



As of This Writing

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As of This Writing: The Essential Essays, 1968-2002 is yet another anthology of characteristically wide-ranging and tart essays from the always provocative Clive James, a volume to be placed on the shelf alongside *Reliable Essays* (2001), *The Metropolitan Critic* (1974), and ten other compilations of his literary journalism. For many readers, there really cannot be too many of these volumes to choose from; for them, James is a writer who can be positively addictive, one whose instantly recognizable style, voice, and point of view are almost impossible to resist. Australian-born, British-educated, he writes with an easy wit, with enormous humor, and great erudition lightly worn; moreover, he writes as an outsider, a fact he makes much of in the forward to this work. Unlike a number of his famous contemporaries (Martin Amis and Christopher Hitchens come to mind), James has chosen to remain in England, ignoring the lure of America and American dollars, refusing the chance to be at what can seem like the center of the action. He works best, he says, on the margins, where his perspective is less likely to be distorted and his critical sensibility more likely to flourish. Flourish it certainly does in these incandescent essays that range from poetry and fiction to cultural figures and the visual arts, from the death of W. H. Auden to the life of Primo Levi, from the legacy of Orson Welles to the lyric, soulful lunacy of Federico Fellini.

James is an unashamed Grub-Streeter, a journalist who can wade into the cultural waters at any point, write on any subject, and, in a jargon-free critical prose both deft and knowing, attempt to elevate the ephemeral to a kind of permanence. It is a sign of his talent and vision that he succeeds in doing just this. Pieces from the early years of his career are eminently re-readable; he can distill from the topical (the publication of a self-serving memoir by Lillian Hellman, or a ground-breaking polemic by Germaine Greer) something of more long-lasting importance about the blind vanity of aging writers or the transforming power of feminist critique.

His model is A. N. Wilson, the “metropolitan critic” of American cultural life whom he clearly admires above all others. Like Wilson, James is insatiably curious about cultural phenomena, both eager and equipped to weigh in on his world and its enthusiasms, whether that means the new television season or the hegemony of photographic images or the financial success (notwithstanding the artistic nullity) of a Judith Krantz novel. He has left the essays as originally written, adding only postscripts that comment on the context and update his views. These are themselves worth the price of the book, being sharp, unsparing reflections, products of a nimble and amused mind unleashed on its own prose and positions. Clive James is a tonic to read, and these essays may in fact be essential.

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