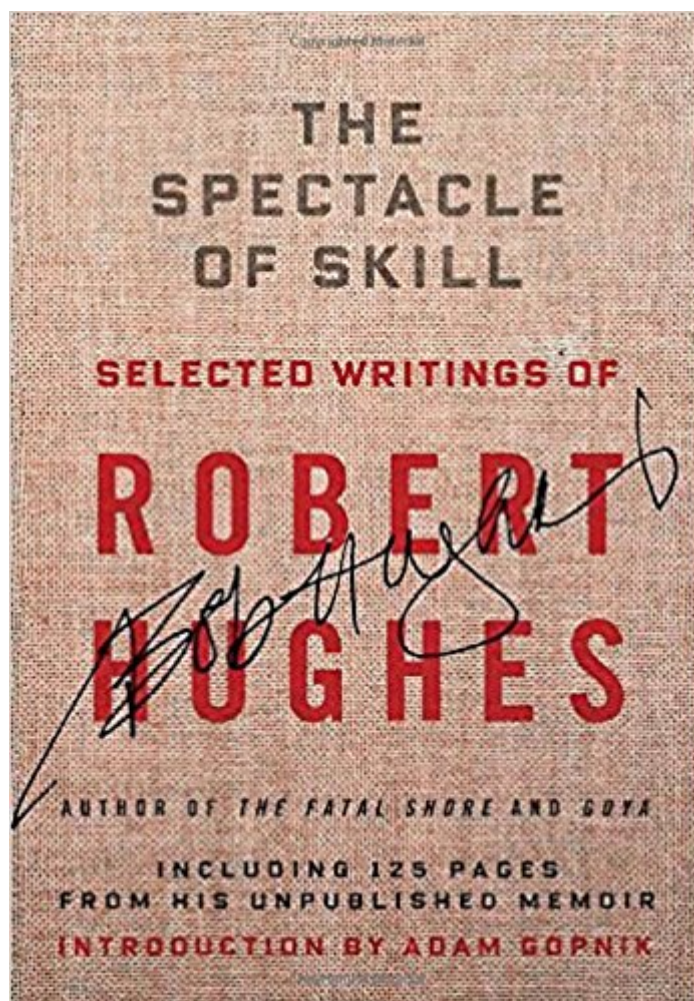


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The Spectacle Of Skill: New And Selected Writings Of Robert Hughes



Synopsis

I am completely an elitist, in the cultural but emphatically not the social sense. I prefer the good to the bad, the articulate to the mumbling, the aesthetically developed to the merely primitive, and full to partial consciousness. I love the spectacle of skill, whether it's an expert gardener at work, or a good carpenter chopping dovetails . . . I don't think stupid or ill-read people are as good to be with as wise and fully literate ones. I would rather watch a great tennis player than a mediocre one . . . Consequently, most of the human race doesn't matter much to me, outside the normal and necessary frame of courtesy and the obligation to respect human rights. I see no reason to squirm around apologizing for this. I am, after all, a cultural critic, and my main job is to distinguish the good from the second-rate.

• Robert Hughes wrote with brutal honesty about art, architecture, culture, religion, and himself. He translated his passions—of which there were many, both positive and negative—brilliantly, convincingly, and with vitality and immediacy, always holding himself to the same rigorous standards of skill, authenticity, and significance that he did his subjects. There never was, and never will be again, a voice like this. In this volume, that voice rings clear through a gathering of some of his most unforgettable writings, culled from nine of his most widely read and important books. This selection shows his enormous range and gives us a uniquely cohesive view of both the critic and the man. Most revealing, and most thrilling for Hughes's legions of fans, are the never-before-published pages from his unfinished second volume of memoirs. These last writings show Robert Hughes at the height of his powers and can be read only with pleasure and a tinge of sadness that his extraordinary voice is no longer here to educate us as well as to clarify and define our world.

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Customer Reviews

• An eye-opener. [The Spectacle of Skill] contains some of the most nakedly emotional prose [Hughes] ever committed to paper. • "The New York Times" Hughes wrote many kinds of things in a career that spanned four decades . . . but his primary goal was always the same: to entertain, especially while he was educating. The Spectacle of Skill will serve as a generous reminder to all those familiar with Hughes' prose of just how dazzlingly he succeeded at that goal, and it will introduce newcomers to one of the great critical voices of the late 20th century. • "The Christian Science Monitor" [The Spectacle of Skill] echo[es] with an erudite authority that would seem impossible to obtain in our day, and a bombast that would be unbearably rude. The combination, conveyed in a clear and entertaining prose, will feel nostalgic even to those who come to know [Hughes] only by this book. • "San Francisco Chronicle" Art writing is rarely readable and hardly ever done well. Few did it better than Robert Hughes. • "Chicago Tribune" For anyone who wishes emphatically to know what is what in the here and now. • "The Wall Street Journal"

ROBERT HUGHES was born in Australia in 1938. In 1970, he moved to the United States to become chief art critic for Time, a position he held until 2001. His books include The Shock of the New, The Fatal Shore, Nothing if Not Critical, The Culture of Complaint, Barcelona, American Visions, A Jerk on One End, Goya, Things I Didn't Know, and Rome. He is a New York Public Library Literary Lion and was the recipient of a number of literary awards and prizes, including two Frank Jewell-Mather Awards. He is widely held as the most respected art critic of our time.

