

The Fifty Worst (and Best) Books of the Century

The turn of the century is a time to take stock of the path we have followed, the better to discern where we ought to be going. Historical discernment requires coming to *judgment* about what has been noble, good, and beneficial in our time—but also about what has been base, bad, and harmful. In the life of the mind, what has our century produced that deserves admiration? What has it produced that deserves only contempt?

Earlier this year, the Modern Library published a list styled The Hundred Best Nonfiction Books of the Twentieth Century. A list of significant books can make a compelling statement about how we are to understand an age. In judging the quality of a book, one necessarily judges the perception and the profundity which the book displays, as well as the character of the book's influence.

Yet many were dissatisfied with the several "Best" lists published in the past year, finding them biased, too contemporary, or simply careless. So the *Intercollegiate Review* (IR) set out to assemble its own critically serious roster of the Best—and the Worst—Books of the Century. To assist us in this task, we relied on the advice of a group of exceptional academics from a variety of disciplines.

To make the task more manageable, our lists include only *nonfiction* books originally published in *English*, and so certain giants of the century such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn will not be found here, on two counts. We left the definition of "Best" up to our consultants,

but we defined "Worst" for them as books which were widely celebrated in their day but which upon reflection can be seen as foolish, wrong-headed, or even pernicious.

There was broad agreement about a majority of titles, but there were also fierce disagreements. Several titles appeared on both "Best" and "Worst" lists. We have tried to be faithful to the contributions of our consultants, but the responsibility for final composition of the list lay with the editors of the *IR*.

What, then, do these lists reveal about the character of the Twentieth Century?

Our "Worst" list reveals a remarkable number of volumes of sham social science of every kind. The attempt to understand human action as an epiphenomenon of "hidden" and purportedly "deeper" motives such as sex, economics, or the Laws of History is a powerful yet hardly salutary trend in our century. The presumed "breakthrough" insight that professes to reveal the shape of some inevitable future has time and again proven to be profoundly misguided. And with human life reduced in these theories to a matter for technological manipulation, our century also reveals a persistent attraction to a dehumanizing statist administration of society.

Prominent on the "Best" list, on the other hand, are many volumes of extraordinary reflection and creativity in a traditional form, which heartens us with the knowledge that fine writing and clear-mindedness are perennially possible.

Editors: Mark C. Henrie, Winfield J.C. Myers, Jeffrey O. Nelson. **Consultants:** Brian Domitrovic, Harvard University; Victor Davis Hanson, California State University, Fresno; E. Christian Kopff, University of Colorado; Peter Augustine Lawler, Berry College; Leonard Liggio, Atlas Educational Foundation; Mark M. Malvasi, Randolph-Macon College; Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., Harvard University; Wilfred McClay, University of Tennessee, Chattanooga; Mark Molesky, Harvard University; George H. Nash, author; George Panichas, *Modern Age*; John Willson, Hillsdale College.

The Fifty Worst Books of the Century

THE VERY WORST ...

1. Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928)

So amusing did the natives find the white woman's prurient questions that they told her the wildest tales—and she believed them! Mead misled a generation into believing that the fantasies of sexual progressives were an historical reality on an island far, far away.

2. Beatrice & Sidney Webb, *Soviet Communism: A New Civilization?* (1935)

An idea whose time has come...and gone, thank God.

3. Alfred Kinsey, et.al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948)

So mesmerized were Americans by the authority of Science, with a capital S, that it took forty years for anyone to wonder how data is gathered on the sexual responses of children as young as five. A pervert's attempt to demonstrate that perversion is "statistically" normal.

4. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (1964)

Dumbed-down Heidegger and a seeming praise of kinkiness became the Bible of the sixties and early postmodernism.

5. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916)

Dewey convinced a generation of intellectuals that education isn't *about* anything; it's just a method, a process for producing democrats and scientists who would lead us into a future that "works." Democracy and Science (both pure *means*) were thereby transformed into the moral *ends* of our century, and America's well-meaning but corrupting educationist establishment was born.

... AND THE REST OF THE WORST

Theodor W. Adorno, et.al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950)

Don't want to be bothered to engage the arguments of your conservative political opponents? Just demonstrate "scientifically" that all their political beliefs are the result of a psychological disorder.

Charles Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1935)

Beard reduces support for the U.S. Constitution to a conspiracy among the Founding Fathers to protect their economic interests. Forrest McDonald's *We The People* provides the corrective.

