Book Reviews

Clive Bloom. *Cult Fiction: Popular Reading and Pulp Theory.* New York: St. Martin's P, 1996. Pp. ix, 262. $39.95, $17.95 pb.

The title of Clive Bloom's latest cultural history study suggests an attempt to avoid offering a basis for a copyright infringement suit from Quentin Tarantino, upon the popularity of whose film (*Pulp Fiction,* and of its subsequent hype) Bloom clearly wants to capitalize, but this difference signals immediate trouble. What the gradations of distinction are among pop, cult, and pulp "fictions" (a word stretched too far) will likely bother any reader, who will be ultimately disappointed. Definition, in fact, is the missing centre of the book, and charting the progress of "pulp" feels a little like hunting for a Snark. The chapter, "Living in Technicolor: The Rules of Pulp" offers the slight definition, "[p]ulp is the illicit dressed up as the respectable, but it is not disguised, nor does it hide its true nature from the consumer" (133).

A very old and snobbish division is here being redrawn in the name of novelty and anti-snobbery, but it does not seem tenable. Consider the case of *Classics Illustrated* comics, wherein "*Pride and Prejudice,* with the aid of a suggestive cover illustration, could all too readily suggest *The Bad and The Beautiful*" (Rasula 56). "Pulp" or "high culture"? *Cult Fiction* ventures no opinion on such questions, but says, "The needs of the canon . . . defined an area for debate which gave a language to pulp while refusing it a voice. What we need to do now is retrieve pulp without reference to the canon and thereby avoid a debate in which definition is already decided" (37).

"What we need to do now" is not what *Cult Fiction* does, however, and Bloom frequently consults the attitudes of and towards recognized literary works and authors, from which he then differentiates his unceasingly subversive examples of "pulp." The readership scheme of Dick Turpin's adventures is contrasted with that of *Northanger Abbey* (87-88), for example; and we are informed that "[f]ar more than James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake,* Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* marks the end of the traditional representational novel" (226).

Bloom's view that the canon stands unscathed by "liberal and left-wing critics" (37)—no mention of names—has the ring of another

critic of the same surname. Straw opponents are cut down swiftly and repeatedly, and *Cult Fiction* has the quality of a book designed in part for the purpose of open-ended venting. Besides the unfortunate "hardline Marxist commentators and cultural élitists (sometimes one and the same)" (135), who just cannot get things right, there are the wayward feminists:

> Few feminist critics notice the inherent contradiction in the fact that women were reading to *escape* the confines of their ordinary lives and that whatever propaganda their reading contained on behalf of patriarchal conformism it also offered an alternative *non-real* world where things were directed to the *control of fantasy* by women and for women. (96)

This sentence displays its author's unique preference for italics over commas more than it does any subtle "contradiction"; for surely by this time the patriarchal governance of a woman's routes for escapism is a relatively rudimentary point of feminist critique.

Bloom presents his reader with an enticing rogues' gallery of portraits—Jack the Ripper, Dr. Fu Manchu, H. P. Lovecraft, even Stephen King—but he is, I think, perhaps too enamoured of them to see them or their mythologies very critically. Batman, for example, Bloom sees as "a heroic figure from capitalism's evolution, a New Dealer born out of the Depression into a Death Wish vigilante" (139). Alan Moore, the writer of *The Killing Joke*, a graphic novel which Bloom notes as the "adult, literate" version of the hero (138), has himself elsewhere put it more frankly: Batman is "a near-fascist and a dangerous fanatic" ("The Mark of Batman"). (I myself would not hesitate with the shaky "near-" prefix. Batman *is* fascism, albeit at its most bizarrely stylized.) Bloom's smoothed-over interpretation of the caped crusader falls in line with his scheme of "pulp" as "illicit pleasure" (133) within a capitalist industrial culture, and (allegedly) not so bad for that. Possible unpalatable connections between the "illicit pleasure" and some fairly ugly ideologies, like the finer points of racism, are, unfortunately, insufficiently confronted here.

What seems most strange about the analysis of pulp forms is the omissions: why, I wonder, in the too brief analysis of comic books and subversion, does Bloom concentrate on the major American comic book publishers (DC and Marvel), and neglect even mentioning "underground 'zines," the names of Robert Crumb or Art Spiegelman (in whose *Maus* comics one finds not illicit pleasure, but pages "filled with anxiety" [Spiegelman and Mouly 197]), or the markedly different cultural attitudes towards the medium in places other than the United States (Japan, say, or France). Although the book sensibly strives to be "an argument, not a compendium" (5), the choice of examples is naturally telling, and in this case often revealing of a lack of adequate research.

The embarrassing errors do not help. David Lynch's 1977 film is *not* entitled "*Erasurehead*" (17); George Lucas, not "Steven Lucas" (31), is

the creator of *Star Wars*; Sherlock Holmes does not confront Jack the Ripper in *The Seven Per Cent Solution* (166), in which the sleuth joins forces with Sigmund Freud, but rather in a completely different film, 1979's *Murder By Decree*. Egregious slips like these are joined by various typographical flubs and unintentionally funny malapropisms, like "ostensively" (81) and "expatriot" (108 and elsewhere).

Cult Fiction is a late dispatch, from a sheltered and distant outpost, rather than from the front, of the culture wars, which wars in any case have themselves now fizzled to a *détente*. Although Bloom offers some interesting interpretations of lurid-leaning anecdotes, the occasional flash of wit ("Norman Bates keeps mum" [231]), and a hint of prospective talent for biography, this uneven study does not offer much that is new, and its more general theoretical (or anti-theoretical) utterances—"High culture is now dead" (226)—are not sustained or delineated carefully enough to pose any threats to their targets.

TIM CONLEY

WORKS CITED

Moore, Alan. "The Mark of Batman: An Introduction." *The Dark Knight Returns*. By Frank Miller. New York: DC Comics, 1986.

Rasula, Jed. "Nietzsche in the Nursery: Naive Classics and Surrogate Parents in Postwar American Cultural Debates." *Representations* 29 (1990): 50-77.

Spiegelman, Art, and Françoise Mouly. Interview. *The New Comics*. Ed. Gary Groth and Robert Fiore. New York: Berkley, 1988. 185-203.

Dominic Head. *J. M. Coetzee*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. Pp. xvi, 192. £35.00.

Dominic Head's *J. M. Coetzee* is the fifth full-length study of the Booker Prize-winning author in the past decade, joining the growing corpus of Coetzee criticism, which also includes two comparative studies, and three collections of essays. It is the first book on Coetzee specifically to set itself out as an introduction to his fiction, although as the fifth volume in the Cambridge Studies in African and Caribbean Literature Series, it also aims to be of use to those already familiar with his work.

Head's intention is to focus on the novels themselves, to draw out their major themes and the links between them, and to provide an overview of Coetzee's whole fictional *oeuvre*. And while the focus is on the fiction, there is ample referencing to Coetzee's non-fiction, and an opening chapter which usefully attempts to tease out Coetzee's place in postcolonial literature. Head does not put the postcolonial tag on Coetzee lightly, and there is a good balance of debate in this section. Although cautious about conflating theories, he argues that there is an overlapping of the postcolonial and the postmodern in Coetzee's fiction. Indeed, he makes a case for calling Coetzee a "post-colonizer,"