

Peter Swirski, *From Lowbrow to Nobrow*

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Swirski's recent bestseller, *From Lowbrow to Nobrow*, is targeted for both academic and general readership, and is a valuable contribution to popular culture studies. Here, Swirski argues that both highbrow and lowbrow literary cultures have been interpenetrating each other, starting from at least the early twentieth-century, i.e. decades before what John Seabrook proposes in *Nobrow* (2000). Swirski's appeal for more intellectual space for popular culture makes this superb book essential reading and the best study to date of the rise of the literary-cultural formation of the "nobrow."

In eight chapters and 180 pages of main text, Swirski, Associate Professor and Head of American Studies at the University of Hong Kong, undertakes his mission of re-defining "nobrow culture" in an innovative way. Swirski initially poses a selection of groundbreaking questions about the nature of popular fiction, defending a paradigmatic revisioning of the concept of "artertainment" (Introduction); engages the readers with statistical data to offer a fuller picture of the rapid growth of popular fiction and its culturally dominating role in artistry (Chapter 1); methodically examines four major critiques of popular fiction to establish a significant range of 'nobrow aesthetics' (Chapter 2); and, researches the genres and paradoxes of "nobrow literature" (Chapter 3). These chapters position the main thrust of the book in Swirski's original examination of three neglected twentieth-century novels (i.e., Karel Capek's *War with the Newts*, Raymond Chandler's *Playback*, and Stanislaw Lem's *Chain of Chance*) to demonstrate how their coalescence of popular and highbrow aesthetics might have resulted in their neglect in artistry (Chapters 4 to 6). Finally, Swirski advocates that "nobrow culture" deserves to be subjected to greater critical scrutiny (Conclusion).

In light of the prevalent assumption that popular literature, though the dominant art of our times, cannot be art, Swirski compellingly demonstrates that "popular literature expresses . . . the aesthetic and social values of its readers" (6). Through an insightful examination of the mix of popular and highbrow cultural characteristics, as represented in three twentieth-century novels, Swirski reveals a new kind of literature that is far from thoughtless pulp. *From Lowbrow to Nobrow*, thus, applies a methodology that respectively provides a new and admirable approach to how meaning is made and how we read the cultural value of "nobrow"; this value is not one of refurbishment but one of elegant reshaping.