



A Bolt from the Blue and Other Essays

Mary McCarthy, A.O. Scott (Editor)

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Mary McCarthy was one of the leading literary figures of her time. In addition to the novels and memoirs for which she is best remembered, she was also a tireless literary and social critic. Starting out as a theater reviewer for "Partisan Review" in 1937, she quickly distinguished herself for her witty and fearless commentary on topics ranging from McCarthyism to the French New Novel to women's fashion magazines. McCarthy was an eager controversialist, unsparing in her dissection of anything she found phony or hypocritical. Her reviews are sharp, sometimes malicious, and often very funny, but her criticism is also informed by deep erudition and enlivened by an inexhaustible capacity for enthusiasm. Her political writings, critical in equal measure of the Cold War consensus and of its critics, are less concerned with finding correct positions than with exploring the often absurd circumstances in which agonizing moral decisions are made.

While the soundness of McCarthy's judgments can sometimes be doubted, her curiosity and intelligence cannot. The intellectual brio and acute judgment that characterizes her best fiction is vividly displayed in this selection of essays, which span McCarthy's career from the late 1930s to the late 1970s. It includes her writings on topics such as fashion magazines, Eugene O'Neill, "A Streetcar Named Desire," "Look Back in Anger," "Pale Fire," J.D. Salinger, Madame Bovary, Italo Calvino, and Watergate. The volume constitutes not only a valuable record of the ideological and cultural controversies that dominated American intellectual life from the Moscow trials to the Watergate hearings, but will also introduce a new generation of readers to a uniquely forthright and vibrant critical voice.

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Terence Manleigh says

A terrific introduction to McCarthy, with a range of essays (theater reviews, literary criticism, memoir, journalism) that reveal a cold eye, a merciless critical stance, and a formidable b.s. detector. (Cf. McCarthy 19s infamous bitch slap of Lillian Hellman on *The Dick Cavett Show*: 1CEvery word she writes is a lie, including 18and 19 and 18the. 19 1D)

There are several theater reviews of now-classic productions -- *The Iceman Cometh*, *Death of a Salesman*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* -- that I angrily disagree with. The anger probably stems from the fact that she argues her points so sharply. Suffice it to say that lyricism and heightened language in the theatre is, to McCarthy, anathema, phony sentiment. She has a much keener appreciation for the 1Ckitchen sink 1D dramas of John Osborne. She writes a wonderful, admiring review of *The Entertainer* which, amazingly, manages to omit mentioning Laurence Olivier, whose portrayal of Archie Rice is the stuff of theatrical legend. But then McCarthy is not looking to effuse over actors and performances. I suppose it's possible that she hasn't seen the productions at all - that she's simply critiquing the text. In which case, she misses the entire point of the theatre. McCarthy seems unmoved by the theatre, really 13 it 19s not her thing, which is one reason her theater criticism irks me. If you 19re a theater critic and can 19t get jazzed about the original *Streetcar*, perhaps you should be looking for a transfer to another department.

I warmed to her literary criticism. She writes shrewdly and eloquently about *Pale Fire*, *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina* (she 19s pro) and without sorrow or pity about Salinger (she 19s con). She gives us a fascinating critical assessment of the state of the novel (in 1960), catching hold of an essential transition in the sort of novel people used to write and what they are likely to write in the future. She gives us a compelling memoir about her experiences amongst the Communist-heavy New York intellectual circles of the 1930s, her even-handedness even more striking considering it was written during the hysteria of the (Sen. Joseph) McCarthy era. Her journalistic pieces are also quite good, her essays on Vietnam and Watergate especially, and one can 19t help but speculate about McCarthy 19s influence upon Joan Didion.

Don 19t turn to McCarthy if you 19re looking for raptures a la Alfred Kazin, but sometimes something sour is just what the palate craves.

Darinda says

A collection of essays by Mary McCarthy. A variety of topics - theater, literature, politics, etc. Critical and sharp.

Brandie says

This is a lovely collection of essays written by Mary McCarthy.

It ranges from reviews of plays to books to politics to travel. McCarthy definitely had an interesting take on

life and literature.

I really enjoyed reading many of the essays. Some I couldn't connect to because they were reviews of plays I haven't seen in any form, let alone the form she saw. But I did appreciate her views and appreciated how she often was able to weave several things together in her writing.

Overall, I felt like my time reading this was well spent and worth it!

Sarah says

Sharp, in every sense of the word. My favorite essays were "The Fact in Fiction" and "My Confession", but just about all of the pieces had something to recommend them. Even when Mary McCarthy was reviewing a play I haven't seen, it was pretty fun to read the exceedingly pointed barbs she was usually throwing at it! She also had interesting perspectives on America, generally quite astute though I disagree with her on some points. The depth and quantity of material didn't exactly make this an easy read, but I found it thought-provoking and worth the effort.
