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# REVIEWS

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Stephen D. Dowden, ed. *A Companion to Thomas Mann's Magic Mountain*. Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1999. 250p.

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The new Camden House anthology of essays on *The Magic Mountain* is full of valuable insights on Mann's novel, carefully compiled with Stephen D. Dowden's cognizance that the critical attitude toward Mann has reached a turning point. As Dowden points out, Mann was revered in the Western world from the 1920s through the Cold War as the champion of liberal democracy, but since the fall of the Berlin wall the urgency of this cause has waned and with it the veneration for Mann. In addition, revelations about his homosexual leanings and residual anti-Semitism, gleaned from his diaries, have dimmed public regard for him. Nor did Mann ever achieve the reputation of stylistic innovator of other modernists like Joyce or Proust. What, then, continues to propel our interest in this author? Given our now deeper and more complex understanding of him as a human being, what critical approaches might enhance our appreciation of his work today?

The purpose of the volume is to find fresh ways to address the rich and varied themes in *The Magic Mountain*, and the overall success of the collection pays tribute not just to the perceptiveness of the contributors, but also to the inexhaustible depth of the novel. Several of the subjects are familiar and the observations about them not entirely new, although the essays contain sparkling insights along the way. We read in Ülker Gökberk's essay about the interweaving of Mann's attitude toward war and Germany in his *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* and *The Magic Mountain*, a topic Gökberk develops in a new way by comparing Mann's with Adorno's dialectical perspective. David Blumberg insightfully reiterates the omnipresence of music in the novel, and Stephen C. Meredith analyzes the theme of illness with a perceptive eye toward Mann's well known association of disease with both criminality and creativity. In his reading of Mann's irony, Eugene Goodheart reminds us that *The Magic Mountain*, despite its grave themes, retains a comic distance from its subject matter that marks Mann as "the ironic master of extreme situations" (51). While it is quite comprehensive in its coverage, the collection mercifully omits an essay on the overworked and somewhat faddish topic

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of Mann's homosexuality, but curiously leaves out a discussion of the ever fascinating issue of Mann's women, notably Clavdia Chauchat.

A number of the essays break new ground. In keeping with the current critical interest in race and anti-Semitism, Michael Brenner offers an unusually insightful analysis of Mann's complex attitudes toward various kinds of Jews. Like his contemporaries, the author distinguished German Jews, whom he described disparagingly, particularly those unassimilated into German culture, from the genuine Oriental Hebrew of the Bible and his own *Joseph and His Brothers*, a hierarchy that allowed Mann to ignore the serious threat of German anti-Semitism "to Jewish existence" (147). Karla Schultz's essay on the role of the X-ray in *The Magic Mountain* offers a fascinating discussion of the attraction and magical danger of the many technological inventions mentioned in the novel. The stand-out essay in the collection may be Kenneth Weisinger's brilliant analysis of Mann's wide-ranging geographical references in relation to the politics of the oil trade. Covering the relations between Russia and France, Germany and England, and Germany and Turkey in the context of *The Magic Mountain's* theme of colonialism, Weisinger points beyond the particular politics of oil to the dangerous temptation for Germans of falling in love with foreign products.

Why does *The Magic Mountain* continue to fascinate readers and generate inspired discussions like the ones in this volume? Perhaps we should not worry so much about Mann's place in the modernist canon or whether his conflicted sexuality, latent anti-Semitism, and dated politics interfere with our reading of his masterpieces. Mann called himself a humanist, and his themes, while embedded in the issues of the times, are also deep probings of perennial human conflicts and concerns. In his own fine essay on Mann's ethical style, Dowden makes the cogent point that Mann, despite his bourgeois identity, was just as "subversive" a modernist as his contemporaries. Yet Dowden significantly concludes the volume with a reprint of Susan Sontag's moving memoir of her meeting with the author in Los Angeles after reading his *The Magic Mountain* in 1947. The fascination of a teenager for Mann's masterpiece serves as a reminder of the deeply human interest in Mann that transcends time and place and even a literary movement, modernism. The essays in *A Companion to Thomas Mann's Magic Mountain* address issues of Mann's day, but in the process, because Mann is such a profound author, also evoke Mann's deep understanding of human life. Sontag's contribution placed at the end ties together the humanist spirit of the volume as a whole. ✨