

## Lightning Reviews.

By Paul Devlin

1. *The Look of Architecture* by Witold Rybczynski. (Oxford University Press, 2001). Rybczynski is the author of many books on technology and design and is a popularizer of architecture. He is Professor of Urbanism at the University of Pennsylvania. This book was originally a lecture at the New York Public Library. His major argument is that architectural style is a result of the fashions of the time more than it is functional. He makes his points well, and is convincing. This is a fun, breezy read and very informative. (Maybe even a tad bit too long.) Many pictures. Good for a 2-hour car, plane, or train ride.

my score (on a scale of 1-10): **9.0**

worth checking out from library?: sure.

worth buying? yeah, why not, it's only \$9.95, plus he talks about a lot of NYC buildings which we can walk up to and look at should we so desire.

2. *Benjamin Franklin* by Edmund Morgan. (Yale University Press, 2002). Morgan is an eminent scholar of colonial American history, and editor of Franklin's papers. This a fast read, a sort of "introduction" to Franklin. Morgan is a talented writer who draws a very complex portrait of Franklin. In the middle there's a section about the Albany Convention of 1754 that gets bogged down, but the chapters about Franklin's life in Paris as American ambassador during the Revolution are captivating, dramatic and taught me a great deal. I did feel like I was left wanting to know just a bit more about his scientific achievements, which are touched on mostly in the beginning. Morgan also brings up Franklin's anti-slavery satire. Overall, a fine tribute to the great man by a learned scholar.

my score: **9.5**

worth checking out from library? essential to be checked out from library.

worth buying?: yes.

3. *The Cambridge Companion to Cervantes* edited by Anthony J. Cascardi (Cambridge University Press, 2002). As a casual reader of *Don Quixote* I find this useful. I'm no Cervantes expert nor do I have any ambition to be. The ten essays collected in this book are fine literary history, and read as such. *Cervantes and the Italian Renaissance* by Frederick de Armas of the University of Chicago taught me a great deal of good background information. *Don Quixote and the Invention of the Novel* by Anthony Cascardi (UC Berkeley) is also a great read. The most surprising essay in here (for me) was *Writings for the Stage* by Melveena McKendrick (Cambridge). Here I learned that Cervantes was an accomplished playwright, and his Siege of Numantia was admired by Goethe, Schopenhauer, and Shelley.

my score: **10**

worth checking out from library?: yes.

worth buying? only if you really like Cervantes and want to know more about him.

4. *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture Between the World Wars* by Joel Dinerstein. (University of Massachusetts Press, 2003). Dinerstein (Ithaca College) meant well and didn't do too bad a job in this ambitious and sustained analysis of jazz and dance in relation to the growth and expansion of technology in America, but at the same time I felt like he was stretching and simplifying all over the place. His scope is vast, at times too vast. I especially felt his "techno-dialogic from John Henry to Duke Ellington" was a bad mishandling of Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of dialogism. His overall point, that black American culture adapted to technology and that this is a positive thing, is well taken. He also gives Albert Murray credit for getting him started on a lot of this. I really wanted to like this book, but I kept wanting to call or

email the guy to argue with him, so I didn't enjoy it as much as I thought I would. But it's OK, I guess. It could've been infinitely worse.

my score: **7.0**

worth checking out from the library?: sure, why not. it is well-researched.

worthy buying?: nah, not really. eh, *maybe*. who knows.

5. *A Free Nation Deep in Debt: The Financial Roots of Democracy*. by James MacDonald. (FSG, 2003) I picked up this book after reading the eminent Gordon Wood's *glowing* review of it in *The New York Review of Books* back in June. MacDonald is a retired investment banker, and this is his first book. And what a book it is! My goodness, it was so well-argued and informative that it's tough to disagree. And I'm thankful for the painstaking research that went into this thing. Read Wood's review of it, then read it. His basic argument is that democracy is based on the idea of the "citizen creditor", and World War II was the swan song of the citizen creditor. He gives a complicated history of public debt from Biblical times to today.

my score: **10**

worth checking out from the library: rush over to a library right now.

worth buying: no home should be without one.

6. *Picture Window* by John Hollander (Knopf, 2003). This entertaining and philosophically engaging new collection by the great poet Hollander (who was interviewed in the second issue of this magazine) is his first volume of poetry in nearly ten years, and it has been well worth the wait. In this volume you will be shocked to learn that "metaphoron" means "moving van" in Modern Greek, and that this connects with Emerson's transitive theory of language. We also learn that "something close to entropy prevails", as "Time's Islam" brings down a ruined tower. I cannot do this volume justice in this small space, but all I can say is I've read it many times and enjoyed it. Don't believe the inane review in *The New York Times*.

my score: **10**

worth checking out from library? of course.

worth buying? yes and no, yes, if you own some of his other books, but no if you don't yet have *Reflections on Espionage* or *Selected Poems*.