

BOOK REVIEW

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Times of Surrender, Selected Essays by Robert Coles. University of Iowa Press, 1988.

IF SURRENDER MEANT nothing more than resignation and defeat, then the title of this recent collection of essays by Dr. Robert Coles would seem very bleak indeed. And bleakness might well be an appropriate response to these times, particularly coming from this Harvard professor of psychiatry and medical humanities who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1973 for his nonfiction series *Children of Crisis*. Yet in documenting the struggles of children growing up in poverty, racial strife, and conditions which painfully reflect larger political and social turmoil, Coles has often revealed the amazing (to us adults, at least) inner resilience and wisdom such children can show in the face of extreme adversity.

Robert Coles has obviously learned to listen for more than symptoms of psychiatric maladies. As a result, he has heard small voices speak more eloquently than those who use far bigger words. As one whose work goes beyond the often theory-bound conventions of his discipline, Coles recognizes the authority of the personal, and in turn the need to reflect as well as to analyze. In much of this reflection Coles draws on his extensive and informed interests in literature, religion, and politics. (He has previously written about the lives and works of Dorothy Day, Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, Simone Weil, and William Carlos Williams.)

The range of topics Coles pursues in *Times of Surrender* is evident in such titles as "Why Novels and Poems in Our Medical Schools?," "The Holocaust and Today's Kids," and "Character and Intellect." The subject at the heart of this collection, though, is the limits of "expertise" and the need to surrender some of our untested devotion to its theories, jargon, and cultural prestige. This surrender becomes

a way of pursuing more personal ways of discerning truth and living with it, ways that transcend the blind trust of professional authority. To do this Coles often looks to literature.

In the book's introduction, Coles explains this idea of surrender in an anecdote from his residency in child psychiatry: as he struggles to begin the therapy of a deeply troubled young boy, he listens to his supervisor advise him not to push the process towards a quick, clinical judgement, but instead to remain open to the boy's revelation of his own story in his own time. Coles and his young patient play checkers in these early, awkward stages of therapy. As the boy prepares to beat his doctor at the game (and, the apprehensive young doctor fears, beat him at the therapy game as well), the boy offers Coles some advice: "Sometimes if you surrender you're winning, because you're free of worrying about losing and you find a better game for yourself." At that point, the game of checkers is over, but therapy begins for the patient. Moreover, a different sense of professionalism develops in the struggling, analytically inclined young doctor. "This bright, sensitive, introspective boy," writes Coles, years later, "helped me figure out not only some of *his* problems but some of mine, too—a lack of respect, at times, for the distinctions between the intellect's realm, and yes, that of the spirit, too, as against the domain so often affected by our psychological burdens, if not demons."

Thus the psychiatrist who learns to listen for someone's story (or who considers the human problems revealed in a novel) surrenders the power of claiming to understand the mind, and takes up the mystery of sensing the spirit. Ultimately, this kind of surrender—this pursuit of a better game—is not so much a giving up, or a giving in, as it is the surrender of absolute intellectual authority that *gives way* to a deeper, more revealing and personal means of inquiry.

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The forty-one selections brought together in this collection appeared originally in a variety of publications during the seventies and eighties, including the *New Yorker*, the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, and the *American Poetry Review*. The pieces fall under categories which connect literature to the professions of psychiatry, psychology, and medicine, and to the experience of religion and politics, and to the lives of children and minority peoples. Not all of these selections are essays; also included is an interview in which Coles discusses his being drawn to medicine, his friendship with William Carlos Williams, his teaching, and his approach to writing. Other pieces are book reviews of such works as Robert Jay Lifton's *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*, Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcis-*

sism, Lillian Hellman's *Scoundrel Time*, and John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*. Yet his reviews are essayistic, often engaging and testing larger ideas as he vigorously examines the subjects and issues he reads about so astutely.

Most of these pieces, however, are essays of the most genuine and compelling sort; they show not only the mind of the essayist at work but they reveal the passion that comes with what Virginia Woolf described as a "fierce attachment to an idea." In these essays, Coles offers a frankness of voice that is powerfully intimate and searching.

Some particular essays stand out in my mind as I reflect on the tremendous range and richness of this collection: "The Wry Dr. Chekhov," in which Coles reflects on his medical school experience of listening to a dying young woman confront the end of her life through references to Chekhov; and "Through Conrad's Eyes," an account of Coles' meeting Robert Kennedy while Coles was testifying before congressional committees on poverty, and their subsequent conversations about Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and the novels of Joseph Conrad.

These and other essays in *Times of Surrender* may well draw many readers back to the bookshelf for another, fuller look at Chekhov, Conrad, and George Eliot (among others)— and quite likely, for more of Robert Coles. This collection offers the increasingly rare opportunity to come away from reading *about* literature with a renewed enthusiasm for actually reading works *of* literature.

Although this book will speak to a wide audience, *Times of Surrender* particularly ought to be a graduation gift for anyone intent on pursuing the profession of higher education. Such statements as "it would be a big boost for many of us if . . . America's late-twentieth-century were . . . less enamored of the conceits of theory" will no doubt challenge us, perhaps disturb or humble some of us, but ultimately remind us that the knowledge we strive so hard to attain and demonstrate can serve a higher purpose than establishing our own expertise.

We need such a message, I think as I reflect on life in the research university where I study and teach (and where I hear so much self-assured theoretical talk). And as I ponder how I'll convince my students next week of the value of reading Flannery O'Connor, I turn to these thoughtful lines from this wise and compelling book by Robert Coles:

This life is full of questions . . . the humanities are meant to help us try . . . to find useful, decent, appropriate, sensible answers. Not that there ever will be complete, definite, thoroughly clear answers. The humanities are not, at heart, preoccupied with factuality. . . . "The task of the novelist," said Flannery O'Connor, "is to deepen mystery"; and if ever there was both an implied definition of what the

humities are about and a rebuke to a predominant contemporary sensibility it is contained in that critical observation—one of the many shrewd, pointed, often caustic comments that marvelous and all too short-lived, twentieth-century storyteller from Milledgeville, Georgia, gave to the rest of us who continue to make our way toward the year 2000.