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Anthony Burgess , José Luis Gil Aristu (translator)

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Entre los numerosos biógrafos de Shakesperare, ninguno aporta al sunto tratado tanta pasión como Anthony Burgess ni más sentimiento al acto creativo. En su esfuerzo por establecer los principales datos sobre la vida y la sociedad de la que surgieron sus poemas y sus obras dramáticas, Burgess logra con éxito mucho más. Insufla vida al hombre que fue Shakespeare e infunde energía a su época. Su retrato de aquel periodo se fundamenta en un sentimiento de ternura casi personal hacia el dramaturgo inglés y sus contemporáneos (en especial hacia el dramaturgo inglés Ben Jonson) y en un profundo sentido de la historia literaria y del teatro.

Shakespeare Details

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Meghan says

Perhaps the most distinctive and pleasing element of Burgess' book lies not in its ability to inform by dissecting the "raw facts" of history, but rather in its reflection of one accomplished writer's speculative musings on the great--yet altogether elusive--details of the life of one of his literary heroes. In this playful biographical study, the author pieces together the scant surviving historical accounts of the life of The Bard and acknowledges them as the thin and inadequate skeleton that they are for framing the life behind the greatest playwright of all time. Then he effusively fills in the gaps with his own informed guesses and imaginative theories. The Shakespeare that Burgess portrays is one who may or may not have been real, but who commodiously satisfies the personal questions that plain history leaves disappointingly unanswered.

The extent to which Burgess' guesses often digresses into the realm of fantasy and grandiose myth will inevitably elicit a cringe or two from the reader; however, the book is altogether an enjoyable read and does an excellent job of placing Shakespeare and his works in a historical context that fans of his plays and poems might not otherwise consider. Personally, I couldn't put it down. The book certainly enabled me to see some of my favorite plays in a new light and instilled me with an eagerness to read or reread several of his works.

Paul says

I've read several biographies of Shakespeare but this one is special. Burgess not only had a deep grasp of the poet but also of the times. Unlike "Will in the World" which has many "Could it be that..." detours, Burgess uses some speculation but always within reason.

Dave says

If you are looking for any biography on Shakes, you should go to this one. Burgess understands that next to nothing is known about him, so he does well with creative speculation and gives us an overall picture of what life was like back then and an appreciation for how strange it is that we don't know anything about Shakespeare.

Steven Belanger says

Absolutely gorgeous writing. Didn't tell me anything I didn't already know, but put it all together very, very succinctly. Tight writing with a very strong voice. An absolute breeze to read. Puts the whole era and Will's genius in context. Ties up all the known facts, the supposed facts, and the outright myths and lies in one nice pie that you couldn't eat fast enough.

Rimgail? Kasparait? says

I am not sure was I prepared to read this work by Anthony Burgess about Shakespeare. I get that a lot of it was a speculation and fiction written about Shakespeare. It was an interesting piece of work, however it took me forever to read it. Some places were intriguing, had a lot of historical facts which amazed me and I felt that they were useful. Yet, in some cases the speculation of facts was too long and complicated to understand.

Sammy says

A joyous, intellectual read. Wasn't Burgess a genius? Truly a remarkable man. In truth, Burgess' *Shakespeare* has very little of factual novelty to offer my generation; all of his knowledge and intuition have formed part of the basis of the latest generation of Shakespeare biographers and writers, not to mention those like Robert Nye's *The Late Mr. Shakespeare*.

Nevertheless, the way that Burgess writes makes this book easily worthwhile. Taking just the facts that we know about the Bard (or, knew, in 1976), he strings a story of Shakespeare's life that is full of reasonable assumptions and some more fantastic but equally beautiful surprises. A vivid and enjoyable read.

