



# **An Open Book: Coming of Age in the Heartland**

*Michael Dirda*

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## **An Open Book: Coming of Age in the Heartland** Michael Dirda

A funny, wistful memoir by a Pulitzer Prize--winning critic that recalls the charm of *Growing Up* and the tenderness of *One Writer's Beginnings*. "ALL THAT KID WANTS TO DO is stick his nose in a book," Michael Dirda's steelworker father used to complain, worried about his son's passion for reading. In *An Open Book*, one of the most delightful memoirs to emerge in years, the acclaimed literary journalist Michael Dirda re-creates his boyhood in rust-belt Ohio, first in the working-class town of Lorain, then at Oberlin College. In addition to his colorful family and friends, *An Open Book* also features the great writers and fictional characters who fueled Dirda's imagination: from *Green Lantern* to *Sherlock Holmes*, from *Candy* to *Proust*. The result is an affectionate homage to small-town America--summer jobs, school fights, sweepstakes contests, and first dates--as well as a paean to what could arguably be called the last great age of reading.

## **An Open Book: Coming of Age in the Heartland Details**

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Author : Michael Dirda

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# From Reader Review An Open Book: Coming of Age in the Heartland for online ebook

**Lynn Green says**

I always love books by Michael Dirda. His loves are my loves. In this book I find many analogies to my own life. His early readings compare with mine. (We both read the blue childhood biographies of famous Americans.)

I make reading lists from the books he has read and enjoyed.

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**Paul says**

## PLOT OR PREMISE:

The author is a book reviewer for the Washington Post; this is the story of his life up until graduation from university.

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## WHAT I LIKED:

Dirda was recommended to me by a colleague from work, whose appetites for reading are far more literary than mine. He actually recommended *Bound to Please*, which is a collection of Dirda's reviews of more literary prose from throughout history, but I tripped over this book first. I'm quite glad I did as I probably won't read the collection of essays until I've read most of the tomes reviewed, but *An Open Book* is a fantastic autobiography. It reads in some place like Angela's Ashes without the darkness of Irish poverty. However, it is not without conflict or family dysfunction during the author's childhood, and he tells the story in places with openness and unashamed personal bias. The main part of the story recounts Dirda's intellectual progress as he moved through comic strips from the newspaper (p.49), pun and joke books (everyone sing: "great green gobs of greasy grimy gopher guts"!), the TAB book club (p.66), the Hardy Boys and Tom Swift series (p.90), a brief stint with romance novels (p.201), and the importance of great literature to challenging society and even changing history (p.290). It also includes his non-literary education – playing with BB guns (p.81), understanding firsthand how hard his father's job was (p.185), learning about art and music (p.267), the ceasing to care about grades when writing essays and the corresponding improvements in marks (p.310), the contribution of early influences in his life to later character traits (p.320), and looking back at one's life (p.321). The book recounts his life relatively linearly in time, yet with lots of interesting digressions that veer away from developments in his personal life and situation with the texts he was reading at the time.

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## WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE:

It would have been interesting to see more of the reactions from teachers throughout the author's life, including perhaps even tracking some of them down. It is hard to imagine exactly how certain ones would have reacted to his precocious reading of more advanced novels, and the existing allusions to some of their reactions are rudimentary at best. As well, the final decision (to become a freelance journalist upon leaving university) is rushed in the story, and negates much of the relaxed pace to that point.

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## BOTTOM-LINE:

See the early influences on a literary book reviewer

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#### DISCLOSURE:

I received no compensation, not even a free copy, in exchange for this review. I am not personal friends with the author, nor do I follow him on social media.

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#### **Dave says**

This was thoroughly enjoyable since the author and I went to the same high school for one and a half years. Having lived in Lorain county for all my life I knew most of the places he mentioned and many of the people he speaks of. It was a "trip down memory lane".

I am also impressed at his knowledge of literature!

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#### **Mary Jo says**

I thought the author was an excellent writer, but I must confess that I got "bogged down" at the end. I would have given him four stars based on his skill as a writer....the book just needed to end sooner.

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#### **Caroline Gerardo says**

When I was a girl I recall putting a towel under the bathroom door and duct tape at the corners to be able to sit on the floor and read a book all night. My father would enforce lights out, but this trick allowed me to finish beloved stacks from the library ( we were too poor to purchase novels).

I loved this book. I highly recommend you buy and stay up all night to share Michael's (if I may call a man I never met but feel I know from reading his work) story

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#### **Steve Walker says**

This is the story of how books shaped a life and about life in America in the middle of the 20th century. Dirda, the Pulitzer Prize winning book critic of the Washington Post, tells the story of his life up till his college years at Oberlin College. In some ways the world he writes about is now past, technology and globalization have seen to that. Yet, there is, in this well written memoir, a road map, a kernel of an idea. That idea is this: books and a life of reading can serve as launching pad to another life if we so desire. Dirda, as some reviewers on this website found out, is very honest about his growing years. An honest writer is like that and a well written memoir should not flinch from that aim. This is a book any book lover can take to heart.

