



Johnson (and Boswell) by the Book

MATTHEW M. DAVIS

Johnson has received a lot of good publicity in recent years in the pages of *The New York Times Book Review* (NYTBR). Most issues of the NYTBR feature a “By the Book” interview with a writer, and the writers who sit for these interviews are often asked to identify their favorite authors, or to name three historical figures they would invite to a dinner party. Johnson has been put on several favorite author lists and a whole bunch of invitation lists — and Boswell has gotten a bit of love, too.

In 2013, Garry Wills was asked to identify his favorite authors. He replied, “Shakespeare (of course), Augustine, John Ruskin, Samuel Johnson” (March 3, 2013).

In 2014, theater critic John Lahr was asked “If you had to name one book that made you who you are today, what would it be?” He replied:

Samuel Johnson’s “Lives of the Poets”: the first attempt to analyze poetry in the context of the life which created it. To me, Johnson is an exemplary critic: thrilling in both the witty balance of his judgment and his prose. (September 21, 2014)

Chef Gabrielle Hamilton said her dinner party invites would go to extroverts, perverts, poets, cranky people, witty people, and people who are “voracious and unafraid” (November 23, 2014). She put Johnson on the invite list but didn’t say which of her diverse criteria he satisfied. (I think he satisfies several of them!)

Gretchen Rubin, blogger and author of *The Happiness Project*, said she would invite Johnson to dinner, along with Virginia Woolf, George Orwell, and Flannery O’Connor:

These are four authors whose work I love, and also the four from who I learn the most, in my own writing.... I’d love to try to get them all talking among themselves, so I could sit in the corner and take notes. (October 23, 2016)

Ron Chernow, the well-known biographer, said he would invite one of his subjects, Mark Twain, along with Johnson and Jane Austen:

I know I wouldn't get a word in edgewise and would just sit back and watch the fireworks explode. I like to think that, now and then, Lady Jane would interject the wittiest remarks and deflate the considerable egos of her two long-winded male companions. The conversation would be so rollicking and fantastic that we would all forget to eat. (October 29, 2017)

Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates was asked, "What book might people be surprised to find on your shelves?" He replied, "The 1806 edition of Samuel Johnson's 'Lives of the Poets,' with which I fell in love in graduate school at Cambridge" (March 28, 2019).

Novelist Cathleen Schine told her interviewer that she likes to read both Boswell's *Life of Johnson* and Johnson's *Dictionary*. She reads the *Dictionary*, she added, as a form of "guilt-free procrastination" (August 25, 2019).

Johnson experienced a couple of lean years in the *NYTRB* in 2020 and 2021. Then the novelist David Shields brought him back into the column, offering some interesting remarks on Johnson, Boswell, and Robert Burton:

For half my life, the Samuel Johnson scholar Helen Deutsch has been urging me to read James Boswell's "Life of Johnson," and I've finally read it: one of the greatest books ever written (also one of the funniest, saddest and strangest). I also recently read another, equally great, long, sad and strange book, Robert Burton's "The Anatomy of Melancholy," which is what Boswell's "Life of Johnson" should have been called. (March 27, 2022)

Former Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin was asked the dinner party question. He listed Johnson, Edith Wharton, and Noel Coward (June 18, 2023).

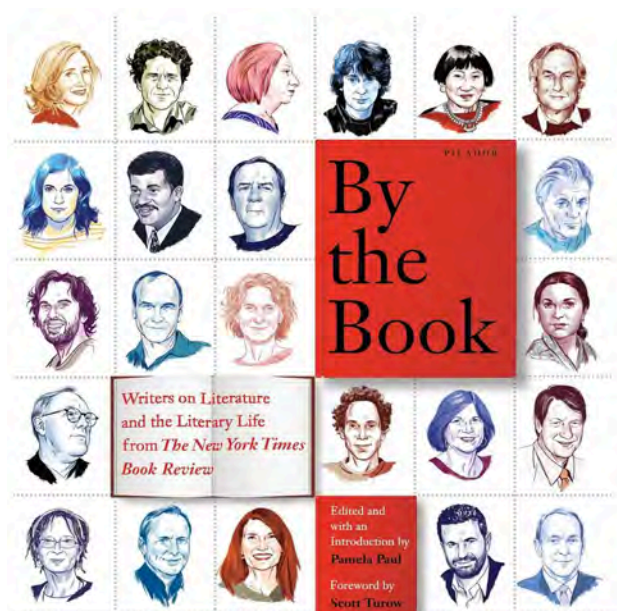


Figure 1: Pamela Paul edited this 2015 collection of “By the Book” columns.

Lawrence Wright, journalist and author of the novel *Mr. Texas*, said he would invite Johnson to dinner “just to determine if he’s as clever as Boswell made him or just overbearing” (September 24, 2023).

The poet Frederick Seidel was asked “Whom would you want to write your life story?” He replied, “Samuel Johnson comes to mind. Or Suetonius” (June 23, 2024).

Stephen Fry, well known for playing Oscar Wilde in the 1997 film *Wilde* and for narrating several Harry Potter audiobooks, fielded the “dinner party” question. He said he would invite Dickens “for party tricks, jokes and manic energy”; Wilde “for... well, I need hardly say”; and Johnson, “for gruntingly profound good sense” (June 22, 2025).