

## The Point of Criticism

WILLIAM GIRALDI'S recent thrashing of Alix Ohlin's first two novels in the *New York Times* caused more than a small stir in the American literati. Among other things, Giraldi panned Ohlin's weak plots and "appalling lack of register." "Mitch's heart sang," Giraldi writes, quoting a few choice phrases from *Inside*,

and then Mitch's "heart sank"; poor Mitch "felt his heart cracking like ice cubes in warm water." Annie "had touched Grace's heart" but had also "gotten under her skin." Grace feels "marooned on her own private island" and then "her nerves were singing." In just 13 pages you will be asked to endure eyes "fluttering," then "shining," then "fluttering" again. Mitch's girlfriend is "brilliantly smart"—imagine for a second the special brand of languor required to connect those two terms—and also blows her nose "goose-honkingly hard."

"Every mind," Giraldi concludes, "lives or dies by its ideas; every book lives or dies by its language."

While some critics were supportive of Giraldi's review, he was mostly chastised, not for being wrong, mind you, but for being "mean." Not too long ago, it was considered not just the critic's prerogative but his duty to criticize poor writing. Truth and beauty were the standards by which good writing was to be judged, even if critics and writers disagreed about what truth was and what counted as beautiful.

As D.G. Myers has pointed out, such a view has gone the way of so many other ideas, displaced by "a heartfelt relativism which holds that every judgment is a personal preference anyway." "Literature," he writes, "needs fewer nice people and more loyalists."

One of those "loyalists," not only of literature but of music and art, is Roger Kimball, and his new book, *The Fortunes of Permanence: Culture and Anarchy in an Age of Amnesia*, contains all the wit and intellect readers of the *New Criterion* have come to expect.

Like Myers, Kimball sees relativism as the culprit in the West's cultural decline. The idea that "all cultures are equally valuable and, therefore, that prefer-

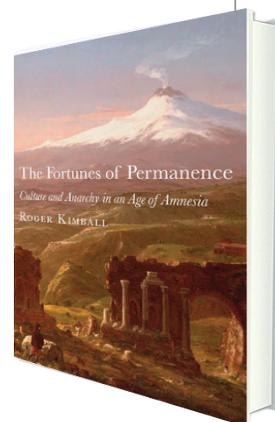
ring one culture, intellectual heritage, or moral and social order to another is to be guilty of ethnocentrism" is the mantra of our time. It's an idea that has spoiled rather than refined "our powers of discrimination," and one that in practice is rather un-egalitarian: "for," Kimball writes, "you soon realize that the doctrine of cultural relativism is always a weighted relativism: Preferring Western culture or intellectual heritage is culpable in a way that preferring other traditions is not."

The corrective, in part, is to put paid to bad ideas and bad art, and Kimball often does exactly that. In "Art in Crisis" and "Why the Art World Is a Disaster," for example, he skewers the replacement of craft with ideology that has led to the posturing of today's art world. On a supposedly "subversive" art show at Bard College, Kimball writes: "The 'arts' at Bard are notable not because they are unusual but because they are so grindingly ordinary." And on the idea of "fun"

in architecture, he writes: "Fun is nice. I like fun. But fun remains most fun when it keeps to its appropriate place. The ambition to transform all of life into a playground is a prescription for the ruin of fun."

KIMBALL IS THE MASTER of the paragraph. He rarely lands a rhetorical knock-out, but the combined effect of his sentences can do a lot of damage. Consider this from a review of Martha Nussbaum's book on disgust:

So maybe many of the things that the inherited moral wisdom of millennia have taught us to find disgusting—and to which society has responded with various legal prohibitions—need to be reevaluated? What do you think? Take necrophilia. Professor Nussbaum finds this a thorny problem. Who, after all, is harmed in the transaction? Professor Nussbaum wonders "whether necrophilia ought, in fact, to be illegal." She acknowledges that there is "something unpleasant" about a person who rapes a corpse, but it is "unclear" to her whether such conduct



**The Fortunes of Permanence: Culture and Anarchy in an Age of Amnesia**

By Roger Kimball

(ST. AUGUSTINE'S PRESS, 347 PAGES, \$35)

Reviewed by Micah Mattix

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should be “criminal.” Possibly, since a corpse is generally the property of its family, there should be “some criminal penalties” where “property violations” are involved, but otherwise not. Think about that for a moment...