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## **Lesa says**

When I read literary critic Michael Dirda's book, *Browsings*, I discovered he's from northern Ohio, and went to college at Oberlin. *Browsings* led me to the story of Dirda's youth, *An Open Book: Chapters from a Reader's Life*. It's a book that resonated with me more than it would many readers since I'm from northern Ohio, spent a little time at the university library at Oberlin, and, most of all, shared that passion for reading.

"All that kid wants to do is stick his nose in a book," was the complaint of Dirda's father who spent his life working at a mill job. But, his father wanted Michael to go to college, and make the money to get out of the mill town of Lorain, Ohio. I recognized myself so many times, despite the fact that I was a female, but still pudgy, wearing glasses at a young age. Michael Dirda is nine years older than me, but I recognize the books and stories about his childhood. There's the excitement of the school book club, and the opportunity to order paperbacks. In fourth grade, he ordered *Snow Treasure*, a book I also ordered and remember with fondness. How many young people my age read those "Childhood of Great Americans" biographies at our public libraries? Michael Dirda read them. City chicken was on the menu for dinner, and there were fireflies in the backyard during the summer.

Dirda's memoir is about his childhood through college years, as he grew as a reader. He read and studied literature, studied under teachers and professors who pushed him. I found his childhood and high school years more interesting, before he became so immersed in the classics. Those classics led him to his career as a literary critic. But, it was his youth and his deep immersion into books that I found fascinating. "To be an indiscriminate reader - as the luckiest young often are - means that the right books are all around you."

Michael Dirda's youth was not mine. I'm not male. I did not grow up in an ethnic, blue-collar neighborhood in the mill town of Lorain. But, I connect with his immersion in books as a child, his feelings of insecurity, even his insecurity that he wasn't in the right place when he was at Oberlin. Michael Dirda studied the classics and languages, while I took a different direction in my love of popular literature. But, it's those books that reflect our own lives that resonate with us. And, Michael Dirda, with his background of reading, his northern Ohio upbringing, brings all that to a memoir that resonates with me, *An Open Book*.

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## **Barbara Mader says**

I learned that Michael Dirda is still a very insecure and defensive guy--or else his sense of humor needs a fluff-up. I also learned how *\*not\** to write a memoir and how I may come across to others. So I've learned plenty. But I didn't enjoy the book much at all, and I had thought I would.

The book reminded me of Tommy Smothers' remark about Jane Fonda. The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour was censored a great deal by CBS, and finally canceled even though it had been picked up for another season. The Smothers Brothers sued CBS and won their lawsuit. Tom Smothers was very sensitive about issues of censorship and became well-known for his stands against censorship and for freedom of speech. But one night he saw Jane Fonda on a talk show or some other tv program, and he saw how her focus on the causes she believed in had left her with no sense of humor on these or basically any other issues. And seeing her, he saw himself, and decided he had to loosen up a bit. Well, maybe in some of Michael Dirda's writing in this book I've seen myself too, and I'm not crazy about what I see. And I know that I would want to avoid the tone he has in this book in any writing of my own.

As an aside, there are some word choices that are supposed to be clever but just sound pretentious and clunky.

As another aside, I just end up feeling kind of sorry for the guy.

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## **John says**

This is an autobiography for book lovers. Michael Dirda, best known as a Pulitzer Prize winning critic with the Washington Post, takes on to his childhood growing up poor in small town Ohio. Those who recall the joys of reading when they were young will get caught up in his enthusiasm for books, from comics to serious literature, as he grows from a child to a young man at Oberlin College in the 1960s. It is a enjoyable journey to be on.

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## **Corey says**

Michael Dirda is a cousin of mine, and I remember going to my local Borders to hear him speak about this book (and get a signed copy!) when it first came out. It was a treat to finally get around to reading the book and experience his perception of some of my relatives. Marlene and "Cookie" are my aunt and uncle and their sister is my grandmother, the third Kucirek cousin who is, unfortunately, not mentioned! I grew up in Lorain in the 90s, and it's amazing to me that not much has really changed. I can pinpoint nearly all the locations he discusses, and can vouch for myself that Yala's Pizza really is the best!! I consider myself more of a casual reader, so some of the ending chapters where he gives us more of his musings on authors and their works was a little dull for me. Overall, though, the book is a wonderful telling of life in Lorain.

