Saikat Majumdar. *The Amateur: Self-Making and the Humanities in the Postcolony*. Bloomsbury 2024. 232 pp. $80.00 USD (Hardcover 9781501399862); $24.95 USD (Paperback 9781501399879).

The philosophy of literature intersects markedly with literary criticism. We need not fear that that intersection subtracts from the robustness of philosophy of literature, as though it has no right in itself. Similarly does the philosophy of psychology intersect widely with philosophy of mind, and the philosophy of language blends into linguistics. In these two cases a branch of philosophy overlaps with a human science. In the literature example, the philosophy branch is the philosophy of literature, and the human science is literary criticism. (Some may object that literary criticism is not quite a social science but falls under humanities; however, that quibble makes little difference in this review's outlook.)

The main theme—if you can so narrow down this academically dazzling work—maintains that "amateur" readers have contributed invaluably to our understanding of world literatures. Surely, that theme itself is not unique. Author Saikat Majumdar has published an earlier, edited book on the related subject, *The Critic as Amateur* (2019), not to overlook his articles and presentations as well. You may say the new volume is the inverse of this earlier one: The focus shifts from critic in *The Critic* to the amateur reader in *The Amateur*. As to the former volume, surprisingly, who would dare think there is anything amateurish about critics? Critics, retaining their territory and pride in their field, may notoriously defend their position within the human sciences. To rephrase less delicately: Criticism huffs a waft of self-importance and conceit. But serious critics seem to cherish their work so much as to stick to their rhythm and spread their ingenious and ingenuous enthusiasm. That earlier volume anticipates what critics may learn from readers who fall outside the collegian profile. And yet—there are plenty readers who don't fall into line with the standard literary pull, even to the point of disdain for the classroom, and prefer the self-chosen cubbyhole. Once these readers cherish and nurture a number of works—those that such readers happen upon outside the school—they often pay their society back for the kindness by enlightening them, expanding their taste. Hence have such gems as V.S. Naipaul or Jamaica Kincaid or other authors been discovered in the global scene. Some of these initially amateur readers may become the next line of critics, even in a hybrid of amateur and professional. Here Majumdar takes an inventive leap by moving past the mere survey and into the authors' lives. Some thinkers deplore references to authors' opinions, tastes, personal experience. These reputedly are fallbacks and offer little insight

in interpreting texts. Yet Majumdar's method is not to revert to authors in this manner. Rather it is done for the sake of showing the sizable global spread of amateur readers.

Majumdar reaches beyond standard literary-historic approaches that primarily weigh lists of authors' works in specified historical periods. Inventive for Majumdar's type of survey is moving beyond mere objective survey and into the authors' lives. Their lives become part of the narrative—appropriately so; because it is the individual's uniquely exploratory endeavour that creates the amateur's discoveries. Some cases may demand moving beyond the notion of canon. The root of "amateur" means 'lover." Often this term is used disdainfully as "mere lover," say of opera or Shakespeare. Contrast the professional, who has a "vocation" or calling, which implicitly lies past one's control. Yet the amateur, yes, a "mere" lover, may inject a refreshing newness into reading the works, leaving the individual a wide range of the world at one's feet—or in one's easy chair, if one prefers. The individual establishes one's own canon, not of mere taste but of love and depth; it need not impinge upon others. Thus, the seeming openness for these genera of readers. Majumdar, with little fanfare, may have best phrased this book's ongoing theme of the amateur vs. the critic, in present or history's past, as follows:

> Literature… constitutes reality differently from the social sciences, even if their respective realities overlap considerably, the peculiar role played by personal, often idiosyncratic imagination in the reality constructed by literature makes it as rich with the promise of empathy as it makes it vulnerable to hegemonic ideologies such as that of colonialism in ineffable and invisible ways (19).

