

# Stanley Eugene Fish

1938-

**Nationality:** American

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**Place of Birth:** Providence, RI

**Genre(s):** Law; Literary criticism and history

## **Award(s):**

American Council of Learned Societies fellowship, 1966; second place for Explicator Prize, 1967; Guggenheim fellowship, 1969; Humanities Research Institute fellow at University of California, Irvine, 1989.

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**Personal Information:** Family: Born April 19, 1938, in Providence, RI; son of Max and Ida Dorothy (Weinberg) Fish; married Adrienne A. Aaron, August 23, 1959 (divorced, 1980); married Jane Parry Tompkins (a professor), August 7, 1982; children: (first marriage) Susan. Education: University of Pennsylvania, B.A., 1959; Yale University, M.A., 1960, Ph.D., 1962. Memberships: Modern Languages Association, Milton Society, Spenser Society. Addresses: Office: College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL 60612.

**Career:** University of California--Berkeley, instructor, 1962-63, assistant professor, 1962-67, associate professor, 1967-69, professor of English, 1969-74; Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, Kenan Professor of English, 1974-85; Duke University, Durham, NC, Arts and Sciences Distinguished Professor of English and Law, 1985-98, chairman of English department, 1986-92, associate vice provost and executive director, Duke University Press; University of Illinois at Chicago, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, dean, 1999--. Leo S. Bing Visiting Professor at University of Southern California, 1973-74. Director of the National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar on Critical Theory, 1974 and 1976, and Summer Seminar on Milton and Critical Theory, 1980 and 1982.

## **WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:**

- *John Skelton's Poetry*, Yale University Press (New Haven, CT), 1965.

- *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in "Paradise Lost,"* St. Martin's (New York, NY), 1967, 2nd edition, Harvard University Press (Cambridge, MA), 1998.
- (Editor, under name Stanley E. Fish) *Seventeenth-Century Prose: Modern Essays in Criticism*, Oxford University Press (New York, NY), 1971.
- (Under name Stanley E. Fish) *Self-consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature*, University of California Press (Berkeley, CA), 1972.
- (Under name Stanley Fish) *The Living Temple: George Herbert and Catechizing*, University of California Press, 1978.
- (Under name Stanley Fish) *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretative Communities*, Harvard University Press, 1980.
- (Under name Stanley Fish) *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies*, Duke University Press (Durham, NC), 1989.
- *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech, and It's a Good Thing, Too*, Oxford University Press, 1994.
- *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change*, Clarendon (New York, NY), 1995.
- *The Trouble with Principle*, Harvard University Press, 1999.
- *The Stanley Fish Reader*, Blackwell (Malden, MA), 1999.
- *How Milton Works*, Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2001.

Contributor to periodicals. Member of editorial boards of *Milton Studies* and *Milton Quarterly*.

## "Sidelights"

Stanley Eugene Fish is a distinguished scholar known for his considerable expertise in English literature, law, and literary theory, particularly the subjectivity of textual interpretation. "Fish," Denis Donoghue wrote in the *Times Literary Supplement*, "has been largely . . . responsible for establishing the reader's experience as a respectable question." Throughout his long career, Fish has held major academic posts, serving as Kenan Professor of English at Johns Hopkins University from 1974 to 1985, as Arts and Sciences Distinguished Professor of English and Law at Duke University from 1985 to 1998, and as dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago since 1999. Writing in the *New York Review of Books*, Richard Wollheim acknowledged Fish as a "prominent professor" and added that he is "a force among those literary critics who not merely assert but exercise the broader claims of their subject." *USA Today* correspondent Raymond L. Fischer called Fish "An erudite scholar who capably makes difficult subjects understandable . . . a brilliant original critic of the culture at large."

In his first book, *John Skelton's Poetry*, Fish writes of the great English poet whose life spans the Middle Ages and Elizabethan period. Fish's perspective is fairly radical, for he perceives Skelton as an essentially private poet, one whose implicitly Christian verse serves as a record of religious development. Russell Fraser, in a review of *John Skelton's Poetry* for *South Atlantic Quarterly*, quoted Fish: "Anything that is new in my reading is the result of a single assumption--that at the center of a Skelton poem is the psychological (spiritual) history of its protagonist." Fraser described *John Skelton's Poetry* as a "sympathetic treatment" and added that it "is suggestive for the history of ideas."

In *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in "Paradise Lost,"* Fish operates from another daring premise: that the actual subject of John Milton's masterpiece, *Paradise Lost*, is the reader. As *South Atlantic Quarterly* reviewer John N. Morris noted, Fish sees *Paradise Lost* as "a poem that seeks to force upon us a sense of our distance from prelapsarian perfection and to convict each of us of our personal implication in the original sin by re-creating" Adam's fall from grace. Morris found Fish's argument "satisfying" and added that *Surprised by Sin* is an "excellent book." Also impressed was a *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer who deemed the book "extremely stimulating."

