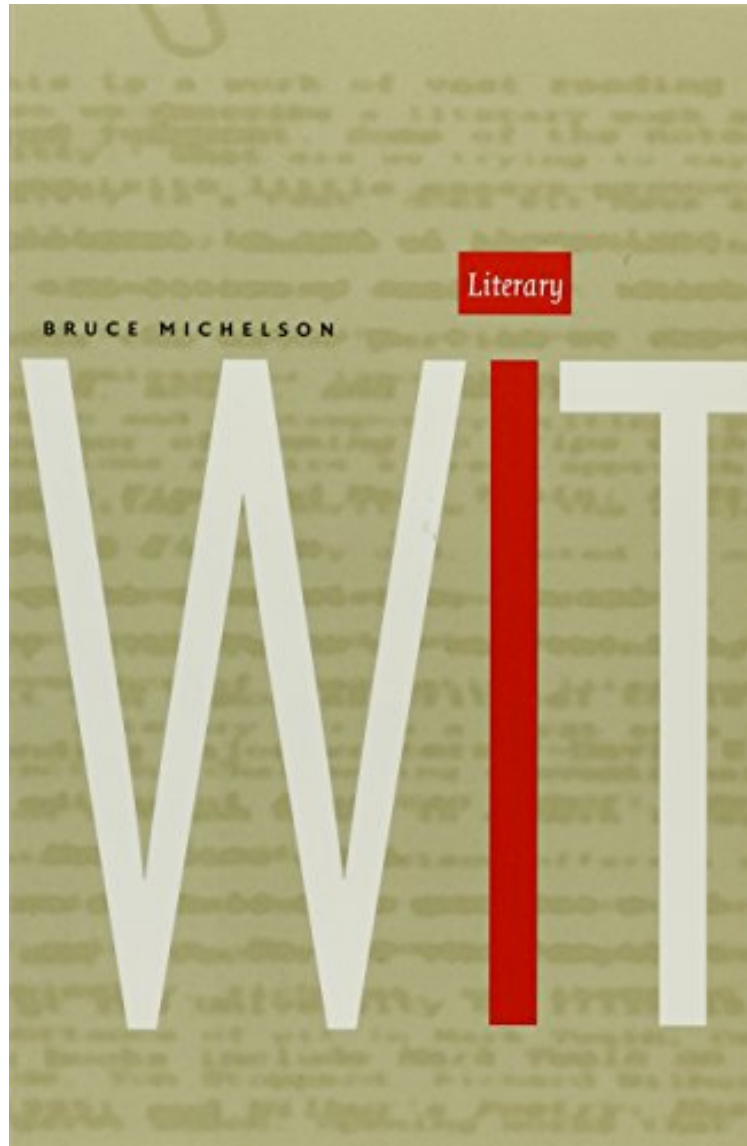


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Literary Wit

Bruce Michelson

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Bruce Michelson : Literary Wit before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Literary Wit:

Written with verve and clarity, this book offers a fresh examination of literary wit as a distinct variety of discourse?one that is fundamentally different from wit, humor, and laughter in nonliterary contexts. Bruce Michelson

moves beyond outmoded assumptions and canonical authorities to explore how wit can transform fiction, plays, and poetry, providing "a fire that keeps our imaginative literature hot." Michelson argues that to achieve a modernized and less-reductive understanding of the comic mode, conventional ideas must be extended, refreshed, qualified, and ultimately left behind. Revisiting Bergson, Freud, Bakhtin, and other authorities, he develops a new description of literary wit, with an emphasis on brevity, eloquence, and surprise, and gives special attention to the power and provenance of the modern epigram. To develop this new approach, Michelson explores Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar* and Oscar Wilde's "Preface" to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He also offers the first extended discussion of two celebrated recent dramas—Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* and Margaret Edson's Pulitzer-winning *Wit*—as well as insightful readings of major poems by Richard Wilbur. He concludes with a suggestive look at the contemporary revolution in cognitive science and its implications for our understanding of the comic dimension in modern literature.

From *Library Journal* In our historical moment flush with Seinfeldian irony, wit seems a perfect antidote to resigned cynicism or sclerotic habits of thought. Michelson (English, Univ. of Illinois), the author of books on Mark Twain and Richard Wilbur, hopes to give a boost to wit as a way of seeing things newly. He proposes to mothball the theories of humor and laughter developed by Freud, Bergson, and Bakhtin to cast wit as the "life-saving affirmation of the certainty that we know nothing for certain." Once Michelson has unmoored wit from its allegedly stodgy explications, however, he yields to naively premodernist assertions that wit "can keep us spiritually alive." When he reduces Wilde's, Twain's, and Stoppard's wit to such vague and starry-eyed jingles, however, he overlooks the capacity of wit to pierce precisely the empty celebration of human potential with which Michelson concludes his book. Recommended for specialized collections only. *DU* Ulrich Baer, New York Univ. Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. "This is a work of vast reading and considered judgment. Some of the notes are really exquisite little essays—provocative and intelligent in and of themselves. . . . As for the literary analysis, which constitutes the major portion of the book, it is lucid, acute, and compelling."—Tom Quirk, author of *Coming to Grips with Huckleberry Finn and Mark Twain: A Study of the Short Fiction*. "A great read—clever, engaging, and extremely valuable to my own thinking about wit and humor as critical tools for understanding major writers."—David E. Sloane, editor of *American Humor: New Studies, New Directions* "In our historical moment flush with Seinfeldian irony, wit seems a perfect antidote to resigned cynicism or sclerotic habits of thought. Michelson (English, Univ. of Illinois), the author of books on Mark Twain and Richard Wilbur, hopes to give a boost to wit as a way of seeing things newly. He proposes to mothball the theories of humor and laughter developed by Freud, Bergson, and Bakhtin to cast wit as the "life-saving affirmation of the certainty that we know nothing for certain." Once Michelson has unmoored wit from its allegedly stodgy explications, however, he yields to naively premodernist assertions that wit "can keep us spiritually alive." When he reduces Wilde's, Twain's, and Stoppard's wit to such vague and starry-eyed jingles, however, he overlooks the capacity of wit to pierce precisely the empty celebration of human potential with which Michelson concludes his book."—*Library Journal* About the Author Bruce Michelson is professor of English and director of the Campus Honors Program at the University of Illinois. His previous books include *Mark Twain on the Loose* (1995) and *Wilbur's Poetry: Music in a Scattering Time* (1991), both published by the University of Massachusetts Press.