Some years ago, A.A. Gill, a contributing editor to Vanity Fair who was born in Edinburgh and resides in England, spoke at a literary festival in favor of the motion that American culture should be resisted. Adam Gopnik from The New Yorker and Salman Rushdie were on the other side. Gill now deems this "cretin's errand," one of the most embarrassing things he has ever done in public.

"To America With Love" is offered, in part, to atone for his sin. Gill's collection of essays, on topics ranging from skyscrapers to sex, from moonshine to movies, from the "Lost Colony" of Roanoke, Va., to the Dublin House bar between Amsterdam Avenue and Broadway, is, by turns, informative, idiosyncratic, smart and snarky.

And, occasionally, off key. Gill claims, for example, that President Grover Cleveland commuted the sentence of socialist Eugene V. Debs. It was, of course, Warren Harding. Forgetting that the British burned down Washington, D.C., he characterizes the War of 1812 as "a model of how to fight a really good-natured war without recrimination." He deems 21st-century Americans "immensely fluent" and "erudite."

Gill is at his best, however, when he challenges conventional wisdom. Reading Ralph Waldo Emerson, he writes, "is like trying to hack your way through a swamp of creeping verbiage." F. Scott Fitzgerald was wrong. Unlike Europe, America "is populated by second acts, encores and revivals." And anti-gun liberals, he claims, exhibit fanaticism that is "equal and opposite" to the NRA. They assume that gun owners "name their children after Disney animals spelled by illiterate Eskimos," burn things recreationally, hang huge flags outside their trailers and "eat food with infantile exclamatory names with their fingers."

Gill realizes that he ought to lean back, hands behind his head, and produce "some wise conclusions" and "some suckable aperçus." His attempt, alas, is not all that satisfying. He raises "one of the great unanswered questions of American politics" -- why has the United States been alone in not having an effective socialist movement -- only to echo so many others by passing along the half-truth (and American cliché) that "if you have everything, the one thing you don't want is socialists making you share."

But it's hard not to like a sharp-tongued author when he admits that while he was at a bar in Manhattan with his girlfriend, a well-dressed man sitting behind him felt compelled to say that "you are without doubt the most..."
pretentious, pompous, phony loudmouth I've ever had the misfortune to listen to for three hours." Especially when the target is as gifted a writer as Gill.

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