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Title of the Book: *Leslie Fiedler: Critic, Provocateur, Pop Culture Guru*

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Reviewed by:

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Leslie Fiedler was the one literary critic of the 20th century that his readers loved to hate. He is variously referred to as ‘the wild-man’ of literary criticism or, as Sam Tanenhaus calls him “the original chest-thumping extrovert of American critics.” In an age which saw the rise of critics like John Barth and Derrida, Fiedler succeeded in carving out a niche in the field of literary criticism by his out-of-the-box intellectual stance in the rarified atmosphere of academia. Fiedler was attributed to having many firsts to his credit; the OED credits him as the first person to apply the term ‘post-modernist’ to literature. He is also considered to have reinvented the American essay with the critic becoming an integral part of that criticism. He was also the first to consider pop art as equally significant as high-brow literature. In his own words, he averred: “the novel is the first art form that is an honest-to-god commodity. I guess that’s what I mean by ‘pop.’ That’s what makes it different from both high art and folk art.” In the post World War II period breaking away from the New Critics, he seriously studied and wrote on pop culture.

Leslie Fiedler Critic, Provocateur, Pop Culture Guru is a remarkable study by Dr. Prem Srivastava, aiming to expose some of the “myriad dimensions of the kaleidoscopic Fiedler.” She supports Camille Paglia’s view that Fiedler was one of the three great thinkers, along with Marshall McLuhan and Norman O. Brown, to have shaped and readied America’s mid-century culture for the “wider and wilder world of cyberspace.” She attempts to establish Fiedler as an important critic, writer, and scholar, whose discourse could be meaningful, not only for the Americans but beyond them. She traces his evolution from the early dabbling in elitism to the gradual changing into a democratic and popular culture critic. Her aim is to study the manner in which Fiedler helped to instigate a paradigm shift, or as Sam Tanenhaus puts it, his “protean transformations,” in American literature and culture, by unraveling the hitherto “staid and comfortable” world of American literary establishments, while deconstructing the mythical pattern of American males.

Srivastava examines Fiedler’s early experiments with the Leftist and Marxist approach to literature, analyzing his wariness of the structuralists in the 40s, and later in the 50s his derision of the New Critics, leading to his debunking of the older schools of thought and total rejection of the New Criticism.

Prem Srivastava approaches this subject from the twin vantage point of “first, a student of Fiedler’s self-marginalized uniqueness within American literary studies and cultural discourse, and then, second, as a post-colonialist.” She endeavors, to “provide an afterlife” to Fiedler’s work, especially among the largely sceptical Indian scholars, regarding the relevance of Fiedler in contemporary times, confident in Fiedler’s works surviving in a new literary and cultural climate, it might have helped to create.

The introductory chapter of the book surveys the early critical studies on Fiedler, with a discussion of Fiedler’s early credo’ i.e. his critical views on “the nature of criticism, the artist, and negativism,” leaning more towards the elite stance. She targets the ‘readership constituencies’ who everyday experience the critical views of Fiedler on various aspects – on popular culture, personal voice, intertextuality and interdisciplinarity. She emphasizes his awareness of the avante-garde and kitsch, his tribute to the ‘other’ in the literary world, be they “new mutants or new writers, novel interpretative strategies and pedagogies, or a new muse that plays to the market,” or, as Maini puts it, his ability to recognize “the winds of change.”

The next chapter deals with Fiedler’s preoccupation with regression, racial and mythic concerns, in American literature depicting the WASP (White Anglo-Saxon [usually]Protestant) American male as alienated and a runaway person, seeking the company of a non-white male. Starting with his first essay on this theme, *Come Back to the Raft Ag’in, Huck Honey* (1948), he gives mythic significance to this triangular relationship of woman, man, and colored man. It is in these ‘quirky’ readings of American archetypes that Fiedler noticed the beginnings of popular culture, and, Srivastava maintains that, before Fiedler, race, gender and sexuality did not feature prominently in the field of literary criticism. Srivastava reiterates that Fiedler laid emphasis on myth as a recurrent pattern of “responses and desires that are universal in nature.” World literatures reflect this mythic pattern of the eternal triangle of man/woman/other woman (or man). The difference that Srivastava notices in Fiedler’s thesis is that this triangle has been altered “beyond imagination” to woman/man/ other man, where this other man is a non-white male, who is mostly an outcast or pariah of society.

