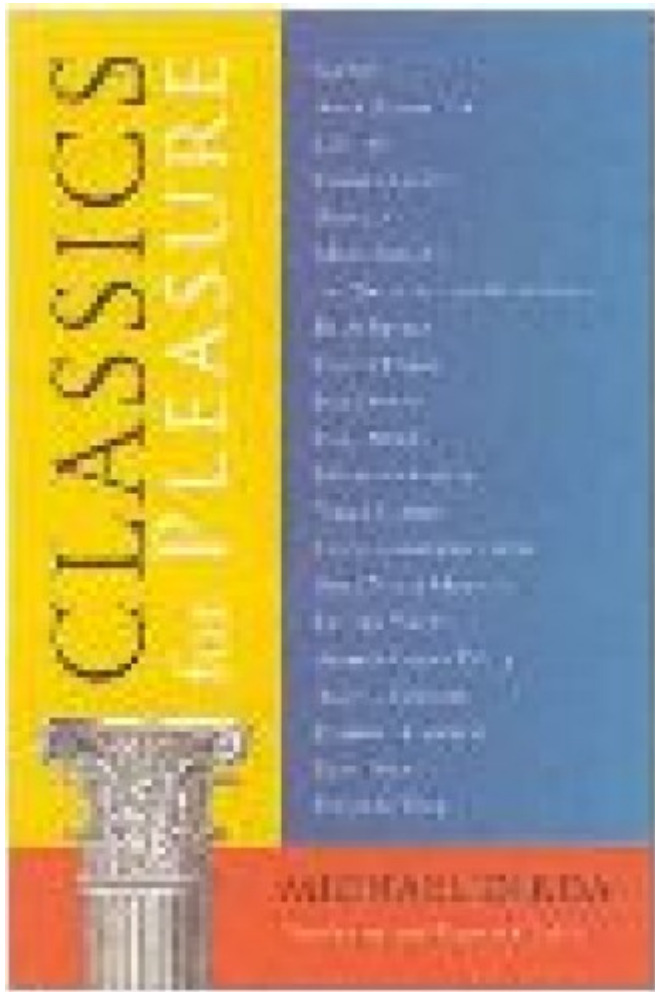


Minor classics

By [Brian Doyle](#) in the [July 15, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Classics for Pleasure

Michael Dirda
Harcourt

Mea culpa. I opened Michael Dirda's book with a sigh, expecting a primer, a handbook, some inky form of self-help muck, and I was so totally and egregiously

wrong, so increasingly amazed and delighted, so driven headlong to the library to read his suggestions—with mounting astonishment—that I begin this review bluntly by saying that I am an idiot, that Dirda is not, and that this is one of the most riveting and enlightening books I have ever had the fortune to digest. *Mea maxima culpa*.

“Truly distinctive voices, once heard, ought never to be forgotten,” writes Dirda, “and for roughly ninety authors [I hope] through summary, tantalizing quotation, and concise biography to convey a writer’s or book’s particular magic. In general, my approach is that of a passionate reader, [pointing] readers to new authors and less obvious classics” than the dray horses of the canon, such as Shakespeare, Dickens and so on. And by the beard of the Bard if he doesn’t do it!

He searches writers you know (or thought you knew) for terrific books that normally go unread: Willa Cather’s *A Lost Lady*, “among the most perfect short novels in our language,” for example, and G. K. Chesterton’s *The Man Who Was Thursday*—“the most thrilling book I have ever read,” wrote Kingsley Amis.

Dirda resurrects writers who were once stars and have been reduced to scholarly-squabble or cult status: Max Beerbohm, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, Prosper Mérimée, for example.

He brings to your attention writers you never heard of who will blow your mind: Thomas Love Peacock, with “Jane Austen-like wit and a flavor of Gilbert and Sullivan”; Ivan Goncharov, whose novel *Oblomov*, “the story of a man who fundamentally never wants to get out of bed,” put Tolstoy in rapture and caused Chekhov to claim that Goncharov was “ten heads above me in talent”; the 16th-century astrologer Girolamo Cardano, “among the most entertaining autobiographers in the world”; and many more.

He hauls up to the light writers of single obscure masterpieces, like Robert Byron, who wrote *The Road to Oxiana* (a work held in awe by Bruce Chatwin and Paul Fussell), and Jaroslav Hasek, whose *The Good Soldier Schweik* Dirda ranks with *Don Quixote* and Joseph Heller’s glorious *Catch-22*.

One of my pet peeves as writer and critic is that there are stunning writers who are much praised but little read except as academic duty—James Joyce perhaps foremost among them. Their names are cause for general bowing and scraping, but their stories are imprisoned and lonely on the shelf. Dirda happily restores some of

these to the public arena—such geniuses of character and headlong story as Plutarch and Isak Dinesen, Émile Zola and Jules Verne, Rudyard Kipling and Philip K. Dick. Really, when was the last time you reveled in the dusty verve of Kipling's wonderful stories, or even read Dick's wild, intense novels rather than saw the movies made from them? "Our own home-grown Borges," says the polymath Ursula Le Guin of Dick, and that remark alone should send you briskly to the library for *The Man in the High Castle*, in which Dick posits a world in which Germany and Japan won World War II and divided up the United States between them. It's thrilling, chilling, eerie, unforgettable.

And the passages Dirda quotes—the remarks and witticisms and anecdotes! He somehow makes his book about books a fascinating book itself, filled with wry and tart images and lines moaning to be jotted down in your own notebook and pored over like koans: Descartes using a folded piece of paper for a ruler, Daniel Defoe going bankrupt owing what would today be nearly a million dollars, Thomas Peacock's "the world is a stage, and life is a farce, and he that laughs most has most profit of the performance," the French soldier Xavier de Maistre's "a bed witnesses our birth and death; it is the unvarying theatre in which the human race acts out, successively, its captivating dramas, laughable farces, and dreadful tragedies."

"Sometimes too much to drink is barely enough," said Mark Twain in another vein; this sentiment is true of Dirda's remarkable *Classics for Pleasure*. Urbane, informed, cheerful, utterly absorbed by great stories and great storytellers in many languages and from many cultures and creeds, Dirda manages not only to salute some 90 wonderful writers who have slipped from the literary spotlight, but to do so with a book that you will keep on your shelf the rest of your life and leave to your favorite grandchild when your chapter closes. It's that good, I was a fool to doubt him, and I am shuffling right quick to the library for E. Nesbit, John Masefield and M. R. James—writers of "the finest ghostly tales in English." Can such an encomium be resisted?