The New Oxford Book of Literary Anecdotes

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Main content

Article Preview:

THE NEW OXFORD BOOK OF LITERARY ANECDOTES edited by John Gross


The appeal and success of an anthology ultimately depend upon the judgment and experience of the editor. The New Oxford Book of Literary Anecdotes is edited by John Gross, whose career as a writer, journalist, reviewer, and editor include stints at the Times Literary Supplement, New York Times, and Sunday Telegraph, as well as editor of previous Oxford anthologies of Aphorisms, Essays, Comic Verse, and English Prose over a fifteen-year span.

In his introduction, he defines the anecdote, according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, as "a..."

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This book starts with Chaucer assaulting a friar in Fleet Street and ends with JK Rowling winning a high court injunction. The latter is less an anecdote (defined by Dr Johnson as "something yet unpublished; secret history") than an item from the Telegraph, which only highlights John Gross's dilemma. To update the old-fashioned literary anecdote he has had to broaden his criteria to include "anecdotal material". Often the modern authors (McEwan, Amis, Winterson) have penned the anecdote themselves, presumably because libel laws prevented anything meatier. There's Items related to The Oxford Book of Literary Anecdotes. The Oxford Book of Literary Anecdotes.

An unrivalled collection of literary gossip and intimate sidelights on the lives of the authors. The dictionary defines an anecdote as 'a short account of an entertaining or interesting incident', and the anecdotes in this collection more than live up to that description. Many of them are funny, often explosively so. Others are touching, outrageous, sinister, inspiring, or downright weird. They show writers in the English-speaking world from Chaucer to the present acting both unpredictably, and deeply in character. The range is wide - this is a book which finds room for M