



Tests of Time

William H. Gass

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Tests of Time brings us fourteen witty and elegant essays by novelist and literary critic William H. Gass, "the finest prose stylist in America" (Steven Moore, *Washington Post*). Whether he's exploring the nature of narrative, the extent and cost of political influences on writers, or the relationships between the stories we tell and the moral judgments we make, Gass is always erudite, entertaining, and enlightening.

Tests of Time Details

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Konstantin says

Gass is entertaining as always (if a little dry and rambling in the middle). Although I would have rather read his views on this or that book, it was indeed interesting to see his views on "Literature" as a whole subject, and also the idea of political-readings and other such stuff. His first chapter is the best, using his wit and certainly an ungodly amount of brainpower to draw a seamless, if not near-invisible, line between what Fiction and Story. I cannot come close to comprehending then relaying it in verbal words, though I did get a little emotional bite, a tingle and tinge of understanding that is more like a wonderful fear of possibility. His other essays are good, especially the "Little List" one that draws from Gilbert and Sullivan's magnificent Mikado. Although, it can be a lot to take in, I find Gass to be a proponent to style of plot and language or action; that is, he is more concerned with the sound of words and how they fit together than how a story gets its beginning-middle-end. It may be of some benefit to look into the Gass and John Gardner debates, too. One collection of essays worth an award.

Tuck says

like John Domini says, "for adults who think and read". Gass yes, is an academic and i'd be shaking if i had to take his classes, but i don't and i love essays and these are for the most part beautiful and insightful literature crits. 3.5 star

Eric Cartier says

Another astonishing collection of essays from the inimitable Mr. Gass. I found most of them more enjoyable and understandable than those in "The World Within The Word," but I also have a firmer understanding of Gass' views on history and literature. It was a pleasure to live with his words through most of this month.

"...the line will abide, will find its page, live on in a book, so that some idle afternoon a reading eye may chance upon it - see/hear/respond - whereupon the ultimate transformation takes place, in another Invisibility - in another awareness - in a soul - if not now more virtuous, at least made, for a moment, finer than it was."

"History is not an agent who goes about trampling traditions into dust, ending lives, stifling others, despoiling the land, and poisoning the sea. History is humanity on its rampage. Considering the frequency of natural calamities, our treatment of warfare as a seasonal sport, and the insatiable squirrelliness of human greed, it should be an occasion for surprise when anything excellent survives."

Mala says

So works which pass the Test of Time are never again ignored, misunderstood, or neglected?

No. Works which fail find oblivion. Those which pass stay around to be ignored, misunderstood, exploited, and neglected.

**But they bring their authors honor, their creators praise?
Those responsible are all dead.
So what is the personal gain from making immortal works if the maker isn't immediately rewarded?
None whatever. (103)**

If you are disappointed by Gass' answers, proceed to 'Quotations from Chairman Flaubert' essay because this is the sensibility Herr Gass is coming from: (view spoiler)

The titular essay joins the rank of Gass greats like 'Fifty Literary Pillars', 'The Sentence Seeks Its Form', 'Sacred Texts', 'Finding a Form', 'The Baby or the Botticelli', etc, almost all of them dealing with the primacy of aesthetic experience & the timelessness of the really great works of art. Remember that Gass quote about genius and originality being evident almost at once and delivered like a punch, in one bite itself instead of having to eat the entire roast to determine it was once a cow?

Fittingly, the very first essay sets the tone of this NBCC award-winning collection: witty, irreverent, razor-sharp & unabashedly elitist. Have you ever paused to ponder the difference between story & fiction? or do you think they are one & the same? In a 25 page essay, 'The Nature of Narrative and Its Philosophical Implications', Gass takes you through the paces. This essay is essentially for the writers.

There are some surprises here—the book is dedicated to the memory of The International Writers Center (1990-2000), and its cofounder (with Gass) Lorin Cuoco instead of the usual you-know-who ;-)

There are few book reviews here — only two!

And the predictable part? Why, Rilke of course!! Gass' magical "kitchen ingredient".