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## **James says**

Michael Dirda is a Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for The Washington Post Book World who has written several books in addition to this one; a great book and a challenge to readers based on his memories of his reading life. It is not only an interesting read but also a source for books to read and reread. Dirda shares the typical stories of how friends and family shaped his life; and he shares the impact of his reading. This is what I enjoyed the most. When he describes his encounter with Dumas' The Count of Monte Cristo as a boy I remembered the same experience that I had discovering that great adventure story. By the time he arrived at Oberlin College he was a veteran reader. Again I could identify with his love affair with the college library. In my own case it was the Memorial Library at the University of Wisconsin, where I would get lost in the stacks and find myself reading for hours. The only downside of this passion was that often the book I was reading was not required for my current courses. Somehow I still graduated with honors. Michael Dirda's adventures with books continually brought back fond memories of different yet not too dissimilar personal experiences.

His reading was both wide and deep. He did not discriminate among books with the Green Lantern and Tarzan just as welcome as Raskolnikov and Hamlet. The result is a book that is not only challenging, but also inspirational. One among many positive aspects of this memoir is a listing of books he read in his teen years -- I'm always looking for suggestions for reading even as my own to-read list already seems to be

overflowing. Whatever your personal experience, and it's likely that it differs from both mine and Dirda's in the details, I am sure that you will find this memoir a delight and one more reason to read the work of Michael Dirda, one of my favorite literary commentators.

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### **Bruce says**

Michael Dirda's book, *An Open Book – Chapters From A Reader's Life*, is an autobiographical account of his love affair with reading from his preschool years through his college education at Oberlin, an account that resonated with my own experience in many ways, both of us having been Midwesterners from uneducated families that nonetheless had at least one parent who valued learning. For a while, I found Dirda's writing too simple and almost insipid, until I realized that his account was consistent with the understanding and expression of the age he was describing; thus, his preschool years were portrayed with the vocabulary, syntax, and style of a preschooler, etc. For me, the book became much more engrossing at the point when Dirda entered junior high school, his experiences and feelings seeming very familiar. His description of critical mentors at all levels of his educational experience was fascinating and made me reflect on those who mentored me. And always he wove into the chronological narrative the books he was reading, how each influenced him, and how each one led to another. Intriguing to me are the different factors and motivations that lead people to become readers. Like Dirda, I think I was always enthralled by the breadth of experience that reading vicariously provided, and, also like him, I know that I used reading as a way of escaping the realities of tensions at home and of the awkwardness of never feeling that I quite fit in perfectly with my peers; I was good at reading and academics, so that is where I dwelt. I came away from this book feeling that Dirda is a soulmate.

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### **Trisha says**

I loved this book! Mainly because it was all about the passion and pleasures of being a reader. It's an account of the author's first 19 years from the perspective of the books that influenced and shaped him. He writes wonderfully well and describes his earliest memories of being read to, his first trip to a library and how much he grew to love being there, his appetite for reading anything and everything that had words on it (including cereal boxes.)He describes the many lists of books he compiled over the years and the things he remembers about them. Reading this book was a real treat - and one of the few times I've come across someone who not only knows what a "commonplace book" is, but acutally keeps one - just like I have always done!!

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### **Tim says**

Michael Dirda does name drop in this book. The names he drops are all the books he read and how early he read them. But they are the shape of his life and if I could wish to have read Dostoevsky at an earlier age, Dirda notes he can hardly recollect anything from his junior high school reading of *Crime and Punishment*. He lists some of the books in an appendix at the end of the book: "What follows is the book list I set down in my journal when I was sixteen. It lists, in no particular order, some of the more ambitious works I'd managed to finish by that age, and yes, it does seem at least a little bit pretentious. But I don't think any of these books is beyond the powers of a reasonably diligent teenager. The trick, of course, lies in actually wanting, in being eager, to read them." (323) Dirda read to escape the world of his father, the Ohio steel mills. Growing up amid extended family in working-class Lorain, Ohio, his vigorous reading allowed him to go to Oberlin and

create a writing life based on reading (ah, the life of the critic). It is interesting too the importance of teachers and mentors in his own life, who led him more deeply into reading and the literary life. A good summer read, that encourages more reading. I have a ways to go to catch up to Dirda at 16.

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## **Linda says**

"A love story, full of a passion for literature and marked by intellectual vigor."—Bernadette Murphy, Los Angeles Times (Review from Amazon.)

"All that kid wants to do is stick his nose in a book," Michael Dirda's steelworker father used to complain, worried about his son's passion for reading. In *An Open Book*, one of the most delightful memoirs to emerge in years, the acclaimed literary journalist Michael Dirda re-creates his boyhood in rust-belt Ohio, first in the working-class town of Lorain, then at Oberlin College. In addition to his colorful family and friends, *An Open Book* also features the great writers and fictional characters who fueled Dirda's imagination: from Green Lantern to Sherlock Holmes, from Candy to Proust. The result is an affectionate homage to small-town America—summer jobs, school fights, sweepstakes contests, and first dates—as well as a paean to what could arguably be called the last great age of reading.

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