Ryan Bastian says

Who better to tell the life of Shakespeare than the author of *A Clockwork Orange* (where he invented a sort of Russian/Shakespearean dialect amongst his fictional world of chaos). Unlike other biographies of Shakespeare, this one doesn't run on too long, finishing just a little north of 200 pages. And Burgess glides you along the read with ease and humor. He's also not afraid to voice his opinion regarding specific plays from the Bard (he hates *Pericles* and *Winter's Tale*), and he never lets you forget that this biography of an old writer is told by a writer himself, who feels connected to Shakespeare, even if only because they share the same profession and love of writing. He talks a lot about the other writers that lived around Shakespeare's time (Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe, etc.) and while these parts can feel a little dull, they do help put the time period and political events into perspective. Burgess is humorous in explaining his own specific theories about Shakespeare's life, as he is always quick to remind the reader that he has no way of proving that this happened. It feels like you're having a one on one chat with Burgess, learning about Shakespeare from him, and then hearing what his opinion is on the manner.

Greg says

Written by a fine writer in his own write, this book imagines Shakespeare as he could be intuitively imagined through the eyes of a novelist. There are multiple technical observations. Chiefly among them, I was very interested in Burgess's take on Shakespeare's predecessor's and contemporaries. The Earl of Surrey's innovation in 1557 was key to the development of Elizabethan drama. The book was a translation of Virgil and written "in blank verse, a form Surrey devised in order to meet the rhymeless challenge of Virgil's hexameters. It is, of course, profitless to speculate what might have happened to Elizabethan drama (or the Miltonic epic, for that matter) if Surry had not tried to find a suitable verse-medium for rendering Latin epic

poetry.” (34) If not for Surrey, would there have been Shakespeare? It is an interesting question. In Richard III, Shakespeare finds another innovation, “an approach to the three-dimensional drama, in which men are not always what they seem. For the first time, in Clarence’s dream speech, the unconscious mind is netted and landed.” (99) Philosophically, Burgess has a number of observations as well. “Hamlet is really about the impact on a Montaigne-like man of the harsh world of power and intrigue. The tragedy of the prince derives from his having to act, and to base that action on a premise which a Montaigne-like man is bound to find uncomfortable.” (106) “That Falstaff should be one of the great lovable characters of all literature is—to those who equate lovability with moral excellence—an eternal mystery. But to those who see no virtue in war, government propaganda, sour puritanism, hard work, pedantry, Rechabitism, and who cherish fallen humanity when it reveals itself in roguery and wit, then there is no mystery. The Falstaffian spirit is a great sustainer of civilization. It disappears when the state is too powerful and when people worry too much about their souls.” (149)

The book overall is organized simply, and easy to read. Burgess shares his guesses and his opinions freely. It is a lively biography, and an imagined one based in reason underpinning intuition. It is very, very good.

See my other reviews here!

Bookdragon Sean says

So after yesterday’s post it seems only fair to reveal what my hidden quotes were. Everything in bold is a Shakespeare quote. I did say they were hidden. Perhaps even in plain sight! (Don’t hate me when you read the first one)

(1) “*There’s Rosemary. That’s for remembrance.*”

It’s the 400th anniversary since Shakespeare’s death! I just had to post something Shakespeare related on this day of all days. I mean can you blame me? Shakespeare’s just awesome. Also to liven things up a bit, I’ve discretely layered my review with Shakespeare phrases. Can you spot any? Some are obvious, but I don’t think you’ll find them all. There are thirteen in total.

So here goes.

This is the most unscholarly scholarly book I’ve ever read. It’s witty, supremely entertaining, and no less informative than a standard biography. It’s also quite concise; there’s no waffle: **(2) brevity is the soul of wit.** **(3) It’s the best of both worlds really.** I really enjoyed this, and I learnt a great deal about the Bard in the process. **(4) It’s the be-all and the end-all** of Shakespeare biographies really. In **(5) one fell swoop** Burgess provides a great level of detail about Shakespeare’s background; it provides a great level of detail about the man himself and the time in which he wrote. Burgess isn’t bias; he just provides as much information as possible. He starts from the beginning, from Shakespeare’s **(6) flaming youth, (7) to his death bed where he breathed his last.**

