

On evil by Terry Eagleton.  
Yale University Press 2010.

In many ways on evil is a companion piece to Eagleton's previous book Faith and Reason, and it is as entertaining, informative and thought-provoking a book as its predecessor. Professor Eagleton writes with wit and some marvellous turns of phrase, and a hint of what is to come is given by the author's dedication of his book to Henry Kissinger!

Following an introduction there are three chapters, Fictions of Evil, Obscene Enjoyment and Job's Comforters. Eagleton starts with the infamous Bulger murder and the language that was used about the two ten year old boys who committed the crime; he is fiercely critical of those who use words promiscuously and thoughtlessly, believing that it is both inappropriate and debases the language itself.

In the first chapter he investigates evil as a concept brought to life in literature, using William Golding's Pincher Martin, Flann O'Brien's The Third Policeman, Graham Greene's Brighton Rock and Thomas Mann's Doctor Faustus as stories containing a character who would normally be deemed worthy of the word 'evil', investigating whether this is really correct or not.

In the second chapter he turns his attention to Shakespearian characters, taking in the Holocaust and Freud's death drive (thanatos) along the way. In the final chapter, with the theology of Job hovering in the background, and the words of certain philosophers like Schopenhauer and Kant in the foreground, he reflects on the difference between what is evil, what wicked and what just plain unlucky.

He concludes, as so many books seem to do these days, with a reflection on Islamic fundamentalism and Islamist terrorism, and the language used to define them.

On evil is a challenging book on a number of levels and demands some work from the reader, though it is work which is well justified. One is left with the strong feeling that regular usages of words such as 'evil' or 'wicked' are often glib and carry a strong not so hidden agenda, and that the true definitions of words as significant as these demand that they be used with the utmost care.

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