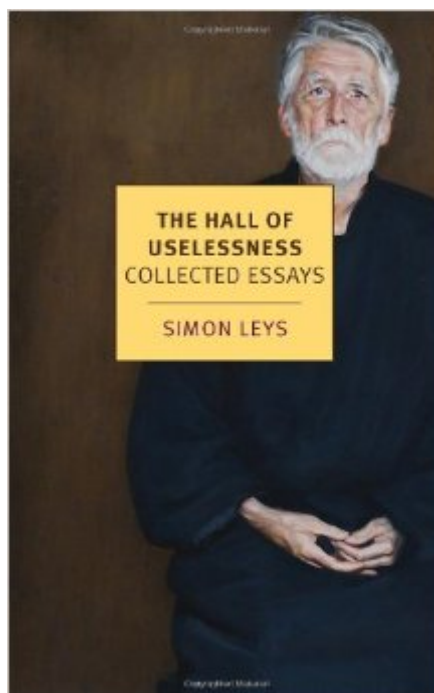


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The Hall Of Uselessness: Collected Essays (New York Review Books Classics)



Synopsis

An NYRB Classics Original Simon Leys is a Renaissance man for the era of globalization. A distinguished scholar of classical Chinese art and literature and one of the first Westerners to recognize the appalling toll of Mao's Cultural Revolution, Leys also writes with unfailing intelligence, seriousness, and bite about European art, literature, history, and politics and is an unflinching observer of the way we live now. *The Hall of Uselessness* is the most extensive collection of Leys's essays to be published to date. In it, he addresses subjects ranging from the Chinese attitude to the past to the mysteries of Belgium and Belgitude; offers portraits of André Gide and Zhou Enlai; takes on Roland Barthes and Christopher Hitchens; broods on the Cambodian genocide; reflects on the spell of the sea; and writes with keen appreciation about writers as different as Victor Hugo, Evelyn Waugh, and Georges Simenon. Throughout, *The Hall of Uselessness* is marked with the deep knowledge, skeptical intelligence, and passionate conviction that have made Simon Leys one of the most powerful essayists of our time.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Simon Leys' book "The Hall of Uselessness" is a collection of his essays written over a period of several decades. Unlike similar books of essays, the author presents a wide range of unlikely and unexpected subjects in a single volume. His book introduces me to topics I normally would not dare to venture into such as Don Quixote, Mao Zedong and Christopher Hitchens. Born and raised in

Hong Kong, I can visualize the nondescript place he describes at the beginning of the book, the hut in the shantytown of Hong Kong, where nobody expects to find anything cultural. Yet, hanging on the wall of this hut is a superb work of calligraphy in which "The Hall of Uselessness" is written. The author helps me rediscover this long-forgotten Chinese art. It reminds me of the small place I lived in my childhood, with a potpourri of Chinese calligraphy and paintings hanging on the walls that my father so proudly collected over the years. I'm hardly a scholar, and English is not my native language, but I can truly appreciate the intense emotion and humility reflected in his writings. For example, in his essay "An Empire of Ugliness," in defense of Mother Teresa, Mr. Leys strongly disapproves of the criticism directed at her by Mr. Hitchens, who wrote in his book, "The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice." Mr. Hitchens attacks Mother Teresa for accepting money from criminals and secretly baptizing the dying, to which Mr. Leys retorts that the only crime Mother Teresa committed is that she endeavors to be a Christian. I thoroughly enjoy the sharp exchanges between Mr. Leys and Mr. Hitchens. It's like watching two highly competent rivals dueling to settle a dispute with their swords, except that their words are their swords. Mr.

Slightly less than half of this collection are texts already included in *The Angel and the Octopus: Collected Essays, 1983-1998*. Some of its best texts on China's art, philosophy and culture have also been included in earlier collections. While some of the texts gathered here are excellent, the "added value" of this work to me remains slightly under the expectation. The book contains sections on (a) Quixotism; (b) Literature; (c) China; (d) the sea; (e) other subjects. I liked the first and third section best. There is much originality in it. His take on Don Quixote is simply masterly. At the same time, it casts a slight shadow on the third essay: Lies that tell the truth. The author is much taken to "the truth," which is "grasped in an imaginative leap." (Pg. 45) Quixote "makes" himself come true. The difficulty I have is imagining the truth is that we only "recognize." Herbert Simon, who had observed chess grand masters for a long time, had come to the conclusion that experience, not intuition made these people exceptional. Of course, our brains are all different, so some people see patterns when others fail to recognize them. This being said, those atop of the greasy pole has difficulty engaging those below, and much of our failure to understand other civilizations is that we never needed to. Attention was not truly exerted. This subtle arrogance, coupled with long established worldviews going back to Greek philosophy, have made us signally incapable of thinking outside the box.

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