Here are some writers you'd like to check out:

Tahar Djaout

Assia Djebar

Ken Saro-Wiwa

And now for the curious, here's the ToC with some comments & quotes:

(view spoiler)

Bookended by two great essays & with many gems in between, this collection provides an erudite, thought-provoking read to the Gass readers. What more can I add?! When it comes to Gass, as they say in India — *Sirf naam h? kāfi hai(n)*.

William H. Gass— just the name itself will do.

David Markwell says

This is a fabulous collection of essays by an under appreciated writer. Every time I read anything by Gass I wonder why everyone in the world is not talking about him and his work. In these essays Gass has given me two book recommendations that I will have to seek out, reminded me of why I love/hate the idea of free speech (and why I might be willing to die for it) and done it all while writing beautifully. A great read.

MJ Nicholls says

Take your time trekking through *Tests of Time*, the tenth text where Gass the Gastrolator, Bill the Bloviator and Will the Word-Wizard are equally in evidence, alongside avalanches of astonishing alliteration and pristinely ponderous prose polished to perfection with pots of personality, power and panache. As ever, summaries of his subjects are superfluous, for what matters in mountainous musings like ‘The Nature of Narrative’ or ‘The Test of Time’ are his slopes of sumptuous sing-song syntax and vivacious volts of revivifying verbiage—these are works within worlds within their own outer orbits, whether the Therouvian litany ‘The Writer & Politics’ or the glib gallimaufry ‘I’ve Got a Little List.’ The third tier peacocks pieces such as ‘Questions from Chairman Flaubert’ and ‘There Was an Old Woman Who,’ which are innovative essay-fictions that dodge definitions and sail the *sui generis* seas smugly. Even when Gass waxes and wanes into the world of weird wankery, his essays retain the radiance, resonance and reliability of a trained thinker and theologian of textual theory whose words drift into the definitively divine.

Pests of Time:

In my copy, someone has taken the time to make snarky Gass-hating comments in the margins and at the end of every essay. Among the highlights:

“Is this a review, a piece of criticism, or just an excuse for G. to amuse himself w. the sound of his own voice? I don’t happen to have read *Invisible Cities* and, failing that, G’s riff on it is opaque, uninteresting, unreadable. Horrible.”

“This one, clever and ostentatious as it is, would be clever if it weren’t also too long.”

“Ugh. G. does indeed love his own rap-song alliteration, ostentatious voice. The ideas are drowned out by the fandango.”

“This is a pretentious, empty, pseudo-hip piece of scatsong [sic] crap. Compare w. Krystalis on God-belief.”

The reviewer also left two dead moths in the book. Thanks.

John says

Someday, I expect, the essays of William Gass will be culled for a single exemplary volume, in a generous selection. As of now, this compendium seems to me the most significant & memorable overall. **THE WORLD WITHIN THE WORD** has the groundbreaking work on Gertrude Stein; **FINDING A FORM** has the holistic exegesis of the history of storytelling, "State of Nature," & the brief **ON BEING BLUE** is the best single sustained meditation ever on erotic writing. Still, for my Goodreads money, **TESTS OF TIME** offers the best balance of smaller-focus studies (on Calvino's monumental **INVISIBLE CITIES**, for instance) & larger pan-aesthetic considerations (the incisive & witty opener, "The Nature of Narrative"), & it goes relative light on the indulgent verbal gamesmanship, the rooting through conundrums out of philosophy, verging on obscurity for its own sake, that sometimes blurs this critic's undeniable brilliance & interferes with his discernment. **TESTS OF TIME** presents Gass the social critic & political commentator, in five essays mid-book that prove him nothing less than the supremely smart humanist we always hoped he would be.

Nick Craske says

Gass's voice as confident, charming and as erudite as ever. These fourteen stylish essays navigate a theological course through the cultural miasma of religion, literature and politics with the poise and verve of a literary genius. In my mind, the most beautifully balanced and measured selection of Gass's essay collections.

Willow says

This is my favorite lit crit book so far. Gass can write! The best essays, in my humble opinion, are "Were there anything in the World Worth Worship" and "There was an Old Woman" which both have untraditional and conversational styles. In fact his whole book is unconventional and thoroughly enjoyable. There were a few essays that I did not understand, but that was simply because I had not read the book he was responding to.
