Finding Focus

Four nonfiction works that bring today's issues to the forefront

By Richard Barbieri

or a year or so, I have explored odd corners of the literary world, philosophizing about the Big Questions or retelling Beowulf or discussing how secondary education was viewed several generations ago by some overly erudite scholars and by a down-to-earth Catholic nun. I recently returned to the present, digging into contemporary nonfiction that directly addresses some of the most difficult issues the U.S. faces at the moment I write this.

POWER AND TRUTH

Literary critic Stephen Greenblatt has never shied away from large topics, examining Shakespeare, Adam and Eve, and the Renaissance, among others. In Tyrant: Shakespeare on Politics, however, he combines knowledge of the past with concern for the present, and follows Emily Dickinson's admonition to “tell all truth but tell it slant.” By analyzing the qualities of Shakespeare's tyrants, Greenblatt builds a picture that looks strikingly relevant. In doing so, he adopts Shakespeare's belief that “he could best acknowledge truth ... through the artifice of fiction or through historical distance.”

Drawing on four history plays, and stepping further back to ancient Scotland, Britain, and Rome, Greenblatt argues that Shakespeare often asked questions such as, “Why would anyone ... be drawn to a leader manifestly unsuited to govern? Why, in some circumstances, does evidence of mendacity, crudeness, or cruelty serve not as a fatal disadvantage but as an allure, attracting ardent followers? Why do otherwise proud and self-respecting people submit to the sheer effrontery of the tyrant ... his spectacular indecency?”

As a critic, Greenblatt is careful to keep to the texts, grounding his analysis on the clear words and actions of the characters: Richard III's elevating and casting off of followers according to his current needs, Macbeth's growing isolation as his followers recognize his instability, Lear's impulsive rejection of those who could prevent his worst follies, and so forth. But

What Your Colleagues Are Reading

Beyond Birds and Bees: Bringing Home a New Message to Our Kids About Sex, Love, and Equality by Bonnie J. Rough

This book examines sexuality education in the United States. If you're a parent, a teacher, or just someone who wishes that talking to kids about bodies and sexuality was a little less taboo, make time for this smart, funny, and compelling read.

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least readers miss his ulterior aim, Greenblatt makes observations such as, of Richard III, “he is an immensely wealthy and privileged man, accustomed to having his way, even when his way violates every moral norm,” and of Lear, “The last thing the tyrant wants, even when he appears to solicit it, is an independent opinion.” By the time Greenblatt reaches Macbeth’s final hours, he can cap the analogy in under 280 characters: “The internal and external censors that keep most ordinary mortals, let alone rulers of nations, from sending irrational messages in the middle of the night or acting on every crazed impulse are absent.”

Tyrant may not outsell the shelf of up-to-the-minute political analyses, but that doesn’t mean it won’t be enjoyed by those who read the present by the light of the past.

GROUP CONTEXT
Roger Daniels’ Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life could ground any discussion of newcomers to this continent, their arrival and their impact, from the beginnings to the 21st century. While one book can’t cover all the issues of immigration, which, together with race, has probably been the defining characteristic of the American nation, Daniels blends attention to detail, readability, and consistent insights into this vexed subject.

Immigration has, since at least the first decade of the Republic, been both a cultural and a political issue: encouraged by those who see America as a welcoming of the world’s dreamers and a source of reliable votes, and opposed by those who fear the dilution of the American character and a threat to their tenuous primacy. The same themes have recurred for centuries: “almost every conceivable group [has] been, at one time or another, accused of lowering the American standard of living,” of being unassimilable, or “contributing disproportionately to crime and, even worse, dangerous radicalism.” When Daniels refers to “the long and sometimes hysterical debate over immigration policy,” and to the fact that in Europe right wing parties gained unexpected strength … by campaigning on anti-immigration platforms,” he is speaking of the 1980s, not today.

In discussing the “Century of Migration,” Daniels gives reasonable space to the major western European groups, as well as to several Eastern and Asian cultures. Most readers will find themselves or their ancestors somewhere here. When he reaches the nativist reaction, which began as early as 1897 and reached its terminus in 1924, he observes a significant difference between those decades and our own: that presidents from Cleveland to Wilson stood firm against nativism, whether on historical, ethical, or economic grounds.

ON PRINCIPLES
In their newest books, Leadership: In Turbulent Times and The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels, Doris Kearns Goodwin and Jon Meacham respectively prefer to learn from U.S. history, ranging over the biggest issues that confronted different eras, from the 1860s to the 1960s. Goodwin’s study of four presidents (Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, FDR, and LBJ) asks how their early years affected their approaches to leadership, what initial setbacks taught them, and what they brought to bear on the enormous challenges they met at the White House. Like all Goodwin’s books, this one contains storytelling and phrase-turning to captivate any historically minded reader.
UNLIKE GOODWIN, MEACHAM EXPLICITLY ESCHEWS FOCUS ON LEADERSHIP, BELIEVING THAT “THE FOLLOWERS MATTER AS MUCH AS THE LEADERS.”

But she has a serious purpose: to create a historian’s taxonomy of the skills leaders may need, depending on the circumstances of their ascent. I say “may” because one virtue of this book is that it isn’t one size fits all. These men grew up in poverty or in affluence; in bursting health or perpetual illness; with doting, demanding, or distant fathers; and differed in innumerable ways. Nor were their challenges especially similar. So, for each, Goodwin offers a list of a dozen-and-a-half principles that carried them and their followers through. These include various versions of the commands to “be informed,” “be flexible,” “exhibit self-control,” and “transcend ego,” among many others.

Unlike Goodwin, Meacham explicitly eschews focus on leadership, believing that “the followers matter as much as the leaders.” He cites Harry Truman in words that surely resonate today: “The dictators of the world say that if you tell a lie often enough, why, people will believe it. Well, if you tell the truth often enough, they’ll believe it and go along with you.” Dealing with each of Goodwin’s crises and several more, Meacham brings together a cast of Americans, from the great heroes to the middling and less-than-middling, all of whom exemplify his thesis that “we are frequently vulnerable to fear, bitterness, and strife,” but “the good news is that we have come through such darkness before.” Though he agrees that, “progress in American life ... has been slow, painful, bloody, and tragic,” he contends that “in our finest hours ... the soul of the country manifests itself in an inclination to open our arms rather than to clench our fists; to look out rather than to turn inward; to accept rather than to reject.”

Whether this claim is statistically true hardly matters. By leading us through the many crises the country has endured, and particularly by compiling a near-encyclopedia of positive but not rosy quotations from every quarter, Meacham has reminded us, to conflate two of my favorite quotations, that the times are never so bad but that good people may live in them, and that we can hope not merely to survive but to prevail.

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What Your Colleagues Are Reading

Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom from Young Children at School
by Carla Shalaby

A friend recently recommended this book, which serves as an eloquent expression of both my personal philosophy of and my professional experience working with young people and educators. At the heart of it is a call to deeply consider our approach to perceived behavioral issues. When we remove students from the classroom—or worse, when we paint them into the rigid identity of “troubblemaker,” which is a construct of the adult world—we rob children of opportunities to grow socially and academically, and of the freedom to be themselves. At once illuminating and heartbreaking, this is a must-read for educators everywhere.

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