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## Book Review: Taking a Long Look: Essays on Culture, Literature, and Feminism in Our Time

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***Book Review: Taking a Long Look: Essays on Culture, Literature, and Feminism in Our Time***<sup>1</sup>

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Vivian Gornick's *Taking a Long Look: Essays on Culture, Literature, and Feminism in Our Time* (2021) captures a close perspective of a selected group of contributors to American culture, literature, and feminist history. The book is divided into four major sections, *Literature, Culture, Two New York Stories*, and *Essays in Feminism*. These four sections are further subdivided into smaller sections. *Literature* addresses individuals likely known to a broad cross section, such as Lore Segal, Alfred Kazin, Herman Melville, Kathleen Collins, Diana Trilling, Mary McCarthy, James Salter, Edna St. Vincent Millay. Uncle Tom's Cabin, Rachel Carson, Primo Levi, Hannah Arendt, Erich Fromm, and are topics in subsections entitled "Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?", "The Americanization of Narcissism", "The Second Sex at Fifty", which are also part of *Culture*. On the Bus, and Bobby's Salon comprise the third section, *Two New York Stories*. Lastly, "Consciousness, On Trial for Acting like a Man", "The Women's Movement in Crisis", "Why Do these Men Hate Women?" and "Toward a Definition of the Female Sensibility" are included in the final section, *Essays in Feminism*. Gornick throughout revisits, recognises and resituates in the continuum between history and the contemporary.

For Gornick, "writing that serves the story rather than writing that imposes itself on the story"(vii) is central to understanding the role and place she gives to authors and writers included in her book. Her other book, *Fierce Attachments* (1987), can be read in the context of the present book, as her fierce and passionate attachment to the fundamental position that literature, feminism and culture occupy in society. For this reason, *Taking a Long Look: Essays on Culture, Literature, and Feminism in Our Time* literary and historical analysis leaves the reader with confronting questions and conflicts. These arise from politics, race, refugee crisis, immigration, slavery, anti-Semitism, women's rights, among others.

Gornick considers herself a memoirist, a writer whose attempt to write back the life histories and the literary contributions of the historical figures. Brilliantly comprehensive, each subsections are precise and clearly developed, starting from the author's birth to the period when the author dies and their place within the literary world. Mentioning some of the most important works that these authors have written, Gornick explains that she had sensed an urgency to rewrite some of these authors' life histories. In brief, she does so because the way politics and culture have impacted civil rights and social and political movements in America develops and takes shape through these literary and cultural masterpieces.

*Taking a Long Look: Essays on Culture, Literature, and Feminism in Our Time* is a collection of pieces written over a long period of forty years. To Gornick, it represents the fulfilment and realisation of her dream as a writer "whose critical faculties have been shaped by the hard-won knowledge that reading into the material is energising but reading out of it is infinitely more rewarding." (xi, Introduction). Gornick's America "has been experienced, for at least a hundred and fifty years, by millions all over the world, as a euphemism for the fabled land" (3), yet the abstraction that America remains in the works as well as the world of these literary figures represents conflicts at the heart of its existence. America is at once "the

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<sup>1</sup>Gornick, V. (2021). *Taking a Long Look: Essays on Culture, Literature, and Feminism in Our Time*. London and New York: Verso Books.

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natural recipient of stateless desolation”(8), and Americanization is a complex process fraught with contradictions. Gornick quotes Lore to describe American citizenship as “a survival trick with a price tag” (6). Citizenship in America continues to be expressed in terms of these dialectics of romance and reality, conflict and creativity due to the history of race and colonialism on national identity.

*Taking a Long Look: Essays on Culture, Literature, and Feminism in Our Time* is an important contribution to literary and cultural scholarship. The book provides insight into the intersection of politics and aesthetics, and the relations between literature, culture, and social movements in America. In the interstices between polemics, journalism and writing, the book situates Gornick’s position as understanding “most intensely how devoted humanity is to the act of making literature because it leads to the act of reading” (89).