2012 wine books - philosophy

23 Dec 2012 by Paul O'Doherty

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How To Love Wine
A Memoir and Manifesto
Eric Asimov
William Morrow, imprint of HarperCollins
£15/$24.99

Wine Anxiety! We've all had it. Sitting at a table full of colleagues or friends, all of them wine writers and connoisseurs, the waiter happens to ask you, 'would you like to taste the wine, sir?' Once you've said 'yes', you can feel the heat of the 10 or 12 pairs of eyes waiting for your reaction. The thought goes through your mind, what happens if it's not perfect and I don't recognise it because I'm only familiar with the 1982 through to the 1930s and this happens to be a 1929, the host's favourite? Asimov, the chief wine critic of the *New York Times*, ponders this conundrum in his opening chapter, drawing on his own worries - for instance, panicking over which outlet to order the takeaway delivery pizza from knowing that not all pizzerias have the correct mushroom topping to suit his evening wine. He also muses that while wine no longer carries its former stuffiness, it still 'causes a sense of dread and suspicion' and an aura that it is a complex subject from which one can derive pleasure only after one has understood everything there is to know about it.

So, as an antidote to wine anxiety, Asimov sets out this 'brave new world' with a manifesto of sorts that aims to re-jig modern thinking, putting pleasure first and the need to learn second, while along the way putting together a wine memoir. To begin with Asimov sketches the modern connoisseur, the person who dreams about drinking the best vintages but can't afford them, while also championing the Old World over the New: 'By contrast, wine production in the New World is largely a copycat enterprise, seeking to duplicate what's been done so well in the Old World'. I wonder what the Australians would have to say to that? He goes on to suggest that wine writers are not infallible and that they don't always get it right (I'm still thinking about the Australians, Eric), and how the annual New York tasting of the new Domaine de la Romannée-Conti vintage suggests that wine is ambiguous. He puts his hands up and admits he has found wine confusing in the past, while also recalling on his road to Damascus how he discovered wine over a bottle of 1982 Barbera d'Alba from Giacomo Conterno that providence had put in his path.

Side by side, memoir and manifesto merge into one as his journey progresses from wine novice to critic. He bemoans how wine adjectives can be over the top while at the same time describing his career development. There is also mention of his first wine education experience, which, as it happens, was also his last. He recounts his 'arc of discovery' from love affair with Bordeaux to his longing to learn more about the less well known areas such as, say, the Jura and Slovenia.

The concept of wine scores, be it out of 20 or a 100, what he calls 'drinking by numbers', gets short shrift, while he champions his concept of the 'wine home school' where one gets to know what one likes by getting to know one's own tastes, at one's leisure. In essence, this is a wonderfully intimate memoir-cum-manifesto from a writer comfortable with his own ability as a wine writer who's not afraid to say it as it is. It goes without saying that Asimov has clearly written one of the more enjoyable and fluid wine books to read all year.

The Aesthetics of Wine
Douglas Burnham and Ole Martin Skilleås
Wiley-Blackwell
£70/$112

Back in my days at university studying philosophy, this sort of book would probably have been scorned by lecturers and students alike for different reasons: the lecturers because wine couldn't possibly be an art form; and the students because you can't possibly drink a book, even if it is on wine. Nowadays, in our postmodern world, everything is allowed inside the tent. That said, Burnham, professor and personal chair of philosophy at Staffordshire University (who has written extensively on Kant and Nietzsche), and Skilleås, professor of philosophy at the University of Bergen and a regular contributor to Norwegian wine magazine *Vinforum*, both acknowledge from the outset that despite all the joys that wine brings, it is simply not art. They go on to set out chapters on the key concepts they employ in assessing wine

appreciation; the science of smell and taste; the cognitive processes in wine appreciation; key moments in recent aesthetics and aesthetic competency; and what it means to be an expert in wine and how such expertise functions; among other considerations, forming a general hermeneutic theory of wine appreciation.

The section on 'who are the true judges of wine' is particularly fascinating with a study on the Master of Wine qualification and the value of wine scores. Along with investigations on David Hume's take on *Don Quixote*, Plato's *Phaedrus*, Immanuel Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, and John Dewey's *Art and Experience,* there is mention of Jancis Robinson's 'wine conversion' over that now-famous Chambolle-Musigny, Les Amoureuses 1959.

Overall, this is a delightfully rich slim volume that is 1,000-odd pages less than *Wine Grapes* and for almost the same price on Amazon. However, it must also be noted that this is a book for those with more than a passing interest in philosophy, and if you feel £70/$112 is too much to pay for a wine book, this book on philosophy isn't going to appeal to you. In conclusion, the question one is left pondering goes back to my days in university - is this a subject I need to be worrying myself with when I could be aestheticising over drinking great wine? From this reviewer's viewpoint, the answer to that question is yes.

Evening Wine
Glen G Greenwalt
Delphinium Books
£7/$10.99

This is a sliver of a book with lines from Shakespeare, passages from the Bible, proverbs from China, and witticisms from WC Fields such as 'a woman drove me to drink and I didn't even have the decency to thank her' to accompany Glen Greenwalt's mainly sullen and colourless drawings. It also has an introduction from Marvin R Shanken, editor and publisher of *Wine Spectator*. One would have thought drinking wine in the evening would have more fun, but maybe that's the point.