Srivastava traces this theme existing in narratives ranging from Rip Van Winkle’s ‘hillside nap,’ Thoreau’s solitude at Walden, Ishmael’s relationship with Queequeg, his Polynesian bunkmate, in *Moby Dick*, as well as the men-without-women fiction of Hemingway and Faulkner. She analyses the evolution in Fiedler’s writings since 1948, with *Come Back to the Raft Ag’in*, *Huck Honey* and *Love and Death in the American Novel* which were concerned with ideas like those on ‘woman,’ ‘child,’ ‘dream,’ and ‘flight,’ in his “male camaraderie critique” as the prominent principles that ruled the American psyche. This theme continues in *Waiting for the End* and *The Return of the Vanishing American*, which Srivastava examines in detail.

Fiedler’s persistent preoccupation with the existence of the ‘other’ in American society: the blacks, Indians, freaks, focusing on the Jews, whose attempt to assimilate into the American ethos was the prime reason for Jewish-American writings. As a Jew himself, the theme of

alienation particularly interested him, since Fiedler considered Jews as strangers on the American soil. Chapter 3 examines this theme in *To the Gentiles* (1971), *The Stranger in Shakespeare* (1972), and *Fiedler on the Roof* (1991). In his early essays, the Native American Indians are represented as the outsiders. Later he considered the blacks as the 'other,' (*Love and Death, Waiting for the End, The Return of the Vanishing American*). *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (1978) deals with nature's outsiders, and *Tyranny of the Normal* (1982).

She comments that "though it is difficult to assess the depth of Fiedler's awareness with respect to the realities of blacks in America, it can be easily inferred that Fiedler has exercised great caution to be objective and has been well guarded in his opinions on the blacks." In Srivastava's analysis of *The Jew in the American Novel* (1959), she concludes that Fiedler tries to give a universal meaning to the problem of alienation.

Srivastava also analyses Fiedler's foray into pop culture, and his emergence as a pop guru. Chapter 4 traces Fiedler's continuous preoccupation with culture in the context of the hegemonic dominance of elitism in academia and the slow but sure rise of mass culture. He established the undeniable presence and importance of the 'pop' novel, which reflected "the mythology of urban culture," far removed from the elitist Christian and Greek mythology. Fiedler was the first to use the term 'postmodernism' which constituted a departure from the older methods of modern criticism, which preferred highbrow literature, while Fiedler preferred to deal with all art, including pop art, in order to avoid "artistic hierarchies." His use of the term 'pop literature' is a description of the majority literature in an industrial and post-industrial society, and totally excludes 'folk' literature, which, according to him, is the literature of the preliterate society.

Srivastava extensively analyses *Towards a Definition of Popular Literature* (1975) and *Giving the Devil His Due* (1978), both significant in Fiedler's evolution as a pop guru. Her study of *Cross the Border - Close the Gap* (1972) describes Fiedler's attempt to bridge the gap between high art and pop art by bringing them closer to each other. He stated the need for "a New New Criticism, a Post-Modern Criticism" that would be "contextual rather than textual." This would imply that contemporary or post-modern criticism should be congenial to this new popular culture.

Srivastava's studies the post-colonial and feminist readings of Fiedler's position in contemporary times, as an "un-American American, insider-outsider, the wild man of American letters with a bifocal vision, or the one-man fifth column in the elitist citadel to earn the nickname of a pop guru" and his contribution to the seminal issue related to post colonialism: how gender, class and race function in colonial and post colonial discourse. It also deals with Fiedler's rejection of "staid, traditional, patriarchal business as usual" seen from the vantage point of his position as "a ghettoized writer also writing about certain subaltern writers and ghettoized texts." She concludes that his quintessentially 'un-American' American position is one that is located geographically in the United States but ideologically outside it and that he has

“set the right pace to follow,” leaving an indelible imprint on literary criticism through his views on race, gender and sexuality debates, thereby establishing a middle-brow critique.

Srivastava regrets the fact that Fiedler’s contribution to literary criticism is neither acknowledged nor is he acclaimed as a writer of fiction. His almost total exclusion from the curriculum of universities is surprising considering that he proved to be an early pioneer in American cultural studies, championing the existence of hybrid, mass, and low cultures. On the other hand Srivastava also enumerates his admirers and the impact he has on them. She concludes with an emphasis on Fiedler’s “enduring, inspiring influence on those artists, writers, and thinkers who . . . are all ‘outsiders’ in their own way. She fervently hopes that this book helps in reviving an interest in an author, still “worthy to be heard.”

This book succeeds in being a comprehensive study of all the various aspects of Fiedler’s writings that have contributed to the controversial reputation of this fine but largely neglected writer, by not only examining, but also justifying his out-of-the-box literary views. Maybe, as Prem Srivastava fervently hopes, this study may be instrumental in a renewed interest in the writings of Leslie Fiedler: Critic, Provocateur, Pop Guru!!