Fish continued to explicate his notion of the reader-as-subject in *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. This volume, comprised of twelve previously published essays and four new ones, more broadly articulates Fish's premise, reiterated--by Gerald Graff in *New Republic*--as an insistence "that the meanings of texts are not discovered but created by readers." Fish also questions the credibility of facts, arguing that the acceptance of something as fact depends on the prevalence of that acceptance: "We can convince others that they are wrong, argue that one interpretation is better than another, cite evidence in support of the interpretations we prefer; it is just that we do all those things within a set of institutional assumptions that can themselves become the objects of dispute."

With *Is There a Text in This Class?* Fish sustained his reputation as a provocative thinker. Wollheim, in his *New York Review of Books* appraisal, noted "Fish's inventive mind, his impetuosity in argument, his flair for practical criticism, and his consistent jauntiness of manner." For Wollheim, these characteristics "give an individual quality to [Fish's] thinking, and they also account for much of its appeal and some of its interest." Similarly, *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer Denis Donoghue mentioned "the attractiveness, the attractive force, of Fish's essays." He added: "It is a great . . . pleasure these days to find a critic willing to discuss language, literature, reading, writing, and the community of readers on the understanding that the reader plays a real part in the production of his experience." For Donoghue, the experience of reading Fish is "exhilarating." *Nation* contributor Rick Perlstein declared that Fish assumed prominence in academia "by developing, through his readings of Milton and other seventeenth-century poets, an audacious home-grown post-structuralism that held that it was the reader's response to a literary text, more than the words on the page 'themselves,' that created the literary text. This breathtakingly counter-intuitive conclusion, and his unnervingly lucid and charismatic selling of it, made him an academic superstar."

More recently Fish has embarked upon studies of pertinent issues such as the nature of free speech, the goals of liberalism, and the evolution of academic professionalism. In his book *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies*, Fish expands his exploration of literary criticism to include another area of expertise, legal studies. The work is a collection of twenty-two essays in which Fish argues against society's "misguided belief in the capacity of 'theory' to determine practice," it's "misguided belief in the power of 'formal' features of language to determine meaning outside the context of use," and it's "misguided belief that the pressures of 'rhetoric' or 'persuasion' are incidental rather than central to argument," as noted by *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer Geoffrey Galt Harpham. Harpham called the book "generally masterful" and commented that "one can look forward to yet more arguments, undertaken with undiminished wit, patience and energy in the future" from Fish.

*There's No Such Thing as Free Speech, and It's a Good Thing, Too* grew from a series of debates between Fish and conservative critic Dinesh D'Souza, held at universities in the early 1990s. In

the book Fish demonstrates that free speech "is not an independent value but a political prize, and if that prize has been captured by a politics opposed to yours, it can no longer be invoked in ways that further your purposes, for it is now an obstacle to those purposes," to quote Cass R. Sunstein in the *New Republic*. Fish asserts that partisan politics and some incarnation of political correctness infect every assertion, and he is particularly scornful of liberals who believe a genuine neutrality can be reached among competing agendas. Sunstein elaborated: "I speculate that the animating impulse of Fish's work . . . is democratic. He wants to say that philosophers and theorists are nothing special, that they are just like the rest of us. His debunking impulse is intended to be antiaristocratic: he opposes what he sees as the aristocratic view that some people can stand above our practices and evaluate them."

Critics found much to debate in *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech*. Sunstein, for instance, felt that Fish's position "comes across as mostly tired and even as self-righteous in the sense that it insists that we are stuck in our current understandings--our conventions--and that we cannot get a critical purchase on them." According to Daniel J. Silver in *Commentary*, the work is a "virtual enshrinement of cynicism as a principle." The critic concluded: "What Fish has labored to produce in his critique of liberalism is actually a parody of liberalism: one in which the principles of neutrality and tolerance are taken to extremes and then married to an unfettered entrepreneurialism. It is a philosophy freed of anxiety about values and choices, or choices among values; a philosophy made safe for yuppies." Conversely, *New York Times Book Review* contributor Calvin Woodard observed: "Using his Austinlike skill at word games, Mr. Fish deflates Anointed Truths with joyful abandon, and he is at his best in exposing the often baleful effects wrought by meanspirited defenders of traditional values." Woodard further declared that Fish "has blown new life into contemporary legal discourse. His writings--rich in literary history, language games and rhetoric, laced with Voltairean wit--appeal to many students. As C. S. Lewis had done earlier, he has become a kind of Pied Piper with a wide following among law students wearied by the cold altars of conventional legal education."

