

Story Wars

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***THE MIDDLE MIND: WHY AMERICANS
DON'T THINK FOR THEMSELVES***

Curtis White

HarperSanFrancisco
<http://www.harpercollins.com>
220 pages; cloth, \$23.95

Curtis White takes as the epigraph of *The Middle Mind: Why Americans Don't Think for Themselves* the following sentence from Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era* (1971): "Whoever can give his people better stories than the ones they live in is like the priest in whose hands common bread and wine become capable of feeding the very soul." And indeed, it is the contention of this impassioned book—a book that sprawls and jumps like a long-held-in outburst at times—that Americans are failing to do the deeper work of imagination; that they have turned away from the true challenge of freedom and have accepted instead a kind of predigested pabulum. Which is, needless to say, precisely what our leaders and the stewards of the system of global capital desire—a docile citizenry satisfied with generic canned goods.

White, a fiction writer and essayist, is the man to write this book. He shows a genuine zeal for going after the patent idiocies of the right *and* the icons of the self-congratulating liberals. The response to his skewering of Terry Gross and *Fresh Air* in a *Harper's* article, which White discusses in his introduction, let him know he had hit a nerve. He had found the mentality—savvy, shaped by the easy-listening expectations of popular culture—that his polemic takes on. "People felt personally insulted," he writes. "Because they listened to Terry Gross or considered themselves 'fans,' it was as if I were telling them they were members of a class of fools. (I have, I think, with great tact refrained from that judgment.)" White doesn't mind some ruffling of feathers. My impulse is to trust the man and to listen to

what he has to say—not because the argument is new, but because sometimes it just feels good to hear an intelligent person saying what he really thinks.

White divides his critique (his Gaul, his gall) into three parts, looking at the co-optation of the collective imagination by the entertainment culture, by academe, and by our dominant political narratives. He then examines and rejects certain responses to the problem, most notably those offered by the New Age movement. Finally, he offers not an answer, or solution, but what amounts to an appeal for a different kind of thinking, a gesture that is consonant with his despairing supposition throughout that the problem—the *crisis*—is systemic.

White came of age intellectually during the counterculture years, and his references—to Marshall McLuhan, T.W. Adorno, Theodore Roszak—reflect it, as do his fundamental attitudes:

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the basic Marxian critique of capitalism, for instance, and outrage at all commercialization of the genuine. From his early schooling in close-reading (before the onslaught of deconstruction) and from attending to master "readers" of cultural artifacts like Mark Crispin Miller, he learned the arts of unmasking the presentation of a work to disclose its deeper operative assumptions. In the chapter on entertainment, White fillets Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* to show his reader just how insidiously a flag-waving mentality can be smuggled into a work masquerading as hard-hitting realism. He models persuasively his own prime contention: that the only defense against a nearly all-pervasive middle mind is reading, by which he means not just the act of turning pages, but the effort of honest, critical evaluation, the effort of attention.

Looking at the culture of academia, White assesses the damage done by the discipline of

Cultural Studies, which essentially proposed the “constructedness” of cultural artifacts and demoted the content of the expression itself to footnote status. The canon debate—he discusses John Guillory and Harold Bloom—did not help matters, further occluding the power and purpose of any given work, and White seizes upon Russian formalist thinker Viktor Shklovsky as a countering force, arguing that Shklovsky’s insistence on otherness and the power of estrangement recenters the reader’s imagination on the work.

Imagination—this is the big concept for White. As the Kenner epigraph suggests, whoever tells the most compelling story carries the day. In our culture now, certainly on the political front, the post-9/11 narrative—the terrorist conspiracy narrative—has a stranglehold on the popular imagination and allows the steady prosecution of preemptive imperialism. It is not that the opposition voices cannot be heard—work of Noam Chomsky, Paul Virilio, and others is available, uncensored—but those critiques are simply powerless. Overwhelmed by the saturations of the middle mind, we are suffering a sclerosis of the intelligence. We have bought, en masse, the assumption of technological triumphalism and with it the seemingly inexorable logic of expansion and domination.

White is not breaking new ground. His basic points have been made more forcefully and coherently by some of the thinkers he invokes. Indeed,

his discussion, chapter to chapter, feels locally inspired but structurally disorganized. At times while reading, I felt I was having a late-night free-for-all with a well-read and energizingly independent-minded individual. But this is precisely what is so tonic, so important about *The Middle Mind*—his insistence on the seemingly outmoded habits of free thought and on the primacy of authentic works of imagination.

White does not, by his own admission, offer us any ready way out of our impasse. Where culture is as global, as total, as ours has become, there are no simple “fixes” to be devised. The best hope we have is in recognition and then a wholesale change in our habits of thought and response. By honoring works of imagination, seeing them for what they are, we remind ourselves of possibility. We come up against the “sublime,” which I understand here as the quasi-religious recognition that existence is rooted in mystery and that things cannot be ultimately managed or foretold. In the face of the sublime, openness, humility, and the willingness to explore—to reconceive our narrow orientation—become mandatory. Curtis White’s *The Middle Mind* tells us this, or reminds us in case we knew and had forgotten.

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