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Political Science - Political Theory

The following review appeared in the November 2007 issue of CHOICE:

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Stow, Simon. **Republic of Readers?: the literary turn in political thought and analysis**. State University of New York, 2007. 185p index afp

This is a brilliant work on an important, interesting topic. Stow (College of William and Mary) examines the fashion in academic circles to use fictional texts and interpretive techniques to advance claims about political life. Cautioning that the “written” and “unwritten” worlds have different rules, consequences, and standards of justification, he raises epistemological/ontological, moral/political, and methodological objections to using literary analysis as a substitute for empirical evidence, conceptual clarity, and rigorous argumentation. The bulk of the book consists of provocative and largely persuasive critiques of Martha Nussbaum, Richard Rorty, Terry Eagleton, and Judith Butler, though Stow also faults the “classical perspective” associated with Leo Strauss. He contends that the political value of literature in liberal democracies resides not in offering pearls of wisdom, promoting empathy and solidarity, or exposing systematic contradictions, but in providing “contextualized abstractions” about which citizens can converse in an open, nonacrimonious fashion. The book is not without flaws; it begins with a bizarre reading of Thucydides’ “Mytilenian Debate” and takes an unseemly number of cheap shots at Nussbaum, in particular. Such quibbles notwithstanding, Stow’s book is required reading for anyone interested in the scholarly use and abuse of narratives. **Summing Up:** Highly recommended. Upper-division undergraduates through faculty. – *S.K. Hinchman, St. Lawrence University*