



A Company of Readers: Uncollected Writings of W. H. Auden, Jacques Barzun, and Lionel Trilling from The Reader's Subscription and Mid-Century Book Clubs

Arthur Krystal

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In 1951, Jacques Barzun, W. H. Auden, and Lionel Trilling joined together to form the editorial board of the Readers' Subscription Book Club. Thus began a venture unique in the annals of American culture. Never before or since have three such eminent intellectuals collaborated to bring books to the attention of the general public.

Now, a half century later, *A Company of Readers* tells the story of this extraordinary partnership and presents for the first time a selection of essays from the publications of the Readers' Subscription Book Club and its successor, the Mid-Century Book Society.

As they composed their comments to club members, these distinguished editors freely shared with each other their notes and drafts. The result is criticism of the highest order: smart, humane, learned -- in short, stuff that makes for damn good reading. And because these pieces were written for the general public by men who knew that books still mattered, perhaps no other collection of essays gives so natural and vivid a picture of the cultural landscape at midcentury.

Together, Auden, Barzun, and Trilling would plunge into a pile of books and pick out what they liked, what they thought would instruct and delight. What they chose may surprise you. Here is Auden on J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Barzun on Virginia Woolf's *Writer's Diary*, and Trilling on Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*. Each book, whether weighty or light, summoned from the editors a spirited appraisal, in language that welcomed any kind of reader.

The Mid-Century club disbanded in 1963, but its legacy lives on in these pages. *A Company of Readers* is essential to admirers of this illustrious trio, and it offers a window on an America in which books took center stage.

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