Or there is this on the status of benevolence in the modern world:

The intoxicating effects of benevolence help to explain the growing appeal of politically correct attitudes about everything from “the environment” to the fate of the Third World. Why does the consistent failure of statist policies not disabuse their advocates of the statist agenda? One reason is that statist policies have the sanction of benevolence. They are “against poverty,” “against war,” “against oppression,” “for the environment.” And why shouldn’t they be? Where else are the pleasures of smug self-righteousness to be had at so little cost?

Kimball never insults our intelligence. The coy rhetorical question here, the ellipses there, invite us to share in his good-natured amusement at our culture’s unfortunately frequent absurdities.

Yet, as Kimball knows, this can sometimes be an easy game to play. More difficult is to point to alternatives to a feel-good but stupefying egalitarianism. This, to my mind, is what sets Kimball apart. In *The Fortunes of Permanence*, we have wonderful essays on James Burnham, Richard Weaver, Malcolm Muggeridge, and a partial defense of Rudyard Kipling. Whether or not you agree with Kimball’s take on these figures, you always learn something new that is worth pondering.

As the selection above indicates, these essays are as much political as they are cultural. Right or wrong, an occasional charge against the *New Criterion* under Kimball’s leadership is that it has become too political. For Kimball, however, one cannot easily disentangle “the realms of culture.” “Ultimately,” he writes, “they exist symbiotically, nurturing, supplementing, contending with each other.”

Yet, while they are connected, politics and art do exist separately. Conservatives are skilled at engaging the former, but have unfortunately shown too little interest in the latter. Kimball’s *Fortunes of Permanence* is a timely reminder that the arts do matter, and that any attempt to regain the best of the Western tradition politically that ignores the arts is only half a victory. ■

## Whose Rule of Law?

**T**WO MEMORIES STAND OUT about my brief foray at Duke University Law School in the early 1960s. One occurred when I was made my class’s representative to plan the dedication of the new law school building on campus. It was an elaborate ceremony to be led by no less than Chief Justice Earl Warren and joined by all the political elite among the school’s alumni—except for our highest-achieving graduate, former Vice President Richard Nixon.

When I expressed curiosity about the omission, I was briskly shushed by the dean and told in no uncertain terms that Nixon would never be allowed back on the Duke campus for reasons that were never fully explained. And so it would be. Even the offer of his presidential library was not enough to expunge whatever offense Nixon had committed at Duke.

The other memory is more pleasant. Finding myself unable to focus on torts and property in fee simple absolute, I took to wandering through the school until I came on a suite of offices for something called the World Rule of Law Center.

There I met Arthur Larson, the center’s founding director. Larson had been known as “the brains of the Eisenhower administration” which he had served as undersecretary of labor, head of the U.S. Information Agency and, lastly, as Ike’s chief speechwriter. He had resigned in 1959 to return to teaching and to create the center to foster this vague concept called the World Rule of Law.

Taking time to give a patient tutorial to an obvious ignoramus, Larson explained to me that the concept was the latest hot idea of Cold War strategy. Fostering a world standard of justice based on the case-precedent laws of England and the United States would be crucial to establishing true democracies among less developed nations and would prove a bulwark against the arbitrary rule of despots—Communists, Fascists, monarchs. He pointed to a declaration signed in Delhi two years earlier when jurists from 53 nations endorsed the United Nations

### **Taming Globalization: International Law, the U.S. Constitution, and the New World Order**

By John Yoo and Julian Ku  
(OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS,  
274 PAGES, \$35)

### **Reviewed by James Srodes**

**James Srodes**, a Washington author, has just published *On Dupont Circle*, his eighth biography.