Describing Robert Hughes as merely an art critic (even if you think him a great one) seems a diminishment. Love or loath his opinions but give the man his due: his prose are beautiful and buoyed by wit and erudition. For that alone one should read (and reread) The Spectacle of Skill. It's a compilation of essays and excerpt chapters that are absolutely breathtaking in their content and style. History, travel, politics, culture (and the business of culture), ethics, fishing, High Trash as well as familial loss and failure are some of the topics Hughes turns his attention to. And oh, yes, artists and the art world. Two sentences in the spectacle of skill tell you all one need's to know about the man: "I am completely an elitist, in the cultural but emphatically not the social sense. I prefer the

good to the bad, the articulate to the mumbling, the aesthetically developed to the merely primitive, and full to partial consciousness. I love the spectacle of skill, whether it's an expert gardener at work or a good carpenter chopping dovetails...I don't think stupid or ill-read people are as good to be with as wise and fully literate ones." I find I disagree as often as not with Hughes. I continually return to read his critical opinions because they are informed, knowledgeable and have a moral as well as an aesthetic or political slant. He can also be hilariously funny and scathingly dismissive--Julian Schnabel, collectibles, Interview magazine, and television are favorite targets. As a critic, Hughes is fiercely passionate and honest. Two virtues anyone can admire, but few acquire. His love of Miro and Picasso is steeped in their foundational skills: as modern artists they dismissed classic forms once they learned them. They actually took the trouble to unlearn them. His contempt for Schnabel and late-Warhol is based on the former's inability to even draw and the latter's apparent determination to elevate the banal to an aesthetic level. Happily for us, he despised cant (artists comparing their works to Kristallnacht beware). Reading the turgid excerpts from gallery shows he's visited is a highlight, as are his quotes from the culture rags of the 80s. Hughes was renowned for his campaigns against bombast and corruption: two afflictions that were and apparently still are epidemic in the art world. His campaign against the casual bribes of his profession was courageous and solitary. His homage to Barcelona and to Antoni Gaudi are a smorgasbord to be savored, gorging readers on courses of history, Spanish politics and chauvinism, urban blight, Catalan cuisine, Joan Miro, surrealism, modernism and the religiosity of Catalunya's premiere architect. It is a breathtaking whirlwind, all the more impressive because I never particularly cared for Gaudi's overwrought, lachrymose style. I don't like it much better now but do appreciate the effort and thinking that went into it. Particularly its artisanal, organic and oriental underpinnings. We are in full accord about the appalling continuum that has become the Sacre Familia and I will not try to top a master at his dismissive best:[it] is the most blatant mass of half-digested modernist cliches to be plunked on a notable building within living memory. It is sincere in the way that only the worst art can be...Art historians of the future will point to it, no doubt, as the precise moment when the public religious art of Catholic Europe died. In all collections, some works are less impressive. Personally, I never need to read another essay or article insisting upon the joys of fishing. Halfway through Hughes' paeon to hooks, lines and sinkers I found my eyes glazing over, my mind wandering. His essay Long Island, would also, I thought, be less than riveting but it proved to be a delight. The writing is lyrical the observations fresh, proving again that the commonplace need not be banal. And of course, there are those artists! Wonderful appreciations of Rothko and Hopper, Pollock and Eakins and two particularly fine chapters on Goya that should be required reading for every lover of

art and creativity. They are essays infused with wonder and passion for a true artistic genius. To his credit, Hughes was as fiercely critical of himself as others. His dissipated youth is reviewed in detail and his tragic failure as a parent is unflinchingly revealed. If there is tragedy and travesty in *The Spectacle of Skill* there is also a tremendous appreciation of greatness and accomplishment. These essays are never just about artists or paintings, cities visited or glitzy trends. Art and Art History are the springboards Hughes uses to dive deep into timeless cultural, social and political topics. It would be a shame if you didn't take the plunge with him.

Hughes is so astute and such a brilliant and educated observer. Anyone interested in the arts should have this in his library. These are enlightening essays that are written with whimsy and sagacity. Moreover, they provide the reader with bright, clever and smart insights into the art world. This book will forever be on my nightstand.

Don't appreciate critics but Hughes gives insight into our recent artistic past relevant today.

Not enough about art criticism

Excerpts from Hughes' most well known works. Wonderfully entertaining and insightful.

A great book!

Always enjoy reading or listening to Robert Hughes.

same

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