FOREWORD

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B-SIDE BOOKS is a book of books. It features writers writing about rare, forgotten, and unsung works that changed their lives and could change yours.

A guide for anyone who has ever found themselves perplexed about what to select in a library or bookstore, *B-Side Books* is an atlas for novice explorers, picky readers, contrarians drawn to what other people *aren't* reading, and epicures who seek to go beyond this year's most notable books.

The essays collected here proffer delightfully unusual suggestions about *what* to read. More importantly, they also model *how* to read. In the spirit of *Public Books*, *B-Side Books* provides the distinctive savor and savvy that come from blending expertise with pleasure, rigor with enthusiasm, and scholarship with appreciation.

Caitlin Zaloom and I launched *Public Books* in 2012 as an online magazine designed to bring specialized knowledge to a

FOREWORD

general public. Initially, we focused on covering newly released works. After a few years, we sought a way to highlight great books of older vintage, books with tiny or nonexistent reputations that deserved more attention. In keeping with our magazine's title, which celebrates analog print culture in the digital era, we called these essays "B-Sides," after the obscure tracks that used to appear on the opposite sides of hit singles released as 45-rpm records.

Under the expert guidance of series editor John Plotz, "B-Sides" became a paean to unsung, underrecognized genius. I teach literature for a living and make a point of seeking out obscure writers, yet I had heard of few and read almost none of these minor masterpieces until encountering them in these essays.

B-Side books are not always easy to love at first sight. Unlike classics, they do not come to us enveloped in the glamor of the *déjà lu*, the always-already-read books that have for decades been taught, adapted, and turned into cultural touchstones. It is easier to appreciate *Jane Eyre* knowing—as most readers today do—that a "madwoman in the attic" haunts its pages or to tackle *Ulysses* informed that it updates an ancient Greek epic or to approach *The Bluest Eye* cognizant that its title evokes racist beauty standards. Understanding paves the way for enjoyment.

But whereas classics come to us cooked, B-Side books come to us raw. The essays in this collection prepare unfamiliar

works for consumption by marshalling the knowledge and devotion that allows for a new kind of appreciation. These essays combine, in perfect proportions, the obsessiveness of the scholar, the discernment of the critic, and the effusiveness of the fan. And in so doing, they demonstrate some of the best ways to read.

First, the contributors to this volume, by deploying their formidable knowledge, make unfamiliar works less strange by placing them in context. Some of our essayists situate their chosen texts historically, as when Lauren Kaminsky and Steven Biel help us understand what makes *The Forbidden Zone* an even more brilliant representation of modern warfare than better-known books about World War I by Erich Marie Remarque and Ernest Hemingway. Stephanie Burt draws on her impressive grasp of all kinds of poetry to help us hear what Patience Agbabi has in common with both the Victorian poet Algernon Swinburne and present-day rap artists. Other contributors link little-known works to well-known genres, such as dystopian sci-fi, the fable, the coming-of-age story, and Central European political novels about disillusionment (are there any other kind?). Still others show how minor masterpieces generate their own categories: “nice art” (Andrew Miller on Joe Brainard); the revisionist anti-western (John Plotz on John Williams); middle-class vacations gone bad (Margaret Cohen on Erskine Childress); the literature of parental insomnia (Leah Price on Celia Fremlin); and espionage novels that equate spies with ghosts (Penny Fielding on Graham Greene).

Next, by attending to craft, these essays teach us to identify and revel in the grain of an author’s voice, the lilt of their

FOREWORD

sentences, the glint of their observations. Stephen McCauley, a fiction writer and teacher of creative writing, shows how Christopher Isherwood compresses a wealth of information about not one but two characters into the brief dialogue tag “growled crossly.” Emily Hyde shows how “parataxis”—the practice of piling up words and phrases with no coordination—perfectly expresses the “jumpy, unhinged” rhythm of postcolonial life in Dennis Williams’s *Other Leopards*. Carlo Rotella identifies how Charles Portis’s *Gringos* mixes “dire grandiosity” with “easygoing self-deprecation,” showing us how to understand *and* enjoy this little-read novel.

Finally, as enthusiastic fans, this volume’s authors attend to their own reading experiences. They tell us how they discovered books that delighted them, provoked them, and changed them and how their love for these books has evolved since those first encounters. Kathryn Lofton offers a wry but moving assessment of her early reading of Edith Hamilton’s *Mythology*, which set her on a path to becoming a queer scholar of religion. Adrienne Brown writes of encountering underrepresented experiences of modernity in Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Love makes these writers better critics, set on distilling what their favorite texts can teach us. Sylvia Townsend Warner’s *Lolly Willows* shows us that domesticity can be wild and revolutionary; Dambudzo Marechera’s *The House of Hunger*, “how certain lives get designated as disposable”; William Hope Hodgson’s *The House on the Borderland*, “just how uneasily we sit within the endless spinning of time.”

The contributors to *B-Side Books* help us love what they love by sharing their knowledge and their passion. The catchphrase “everyone’s a critic” usually evokes how depressingly easy it is to be a killjoy, to find reasons not to like things, to make anything look bad. The contributors to this volume give this old saying a magical new spin: they make everyone a critic capable of seeing what is great and lovely and instructive in obscure books that might otherwise have eluded our grasp.