Books

Book Review: "Scribble, Scribble, Scribble"

Writing on Politics, Ice Cream, Churchill, and My Mother. By Simon Schama (Ecco).

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Simon Schama discusses J. M. W. Turner's 1840 painting "Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On" (detail) in his essay "Turner and the Drama of History." (Burstein Collection / Corbis)

To listen to Simon Schama, or to read him, is to be exposed to gushing torrents of prose, prodigious and ecumenical scholarship, and the avidity of an enthusiast. Schama is University Professor and the author of at least 15 books, treating topics as various as Rembrandt, the transatlantic slave trade, and the French Revolution. As an award-winning writer-presenter of television documentaries, he has ranged across art, literature, and history.

In *Scribble, Scribble, Scribble: Writing on Politics, Ice Cream, Churchill, and My Mother*, Schama reveals himself as a dedicated foodie, a film buff, a critical observer of American politics, and a connoisseur of what he calls “gothic language.” Arranged by topic and including essays, reviews, reportage, lectures, and theater program notes, the book serves as a fitting aperitif to his more substantial works.

My own first encounter with Schama was a happy accident. I had driven to the Free Library of Philadelphia this April to hear the filmmaker John Sayles, but when I waltzed into the auditorium, just as the ticket takers had dispersed, Schama was being introduced — and I realized I had mixed up the dates.

My disappointment abated almost immediately. Reading from *Scribble, Scribble, Scribble*, Schama plunged into the lushly descriptive “Cool as Ice,” from *Vogue*, evoking in besotted language what he called “the delirium of ice cream.” He extolled the art of the essay and such practitioners as George Orwell, disdainfully dismissing the less-studied utterances of today’s bloggers. And he expressed his partiality for “extreme American writing,” citing as favorites Melville, Fitzgerald, Faulkner (of course), early Mailer (*The Naked and the Dead*), Whitman, Lowell, Frost, and Joseph Heller, who had been a friend. Overall, it was a pyrotechnical performance — learned, forthright, intentionally excessive.

So by the time I picked up the new book, I was not entirely an innocent. The intense verbal energy, fondness for digression, and breathtaking syntactical feats that characterize a Schama talk all mirror his prose. Here, for instance, is full-on Schama in “Virtual Annihilation: Anti-Semitism on the Web,” describing the failure of 19th-century culture to banish the superstitions of the past:

> From the outset, of course, the machinery of sensationalist stupefaction — the dioramas, and panoramas, the Eidophusikon — was the natural handmaid of the sublime and the terrible. As Victorian Britain became more colonised by industry, so its public became greedier for spectacles of disaster, brought to them as

> visceral entertainment: the simulacra of Vesuvian eruptions; the collapse of the Tay Bridge; an avalanche in the Simplon. More ominously, the paradox of a modernist technology co-opted to attack modernism became, in the hands of its most adroit practitioners, no longer so paradoxical.

The vocabulary is difficult, the references arcane, the phrasing musical, the argument complex. It may take more than a single reading to parse it. From this passage, Schama moves, in brilliant spurts, to D. W. Griffith, Leni Riefenstahl, and, finally, the topic at hand: the spread of anti-Semitic propaganda on the Web.

It is Schama's saving grace as a writer and a polemicist that he is aware of his own self-indulgences. In a vivid essay on the seminars of the English historian J. H. Plumb, one of his teachers at Cambridge, he affects a third-person detachment: "Schama, as usual, depended overmuch on adjectival overload and overwrought atmospherics to conceal the shakiness of his hypotheses." He adds, parenthetically, as though to inoculate himself against a critical scolding: "Plus ça change."

The glory of rhetorical excess is precisely the subject of a 2008 London Library Lecture titled "Gothic Language: Carlyle, Ruskin, and the Morality of Exuberance." Ruskin, an admirer of the artist J. M. W. Turner, "writes exactly as he supposes Turner must paint; with a kind of gorgeously incontinent abandon," Schama tells us. Thus, Ruskin's commentary on a Turner seascape involves "the impassioned conductor controlling the orchestra of alliteration, assonance, allusion, sudden metaphor, the words and the water they describe rolling over each other." To borrow a Schama metaphor, we are in a world of Chinese boxes, with the divide between subject and writer continually collapsing.

Schama describes *Scribble, Scribble, Scribble* as "a salmagundi — a thing of various tastes and textures." Many of the shortest, most direct pieces were written for the *Guardian*. These include Schama's pointed, if unsurprising, takes on post-9/11 and post-Katrina America, in which his admiration for the generosity of the populace butts up against his anger at governmental missteps.

In the territory of art history, Schama is especially sure-footed. He ably defends the spirituality and profundity of the 17th-century Dutch masters from Ruskin and other antagonists: "What seems to be the most straightforward visual culture turns out to be a Chinese puzzle; an endless enquiry into the observation and representation of seen things and people." His paeans to the contemporary German painter Anselm

Kiefer stir admiration for Kiefer's achievements as both a formal innovator and a commentator on the crimes of Nazi Germany. And in a *New Yorker* piece titled "Rembrandt's Ghost," Schama provocatively traces Picasso's debt to the 17th-century portraitist. "It was," he writes, "an unlikely pairing — the cerebral modernist who had made a point of expelling sentiment from painting going wistful over the master whose every brush mark was loaded with emotion."

Readers perusing the collection, which also embraces appreciations of Martin Scorsese, Charlotte Rampling, Winston Churchill, Washington, D.C., and spaghetti Bolognese, will no doubt find personal favorites. Mine, titled "TBM and John," is Schama's tribute to both historian John Clive and the idea of biography as an intimate communion between subject and biographer. Thanks to Schama, I now know that Clive, my British-history professor at Harvard, was born Hans Kleyff, a Berlin Jew, and fled with his family to England before the Holocaust.

Schama's description of his first meeting with Clive, who would become a close friend, is particularly engaging. Expecting Clive, from his famous biography, *Macauley: The Shaping of the Historian*, to be "an understated, impeccably turned-out Harvard professor" with a sense of humor that was "gentle and loftily Jamesian," Schama was bowled over by their first encounter:

> John knocked (or rather pounded) on the doors of my rooms . . . , tripped over the door-sill and fell spread-eagled on my couch. After we had exchanged flustered apologies, it took about five minutes and a cup of tea (which John drank as if it were a famous vintage, enquiring after brand, store of origin, length of brew) for me to see how spectacularly wrong I had been. . . . His speech moved from embarrassed stammering to flights of eloquence, the sentences broken with puns and rhymes and even snatches of song performed with exaggerated operatic trills. . . . At the delicious prospect of routing a common enemy, he would smack a fist into his palm with boyish exultation.
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> This is almost — not quite — better than actually being there.

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