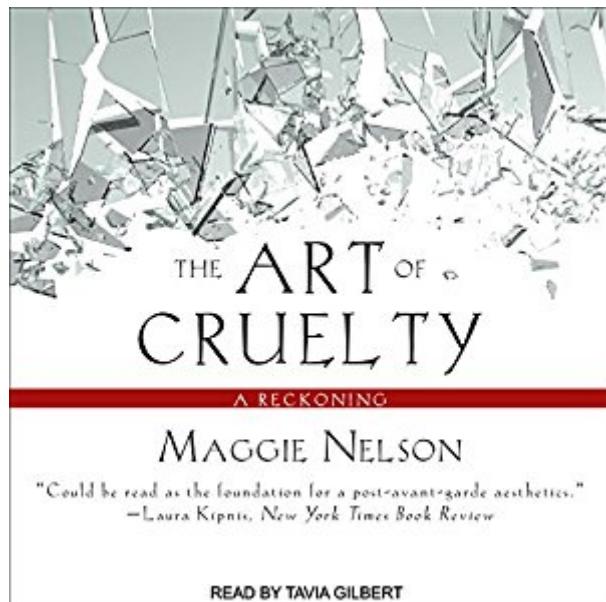


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The Art Of Cruelty: A Reckoning



Synopsis

Today both reality and entertainment crowd our fields of vision with brutal imagery. The pervasiveness of images of torture, horror, and war has all but demolished the 20th-century hope that such imagery might shock us into a less alienated state, or aid in the creation of a just social order. What to do now? When to look, when to turn away? Genre-busting author Maggie Nelson brilliantly navigates this contemporary predicament, with an eye to the question of whether or not focusing on representations of cruelty makes us cruel. In a journey through high and low culture (Kafka to reality TV), the visual to the verbal (Paul McCarthy to Brian Evenson), and the apolitical to the political (Francis Bacon to Kara Walker), Nelson offers a model of how one might balance strong ethical convictions with an equally strong appreciation for work that tests the limits of taste, taboo, and permissibility.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

lingered over "The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning," for a while. With every book Nelson writes I am making lists of artists, writers, and films to visit or revisit. The questions that Nelson raises are not only fascinating, but necessary for me as a writer. Delving into the human experience of violence, trauma, and what it is to survive the every day existence is absolutely focal to the artists she includes in this panorama of carnival rides. How much can one take? Are you ready for the slaughterhouse in Wender's film? Asphyxiation? Mutilation? Human as meat on the canvas and on stage? "Francis Bacon was one of those who insisted that humans will always suffer, no matter how just their circumstances, and that to argue otherwise is to deny a fundamental aspect of the human

condition." YES! Nelson asks us to "think of pain of being poor, of being raped, of being enslaved, of being gay-bashed, of being forced into exile, of losing everything in a natural disaster, of suffering from an illness such as HIV or cancer (or any illness, especially if one does not have access to health care to treat it): such experiences swirl all kinds of human-made and primordial sufferings together." Nelson lays it all out, but leaves the judgment to us.

I hand-picked this book for a class requirement to review a book, so I read it a bit beyond my more comfortable reading speed. That said, I enjoyed every perspective it gave; and perspectives are the entirety of this book. It's very open about criticisms and attacking the author's own initial beliefs. Nelson does a great job remaining unbiased, or if she's biased, to address it and explain it. There's numerous critiques of common perspectives, but most of this book is regarding art which the common person might not know of, providing a new ground for understanding.

This is someone with a broad enough intellect to critique the critics. There aren't very many writers who can & it's refreshing.

Maggie Nelson in this book is clearly experimenting with language in art criticism. I much appreciated this aspect. Common readers, i.e. readers that are not trained in art criticism, often find art theory pure invention, fanciful speculation or arcane discourse. Nelson's investigations and questions are simple, specific, concrete and objectively reasonable. How did she manage to do this? Talking in first person as personally and emotionally engaged. The topic, artistic issues related with an hypothetical (since theorized in theater by Artaud and barely mentioned in art) "Art of Cruelty", is very original and Nelson is brilliant in raising it to critical attention.

If you are looking for a contemporary book that deals with the relationship between violence, cruelty, art and mainstream media, this book is for you.

In the first chapter, "Styles of Imprisonment", the author sets her premise: to focus on works of art whose employment of cruelty seems to her "worthwhile".

While this writer is clearly a brilliant person, she is not a clear writer. She has written about a very interesting topic in a manner more akin to a doctoral dissertation than to a book for mainstream readers. It is possible to be an intellectual, even a theorist, but still communicate directly. That

doesn't happen here. When she includes political comments she is consistently "politically correct." The problem with that is that one quickly pigeonholes her perspective. To me it is always more interesting when an essayist is unpredictable. I wish I could recommend this book but that isn't the case.

incredibly wide-ranging reading informs a focused erudition and incisive analysis of an important subject many people have trouble merely thinking about; highly intelligent, yet readable and approachable... great style

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