



Literary Genius: 25 Classic Writers Who Define English & American Literature

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Our finest essayists discuss six centuries of literary genius.

"Genius is one of those words upon which the world has agreed to form no clear consensus," Joseph Epstein tells us in his introduction. How then shall we define "literary genius"? In this collection, twenty-five contemporary authors endeavor to answer that question by considering twenty-five classic writers and their enduring works.

We learn that, more important than mere originality or creativity, it is the ability to make us experience the world in new ways that sets these writers apart. "My task," Joseph Conrad wrote, "is by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is above all to make you see. That—and no more, and it is everything."

Wood-engraved portraits and illustrations by renowned artist Barry Moser accompany each essay.

Contents:

1. Tom Shippey on Geoffrey Chaucer
2. Lois Potter on William Shakespeare
3. Reynolds Price on John Milton
4. Anthony Hecht on Alexander Pope
5. David Bromwich on Samuel Johnson
6. David Womersley on Edward Gibbon
7. Dan Jacobson on William Wordsworth
8. Hilary Mantel on Jane Austen
9. Frederick Raphael on William Hazlitt
10. Evan Boland on John Keats
11. Daniel Mark Epstein on Nathaniel Hawthorne
12. A. N. Wilson on Charles Dickens
13. Justin Kaplan on Walt Whitman
14. William Pritchard on Herman Melville
15. Paula Marantz Cohen on George Eliot
16. Bruce Floyd on Emily Dickinson
17. David Carkeet on Mark Twain
18. Joseph Epstein on Henry James
19. Elizabeth Lowry on Joseph Conrad
20. Stephen Cox on Willa Cather
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23. John Gross on James Joyce
24. John Simon on T.S. Eliot
25. James L. W. West III on Ernest Hemingway

Joseph Epstein, from his introduction: "Literary genius comes in many varieties. Some literary geniuses

seem natural (Charles Dickens, Mark Twain), others cultivated (George Eliot, Henry James). Some are prolific (Wordsworth, Whitman), some are more carefully concentrated (Jane Austen, T. S. Eliot). Some literary geniuses are stimulated by the difficult (Alexander Pope, John Milton). Some require absolute originality — entailing the need to invent their own style — to convey their vision (James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway). Some have perfected a form (Pope, the heroic couplet), some have tried to kill off a genre (Joyce, the novel). Not some but all literary geniuses can be read again and again, down through the generations. As Hilary Mantel, in her essay on Jane Austen, writes: 'Surely this is the definition of genius in a writer: the capacity to make a text that can give and give, a text that is never fully read, a text that goes on multiplying meanings.' Timelessness this is called, and it is another of the hallmarks of literary genius."

Joseph Epstein is the author of nineteen books, most recently *In a Cardboard Belt!: Essays Personal, Literary, and Savage*. For more than twenty years he was editor of *The American Scholar*. A contributor to *The New Yorker*, *Commentary*, *The Atlantic*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, and other magazines, he also taught for many years in the English Department at Northwestern University.

Barry Moser is an illustrator, author, and designer whose work appears in museums and libraries around the world. He has published nearly three hundred titles, including Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which won the American Book Award in 1983. In 1991 he won the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for his collaboration with Cynthia Rylant, *Appalachia: The Voices of Sleeping Birds*. A member of the National Academy of Design, he has served on the faculty of Rhode Island School of Design and is currently on the faculty of Smith College.

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