



Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation

By John Guillory

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John Guillory challenges the most fundamental premises of the canon debate by resituating the problem of canon formation in an entirely new theoretical framework. The result is a book that promises to recast not only the debate about the literary curriculum but also the controversy over "multiculturalism" and the current "crisis of the humanities." Employing concepts drawn from Pierre Bourdieu's sociology, Guillory argues that canon formation must be understood less as a question of the representation of social groups than as a question of the distribution of "cultural capital" in the schools, which regulate access to literacy, to the practices of reading and writing.

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Editorial Review

From the Back Cover

In *Cultural Capital*, John Guillory challenges the most fundamental premises of the canon debate by resituating the problem of canon formation in an entirely new theoretical framework. The result is a book that promises to recast not only the debate about the literary curriculum but also the controversy over "multiculturalism" and the current "crisis of the humanities". Guillory argues that canon formation must be understood less as a question of representing social groups in the canon than of distributing "cultural capital" in the schools, which regulate access to literacy, the practices of reading and writing. He declines to reduce the history of canon formation to one of individual reputations or the ideological contents of particular works, arguing that a critique of the canon fixated on the concept of authorial identity overlooks historical transformations in the forms of cultural capital that have underwritten judgments of individual authors. The most important of these transformations is the emergence of "literature" in the later eighteenth century as the name of the cultural capital of the bourgeoisie. In three case studies, Guillory charts the rise and decline of the category of "literature" as the organizing principle of canon formation in the modern period. He considers the institutionalization of the English vernacular canon in eighteenth-century primary schools; the polemic on behalf of a New Critical modernist canon in the university; and the appearance of a "canon of theory" supplementing the literary curriculum in the graduate schools and marking the onset of a terminal crisis of literature as the dominant form of cultural capital in the schools. The final chapter of *Cultural Capital* examines recent theories of value judgment, which have strongly reaffirmed cultural relativism as the necessary implication of canon critique. Contrasting the relativist position with Pierre Bourdieu's very different sociology of judgment, Guillory concludes that the object of a revisionary critique of aesthetic evaluation should not be to discredit judgment, but to reform the conditions of its practice in the schools by universalizing access to the means of literary production and consumption.

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