Fish's 1995 title *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change* offers an argument for "professionalism," decrying the tendency for academics in all fields to infuse their scholarly work with political meaning. "Fish has a hunch that the system of university scholarship is the most impressive machine for intellectual autonomy yet devised," noted Perlstein in *The Nation*. "And he's right. He's also right that this autonomy is worth fighting for. . . . But threats to the autonomy of scholars have far more to do with current American political change than with the supposed intellectual perfidy of the various academic guilds." In *New Statesman*, Valentine Cunningham wrote: "Fish appeals to his audience to recognise a professional job. The whole academy will follow the tricks, because it knows the rules of an old game. This is what a professional critic does, because this is what reading is--grappling with words as words, texts as texts, generic stuff as generic stuff--with none of your neo-historicist, cultural materialist, political musings. They're distractions from professional business, argues Fish." The critic continued: "So for political correctness and its attendant anxieties, Fish would substitute professional correctness." Cunningham took strong exception to this stance. He deemed *Professional Correctness* to be "intellectually sullyng . . . morally disgusting, an insult to every politically engaged interpreter and a barbarous slight on every writer who has ever suffered at the hands of some inhumane regime." Perlstein felt that Fish's brand of academic professionalism may not be enough to save certain scholarly pursuits from a changing university climate. He concluded: "Stanley Fish has written a very stylish, muscular little book arguing that the enemies of literary study are the New Historicism and cultural studies, and that more

professionalism just might save the sinking ship. He might note that employees of the Interstate Commerce Commission may well have been able to boast impeccable professionalism, but little good it did them when their agency fell to the budget ax this year. If Stanley Fish looks out the window, he might find that he is practicing theater in a crowded fire."

Fish goes after another sacred cow in *The Trouble with Principle*. He suggests that the application of "principles" impedes democracy, using as one of his case studies the turmoil over affirmative action. Fish demonstrates how opponents of affirmative action argue from the principle that it ignores individual merit--a point well taken except that it seeks no redress for generations of inequity in America. He also challenges liberals once again for their claim that their theories advance a neutrality that can accommodate any religious sect. As a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer put it, "Liberals, [Fish] says, duck behind the comforting fiction--or 'principle'--that we are all the same underneath. Fish--hard-nosed, unflinching and persuasive--maintains that differences are real and must be faced squarely without recourse to timeless, abstract principles. His cautiously reasoned argument, not easily dismissed, will excite controversy." In the *National Review*, Harvey C. Mansfield stated: "There is a certain amount of fun in watching Fish go after pretentious liberal theorists. It's easy to join in the laugh as he exposes their clumsy tricks. He shows how theorists of 'democratic discourse' contrive in their utopian schemes to lay down conditions of entry into political debate so that nobody who seriously disagrees with them can even begin talking. Very tolerant! But this objection to liberalism's formal principles is nothing new and not decisive." Mansfield concluded: "It's true that it's easier to show that we need principles than that we have them--which is my sole concession to Dean Fish. But it's also true that the need must be admitted, and the search to satisfy it begun over and over again." *Booklist* contributor Bryce Christensen contended: "True liberals will rally to defend the principled neutrality Fish assails, but many readers will welcome his call for an end to doctrinal paralysis. [*The Trouble with Principle* is] sure to become a touchstone in debates on political theory."

Fish once told *CA*: "In my view the forging of a style is inseparable from the honing of argument. I learned to write by reading C. S. Lewis and J. L. Austin, who, different though they may be, are alike in investing their prose at all points with the energy of strenuous thought. This is the effect I aim for both in my literary and legal writing."

## **FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

### **PERIODICALS**

- *American Scholar*, autumn, 1991, p. 608.
- *Booklist*, October 15, 1999, p. 398.
- *Christian Century*, July 21, 1982, p. 801.
- *Commentary*, February, 1994, p. 58.
- *English Journal*, April, 1994, p. 95.
- *Library Journal*, March 1, 1981, p. 559; October 1, 1993, p. 112; December, 1995, p. 108.
- *Library Quarterly*, October, 1994, p. 493.
- *Nation*, January 31, 1994, p. 135; December 18, 1995, p. 792.
- *National Review*, December 17, 1990, p. 44; December 13, 1993, p. 64; February 7, 2000, pp. 46-47.
- *New Republic*, February 14, 1981; December 6, 1993, p. 42.

- *New Statesman*, December 8, 1995, p. 27.
- *Newsweek*, December 24, 1990, p. 48.
- *New Yorker*, January 17, 1994, p. 91.
- *New York Review of Books*, December 17, 1981, p. 64.
- *New York Times Book Review*, May 21, 1989, p. 22; January 2, 1994, p. 11; February 6, 2000.
- *New York Times Magazine*, May 3, 1992, p. 38.
- *Publishers Weekly*, October 18, 1993, p. 61; November 15, 1999, p. 46.
- *Reason*, May, 1994, p. 56.
- *Rolling Stone*, October 15, 1998, p. 75.
- *South Atlantic Quarterly*, winter, 1969.
- *Thought*, December, 1984
- *Times Literary Supplement*, November 11, 1965; August 17, 1967; September 29, 1978; May 9, 1981; December 10, 1982; March 9, 1990.
- *USA Today*, July, 1994, p. 96.
- *Virginia Quarterly Review*, summer, 1973.
- *Voice Literary Supplement*, June, 1983.
- *Yale Review*, spring, 1990, p. 406.\*

**Source:** *Contemporary Authors Online*. The Gale Group, 2001.

**Gale Database:** Contemporary Authors