

## Book Reviews

Mary Beard and John Henderson. *Classics: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Pp. 136. Paper. \$11.99.

*Classics: A Very Short Introduction* offers a unique analysis of Greco-Roman cultural influence on Western society. Mary Beard and John Henderson employ a style that differs from traditional textbooks in order to appeal to a wider audience, yet still encourages students to think critically about how to examine ancient art and literature. The authors reference museum exhibits and even an ancient “travel book” to enumerate the intricacies associated with the field of Classics. As the title of the book suggests, Beard and Henderson condense the study of Classics into ten short chapters. Topics include modern archaeology, architecture, romanticism, slavery, Greek philosophy, and the Roman Empire. While none of these subjects is discussed at length, their relevance to classical study is clear.

Readers first learn the history of a frieze, a decorative sculpture at the top of an interior wall, which was “discovered” by a team of nineteenth-century European explorers at the temple of Apollo at Bassae. The authors focus on how Classics shaped the group’s choice of Bassae as a destination, as well as the aftermath of their “discovery” of the frieze. The explorers chose this temple based on a reference in a classical text indicating that Iktinos, the architect of the Parthenon, designed it. Beard and Henderson use similar anecdotes throughout the text to demonstrate the influence of Classics. Readers also learn that documents such as anthropological studies that pre-date the expedition to Bassae, psychological theories, and even Shakespearean poetry, have been shaped in some way by classical sources. Beard and Henderson also point out that the way Classics is interpreted is a dynamic exercise. For example, a poem written for a second century Roman or Greek audience appealed to their sensibilities and social standards at the time. This does not, however, diminish the meaning that a twenty-first century historian may take away from the poem. Beard and Henderson contend that even though time and readers of classical texts may change, the subject material is still relevant.

The authors succeed in educating readers about the role that Classics plays in modern Western tradition. Many of the details regarding more

specific contributions of Greek and Roman society, however, are not addressed. This is due, in part, to the length of the book itself, but also the structure chosen by the authors. Beard and Henderson aim to provide a brief glimpse into the complex world of Classics. The text is not meant to serve as a definitive reference on the subject. It is intended for students to use as a supplemental resource in an introductory course on antiquity, or for non-historians to familiarize themselves with Classics. The authors offer a fascinating introduction into the discovery, reconstruction and final analysis of classical materials; more importantly though, they promote critical thinking about examining ancient art and literature.

*James Spicer*

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Barbara Demick. *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*. New York: Spiegel & Grau 2009. Pp. 336. Paper \$16.00.

In *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* Barbara Demick vividly tells the life stories of six North Koreans who defected in the past ten years. The men and women chronicled in this fascinating book are from varied backgrounds struggling under the rigid communist regime. Though not a historian by trade, Demick offers a thorough discussion of North Korea's history and subsequent development since the end of World War II. Using information collected during oral interviews, Demick presents detailed accounts of how ordinary North Koreans endured various disasters, both natural and manmade. From the downfall of the USSR in the late 1980s to the crop failures in the early 1990s, North Koreans fought to survive day-to-day, while many desperately wanted to believe the propaganda bulletins distributed by their government.

As the bureau chief for *The Los Angeles Times* in South Korea, Demick has visited North Korea twice in the past fifteen years. Using the information obtained during these visits and as a reporter in the region, she paints a poignant, yet disheartening picture of this small third-world country that is surrounded by some of the strongest economies of our time. Demick's focus, however, is the life stories of six North Korean defectors. These individuals come from all walks of life and have rather surprising backgrounds. Mi Ran is the daughter of a South Korean POW who never returned to his country and was forced to work as a miner. Jun-Sang, a university student, is the son of a Japanese pro-communist