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 ***Browsings: A Year of Reading, Collecting, and Living with Books by Michael Dirda (review)***

Ernest Hilbert

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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Ernest Hilbert (bio)

“To my mind, reading should be a pleasure,” writes Michael Dirda, one of the great bookmen of our time, a man who has energetically devoted himself to passing “along some of the excitement and rewards of my own bookish life.” Dirda has written some of the most impressive books about literature we have had in recent years. Three of these—*Readings: Essays and Literary Entertainments*, *Bound to Please*, and *Classics for Pleasure*—are, by his definition, “essentially collections of my columns and reviews.” Nonetheless, they read as important and authoritative compendia, addressing authors from Sappho to Søren Kierkegaard, with plenty of room left over for the likes of Bram Stoker and Arthur Conan Doyle, authors of the kind of supernatural and detective stories he so enjoys. In fact, Dirda’s book *On Conan Doyle; or, The Whole Art of Storytelling* won an Edgar Allan Poe Award from the Mystery Writers of America in 2012. Dirda also publishes books of a more personal nature, recounting the daily (and often lonely) life of a reader and book collector. These lighter yet remarkably learned efforts include a memoir, *An Open Book: Coming of Age in the Heartland*, and *Book by Book: Notes on Reading and Life*. His latest in this vein is *Browsings: A Year of Reading, Collecting, and Living with Books*, which blends anecdotes, jokes, grumbles, advice, and valuable facts. The book began when Dirda, a regular book critic for *The Washington Post*, *Times Literary Supplement*, and the *New York Review of Books*, was invited by the *American Scholar* to contribute short weekly posts for the magazine’s blog for one year. The resulting fifty-two chapters (most run two or three pages) bear intriguing titles such as “Rocky Mountain Low” (a thrilling tirade), “Bookish Pets” (plenty of cats but also pigs and others), and “Castles in Space” (fascinating yet overlooked works of fiction).

Dirda, who was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for distinguished criticism in 1993, describes himself as less of a critic—“I don’t possess that kind of analytic mind”—than a “bookman, an appreciator, a cheerleader for the old, the neglected, the marginalized, and the forgotten,” adding that

“on sunny days I may call myself a literary journalist.” It is in this role that he brings us good news, that “the world is full of wonderful stories, heart-breakingly beautiful and witty poems, thrilling works of history, biography and philosophy,” commending us to them because they “make you laugh, or hug yourself with pleasure, or deepen your thinking, or move you as profoundly as any experience this side of a serious love affair.” If the life of the mind required an advocate, Dirda would be on retainer. After all, it is hard to argue with his well-worn conviction that “we don’t read for high-minded reasons. We read for aesthetic, emotional, and intellectual excitement.” This attitude is hardly surprising from the author of *Classics for Pleasure*, a title which contains two words not often comfortably found together. A lively allusiveness runs throughout and brightens the book. Keats and Shakespeare live in Dirda’s sentences. When he professes **[End Page 481]** that he likes “a piece to sound as if it were dashed off in 15 minutes—even when hours might have been spent in contriving just the right degree of airiness and nonchalance,” the reader registers under his sardonic tone the sentiments of W. B. Yeats’s “Adam’s Curse,” “Yet if it does not seem a moment’s thought, / Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.” The reader’s antennae quiver page to page with the sense that they have encountered what Dirda calls “another of my quirks—the buried allusion, the embedded quotation without any identification of the source.”

At times, Dirda conjures scenes like a novelist (he knows many who ply the trade), as when he illustrates his preference “simply to be surrounded by other people while I read or write.”

Years ago, when I was in graduate school, I took to polishing chapters of my dissertation late at night...

Michael Dirda, *Browsings: A Year of Reading, Collecting, and Living with Books* (Pegasus Books, 2015), 336 pp.

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