So far, I've regarded the book's title; next, the subtitle on "the Postcolony." Who, then, are these new amateur readers across the world? Majumdar covers three broad, major, and nondefinitive regions: The Caribbean, Africa, and South Asia. These are all sites marked by colonialist exploitation, both past and persisting. It would not be surprising if many a postcolonial reader, especially an artistically sensitive student, would be downright bored by studies of Western authors such as Washington Irving, Lousia May Alcott, John Galsworthy, George Eliot, or Henry James, even if many a Western literature professor appreciate them. Many students, especially beginners in serious literature, may need a degree of "relating" to an author or text. A story set in a river mill with characters speaking a nearly incomprehensible dialect of English as dry as walnut shells and a teacher reading aloud with affected enunciation strikes many an ear as just plain silly. But a story about a clandestine, religious, struggling, war-torn village—especially if the student has

encountered a civil war infiltrating into a society—may draw lively student attention. The literature germinating in such a climate may even offer new challenges in philosophy of literature still at large.

Majumdar provides numerous examples of students catching on eagerly to entirely new kinds of storytelling. What sorts of new aesthetic standards arise? Can we use new standards to aid an amateur student in find workable understandings of works? Perhaps most important: must we even seek to establish aesthetic standards that cut across borderlines and classes? Do we then foster changes of foci from the community and back to the individual? Granted that opening more of the (literary) world could call for shifting literary emphases, environments, and media away from universalizing. Hence comes the prospect of reinventing the individual reader while maintaining another, new personal individualism, if such is viable and consistent. These can be the inchoate formations of individualized tastes. The foundation, from this angle, could be set for new social activism.

What then is this postcolonialism that is supposedly poised to attract a new kind of reader? There are some district traits and themes in the literature. One is a sense not merely of ongoing sociopolitical oppression but also, somehow, by some twisted force, the colonialism drives onward, even if that "colonial" word is not used. Many of the peoples oppressed may not know the concept but deeply sense the aftereffects for decades. Another postcolonial trait is profound religious roots in individuals and societies. Majumdar offers the example of the boy who cuddles up in bed at night reading "the Word"—the Bible—to the point of memorizing it. Not only do the biblical histories fascinate, but the Hebrew laws offer hope of structure in his life.

Another postcolonial trait Majumdar evinces is the struggle—of authors-to-be or of nascent writers—with language choice: whether the native or the oppressive? Very common is the option favoring the oppressor. This matter is both political/controversial and hard to pin down and explain. The very existence of West Africa as "francophone" and the Indian subcontinent as "anglophonic" is already colonialist thinking. Why not "xhosa-phonic" for a region of Africa or "assamese-phonic" in North India? Evidently, using the wider-spread languages in these expressions reflects, even unwillingly, the centuries of colonialism in those areas. Yet—these authors and readers often seek to be better integrated into their own, evolving contemporary lives, where they hope to be assimilated to at least moderate degrees, despite the remnants of colonialism strewn across their countryside. Literacy reflects social status. The language fight continues.

Majumdar does not quite bring this matter of author language to center stage, but it often shows in this work. Further postcolonial traits include— perhaps most significant in *Amateur*—the connection between amateurism and autodidacticism. Amateur readers are often self-taught. Their self-teaching may prove to be on a consistent track, headed somewhere. But such a quality may not only be rational and productive but also exploratory and leisurely. It's creative wandering. This aimlessness can lead to discovery, as Russell brought to fore in his *In Parise of Idleness*: autodidactic ↔ amateur, traits often coupled.

One reader Majumdar profiles, C.I.R. James, scavenged well, from the odd assortments in his vicinity: appropriately William Makepeace Thackery's 37 works. These became a cherished denizen of his modest library and remained revered for a lifetime of writing. Surprises welcome us in the backcountry—but also in the gray urban world—of Africa, Caribbean, and South Asia.

This exceedingly well-researched book merits the attention of readers interested in the philosophy of literature and in literary criticism as a phenomenon in its own right. Particularly crucial is the area where the postcolony meets the amateur reader—the socially *active* amateur. This very approachable monograph reads like a good novel—the sort where, by the ending, a reader wants more.

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