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Book Review

Edward Said: A Critical Introduction by Valerie Kennedy, (2000) 180 pages, UK. $60. Available from Polity Press

Valerie Begley

Valerie Kennedy's *Edward Said: A Critical Introduction* is a pleasure to recommend. Kennedy's book is part of Polity Press's *Key Contemporary Thinkers Series*, a series itself worthy of recommendation for its insistence on clearly written, well-organized books suitable both for scholars and for students. Kennedy's book fully reflects this ethos: well-written, focused, comprehensive but never dull, dense with information but never in delivery--it is a book you will return to again and again.

The book lays out Said's (many) intellectual contributions, the (many) debates surrounding his ideas; the (many) forms of lasting influence he has had; his biography and its crucial relation to his body of work; and discussions of postcolonial scholarship, including a comparative discussion of Said, Homi Bhahba and Gayatri Spivak; the feminist response to Said through a discussion on postcolonial travel writing; and a detailed bibliography, including relevant works in postcolonial theory. This is a lot of information to cover in one slim volume; Kennedy organizes the material chronologically, wisely using *Orientalism* as the thematic anchor, which permits observation of the development of his ideas over time as well as the relationship of his earlier literary criticism to his later political work.

Kennedy's central argument concerns the centrality of Said's academic influence. This is a necessary argument to make because Said's contentious politics make him vulnerable to dismissal by those who believe that academicians should remain publicly silent, even in the face of political outrages. Said persists as the scholar-activist so many love to hate; tending either to use the early Said, disregarding the latter writings as embarrassing or annoying; or embracing his later, overtly politically-engaged work without a real sense of the profound contributions he made in intellectual life in the last part of the twentieth-century. Kennedy means for us to acknowledge both and to think the two together: the literary criticism is a form of political activism, and the political activism is not possible without understanding the power of discursive forms.

Kennedy rightly situates Said's greatest influence with his path-breaking *Orientalism*, which illustrates the inextricability of history, politics and culture; after this, literary studies would never be the same again. The irony of Said's impact is that the

weaknesses as much as the strengths of his work motivated postcolonial studies. Kennedy argues that postcolonial studies was in part galvanized in response to the abiding Eurocentrism of Said's work; feminist postcolonial studies was motivated in part by the persist sexism of his work. Indeed, it is Said's persistent failure to account for gender that is the more disturbing given that his analysis of the Western construction of Eastern Otherness parallel's feminist's analysis of women as Other; Kennedy examines this problem in detail.

Kennedy discusses with sensitivity the key issues Said raises in his writings, particularly regarding Palestine: issues of representation, power, knowledge, and objectivity. His central argument, that Palestinian narratives are needed to counter the Orientalist bias in news coverage of the Middle East crisis, is complicated by what Kennedy identifies as the "double focus" in Said's work: his desire to represent all Palestinians, while acknowledging his own privileged status as an inside/outsider. As a Christian Palestinian trained in British schools, having enjoyed a career as tenured faculty at an elite university in the US, Said's ability to speak for or about Palestine is fraught.

Finally, as part of her analysis of Said's political writing, the book functions as a useful overview of the discursive dimensions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Kennedy's book has all the virtues of a highly useful resource that refuses to shy from controversial discussions. A valuable text, full of intelligent observations and canny connections, Kennedy's book does justice to Said's broad vision of intellectual responsibility and political engagement.