly erudite and a master stylist, Guy Davenport is the writer whose books should dominate a nightstand if you were allowed one writer only in your life. From his intense, obsesively detailed fictions concerning historical figures to his large-hearted stories of idyllic youth, from his encyclopedic synthesis of his essays to the suprisingly candid memoirs of himself and other literary figures, Davenport's writings

comprise a far superior, and a far more delightful, education than can be achieved elsewhere.

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robert says

amazing stuff by someone few people have heard of. strange stories, or half-essays, with a strange moral compass and structures that don't make sense. Start with The Owl of Minerva or the title story, The Death of Picasso.

David M says

- Franz! Max said before he considered what he was saying, why are there tears in your eyes?
- I don't know, Kafka said. I don't know.

I want to insist (pedantically) on a distinction between erudition and pedantic information-mongering. The first of these can't be googled or faked. There may be intermediate cases, but Mr. Davenport is most definitely on the side of erudition. His learning is vast and it seeps into the deepest parts of his soul. And for that reason, this collection is not always easy to approach. It may claim to be fiction and criticism, but it's really more like poetry. Davenport must be one of the greatest overlooked American writers of last century. These pieces contain depths I can hardly begin to fathom.

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Where it was, there must I begin to be...

'The unexamined life is eminently worth living, were anyone so fortunate.'

Health, as we know, is organic innocence. When healthy my body is all but invisible to me, the indifferent medium by which I have a world.

Can there be such a thing as a second, post-critical conquest of innocence? Even to speak of an investigation of innocence may be a contradiction in terms, since the critical apparatus necessary to investigate already presumes a split within being. Nonetheless I think this is what Davenport is up to here. The quasi-pornographic content of these stories is in keeping with this. Porn is often far more innocent than it's given credit for being. The furious moralists who castigate it for objectifying or demeaning the body are themselves more often than not the disease for which they purport to be the cure.

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For good measure, on the subject of innocence, here's that inexhaustible quote from George Canguilhem

> No one innocently knows that he is innocent since being aware of adequation to the rule means being aware of the reasons for the rule which amounts to the need for the rule. It is appropriate to contrast to the overly exploited Socratic maxim no knowing man is evil, the opposite maxim that no one is good who is aware of being so. Similarly no one is healthy who is aware of being so... But it is in the rage of guilt as in the clamor of suffering that innocence and health arise as the terms of a regression as impossible as it is sought after.

Ian says

Read the title story. Interesting.

notgettingenough says

It didn't take long to figure out that sticking with The Death of Picasso...was going to be The Death of Me.

What am I missing? Do tell me if you get it.

David Guy says

There's nobody like Guy Davenport, and this is apparently what he considered a representative selection of his work. I don't know what to make of him in some of his sexual stories, and they sometimes seem to go on too long without much of a point, but he's always interesting, and writes beautifully. He's one of the most intelligent of modern writers.