

well read | by robert weibezahl

In praise of the solitary artist

This thought-provoking meditation lifts up many writers and artists who have embraced seclusion.

Writer Fenton Johnson is a self-proclaimed solitary—unpartnered, living alone, at home with his inner life. In **At the Center of All Beauty: Solitude and the Creative Life** (Norton, \$26.95, 9780393608298), Johnson elegantly blends memoir, philosophical musings and literary inquiry as he explores how other writers and artists have faced the challenge of “solving” loneliness by converting it into solitude. Looking at what it takes to live outside “coupledom” in a culture that values marriage and family above much else, he ponders the usefulness of the solitary and seeks answers in the lives and work of some who chose to live and create their art outside the parameters of what society deems “normal.”

Johnson grew up Catholic in rural Kentucky, down the road from the monastery where the Trappist monk and mystic Thomas Merton sequestered himself. But this book moves beyond religious traditions as Johnson seeks the expression of the spiritual through art. He turns to some of the most notable solitaries of the American canon—Whitman, Dickinson, Thoreau—to mine their work for guidance in the ways of solitude, discovering that each in their own way “lost the self to find the self.”

Some solitaries, like Whitman, and later Henry James and Zora Neale Hurston, lived public-facing lives, while others, like Dickinson, were virtual hermits. Eudora Welty returned from the crush of

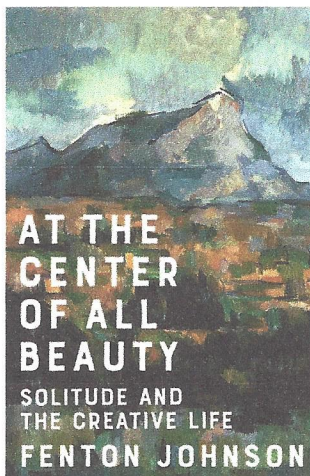
New York to her quiet childhood home in Mississippi, creating a life of the imagination that was enviably rich. The great Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore was the first non-European writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature but increasingly took shelter from the public arena. Johnson also looks at the lives and work of musical genius Nina Simone, beloved street photographer Bill Cunningham and painter Paul Cézanne to

parse how they achieved their humanist visions while embracing solitude.

Johnson concludes that these outlier writers and artists (and he proudly counts himself in their company) “understood commitment as well as or better than any marriage vow. . . . Their life-long selfless prac-

tice rooted itself in their fecund, uneasy difference: their queerness and their solitude. These writers and artists took unbreakable vows to their art.” Through this art, Johnson finds, they show us that the solitude that many fear is an illusion.

Somewhat counterintuitively in a book about solitude, Johnson is a congenial and companionable guide, ushering us through the thicket of loneliness and into the clearing of solitude. He writes with grace, insight and humility. **At the Center of All Beauty** has great appeal even for those who may not fashion themselves as solitaries but who nonetheless crave more contemplation and self-awareness in their lives.



Robert Weibezahl is a publishing industry veteran, playwright and novelist. Each month, he takes an in-depth look at a recent book of literary significance.