The chapters are organised for easy reference. It really is a good little book. In case you didn’t know, Anthony Burgess is the author of the famous *A Clockwork Orange*. So there’s going to be some skill in the

writing. I tend to find biographies dry and boring; however, this was almost uplifting in places. **(8)And that's the naked truth.**

My edition is the beautiful folio society one. The only way I could justify buying more of these lovely, and expensive, books was if they were university related, so I was very pleased to find this. Even if I'm no longer studying Shakespeare! **(9)There's the rub.** But who cares? Despite finishing with this a university, I think I will always be studying Shakespeare. Shakespeare's verses are **(10) as swift as a shadow**, and his plays are **(11)such stuff as dreams are made on**. His writing, his legacy, is everlasting. **(12)In my heart of hearts** I can tell you that there will never be a day when Shakespeare's words aren't relevant to the world. All people have to do is open their ears and hear them. **(13)That's the short and the long of it.**

How many did you spot?

Jim says

Burgess's novelistic skills enrich this erudite (but not stuffy) and entertaining portrait of Shakespeare and his times.

Adam Floridia says

I'm torn on this one. As far as Shakespeare biographies go, it's probably pretty good (I have nothing to judge it by!). At times some of the conjecture on Burgess' part bothered me, but a biography of The Bard can be little more than supposition. At other times, particularly during his narrative concerning the performance of Hamlet, I was enchanted by the reality of attending an Elizabethan play.

Heavy on historical context--that being the only concrete detail available--the biography provided a very convincing impetus for the creation of each play.

Spiros says

A very deft overview of the life and works of Shakespeare. Burgess painstakingly hews to the documented facts about the Bard, and then indulges in occasional flights of fancy, which are carefully announced as such. Not as copious in scope as Ackroyd or Greenblatt's biographies (and much shorter than either), and obviously not as fun as his own novel,

Nothing Like the Sun, this is still a valuable bit of Bardology.

"We need not repine at the lack of a satisfactory Shakespeare portrait. To see his face we need only to look in a mirror. He is ourselves, ordinary suffering humanity, fired by moderate ambitions, concerned with money, the victim of desire, all too mortal. To his back, like a hump, was strapped a miraculous but somehow irrelevant talent. It is a talent which, more than any other the world has seen, reconciles us to being human beings, unsatisfactory hybrids, not good enough for gods and not good enough for animals. We are all Will.

Shakespeare is the name of one of our redeemers."

So: not Bacon, not Essex, not (as Malcolm X argued) James I. We are Shakespeare, Shakespeare is us.

MEGAN C says

This book was a scholarly biography salted with a fair deal of artistic liberty. Burgess does a good job of filling in the gaps that history has left in Shakespeare's life. While I am not a real Shakespeare fan I thought it was an interesting book. Despite being a struggle at times it was definitely worth it. My only criticism would be that he tends to overplay the relationship between the art and the artist's life, constantly looking for parallels between Shakespeare's characters and his real life friends, foes, and self. I think he overdoes this at times but he knows more about the plays and Shakespeare than me so who am I to complain.

Redsteve says

Very good, if a bit speculative. On the other hand, Burgess makes no apologies: "This book contains conjecture - duly and timidly signaled with phrases like "It may well be that..." or "Conceivably, about this time..."

Good quote: "All that young men of learning like Greene and Nashe and Peele and Kyd could do was write eyecatching pamphlets and essay the drama (unless, of course, they wished to take up espionage like Marlowe and end up with a dagger in the frontal lobes)..."

Marc says

This should be called, 'an inferred' biography. Anthony Burgess, using historical context, peer histories (Marlow, Greene and Johnson) and the bard's own writing attempts an educated guess at the less documented particulars of the life of one Will Shakespeare. The sleuthing and organization of the material is half the pleasure of the book. Worth a read for Shakespeare junkies, everybody else is going to have to plow hard and learn much corollary material to get even a glimpse of the shadow that is the subject.