Martin Bernal, *Black Athena* (1987)

All of Western philosophical and scientific thought was stolen from Africa and a conspiracy ensued to conceal the theft for more than three millenia. Provocative, but where's the evidence?

Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *Our Bodies, Our Selves* (1976)

Or, *Our Bodies, Our Liberal Selves*. A textbook example of the modern impulse to elevate the body and its urges, libidinal and otherwise, above soul and spirit.

Noam Chomsky & Edward S. Herman, *After the Cataclysm* (1979)

Chomsky's anti-anti-communism was so intense that he was driven to deny the genocide perpetrated by Cambodian communists—stipulating of course that even if the charges against the Khmer Rouge were true, massacres were at least understandable, perhaps even justified.

Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul On Ice* (1968)

A rapist and murderer whose denunciation of The Man brought him the admiration of guilt-stricken white liberals.

Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (1968)

What this scientist proclaimed as an inevitable "fact"—that "hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death" in the 1970s—turned out entirely "evitable."

Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (1965)

Celebrated the liberation that accompanied modern urban life at the precise moment when such liberation came to mean the freedom to be mugged, raped, and murdered. Argued that "death of god" theology was the inevitable and permanent future for modern man just before the contemporary boom in "spirituality."

Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (1919)

A pernicious book that celebrates the growth of the welfare state and champions the unlikely prospect of "achieving Jeffersonian ends through Hamiltonian means."

Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1936)

Everything you always wanted to know about sex, but were afraid to ask—and rightly so. The first influential book to take a wholly clinical view of human sexuality divorced from values, morals, and emotions.

Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally* (1989)

Fish likes to ask his predecessors and critics, "How stupid can you be?" Well...

John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (1958)

Made Americans dissatisfied with the ineradicable fact of poverty. Led to foolish public policies that produced the hell that was the 1960s.

Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (1966-69)

Writing glib, cliché-ridden verbiage about the virtues of irreligion, Gay matches the sophistry of the dimmest *lumières*.

Lillian Hellman, *Scoundrel Time* (1976)

The self-absorbed, unrepentant, and generously fabricated memoir of an American Stalinist.

Alger Hiss, *Recollections of a Life* (1988)

Hiss draws attention to his essential mediocrity in this sad tale of a life led largely to conceal a lie, a lie in which thousands felt compelled to participate.

Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (1954)

Huxley paved the way to the ruin of countless lives by writing up his experience with mescaline as a sort of primordial homecoming and lending his all-too considerable prestige to the claimed benefits of hallucinogenic drugs.

Philip Johnson & Henry Russell Hitchcock, *The International Style* (1966)

Build ugly buildings, wear funny glasses, make lots of money, and justify it all by writing a book.

John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage* (1956)

Should have been called, *Profiles in Ghost-Writing*.

John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* (1936)

This book did for Big Government what Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* did for the tse-tse fly.

Timothy Leary, *The Politics of Ecstasy* (1968)

Leary always said it was a mistake to take things too seriously. This book proves he was right at least once in his life.

Norman Mailer, *Armies of the Night* (1968)

Fact or fiction? Not even Mailer knew for sure.

Catharine MacKinnon, *Only Words* (1993)

"Sticks and stones can break my bones but names will never hurt me." Not according to Catharine MacKinnon. This book provides the foundation for some of the most ridiculous developments in recent American law.

Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979)

Bored with the real Gospels and real Christianity, professors of religion were thrilled to find out how important—not to mention feminist and pre-Socratic—these fragments were.

Simon N. Patten, *The New Basis of Civilization* (1907)

This favorite of East Coast busybodies gave crucial middlebrow intellectual support to the proposition of an income tax. Called for a general willingness among Americans "to bestow without conditions and to be taxed for public and far-reaching ends." Thanks a lot, Simon Patten.

The Pentagon Papers as Published by the New York Times,

Based on Investigative Reporting by Neil Sheehan (1971)

Publicizing the blunderings of “the Best and the Brightest” did nothing but undermine the new President’s—Nixon’s—statesmanlike efforts to salvage the mess in Vietnam bequeathed to him by JFK and LBJ.

Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1950)

Popper “shows” that he is smarter and more open-minded than Plato or Hegel. That kind of thinking is one of the main obstacles to open-mindedness in our time.

Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907)

“[The Church] should therefore strengthen the existing communistic institutions and aid the evolution of society from the present temporary stage of individualism to a higher form of communism.” Eek!

John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (1971)

The hollow soul of liberalism elaborated with a technical apparatus that would have made a medieval Schoolman blush.

John Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World* (1919)

... and after that, Reed went home and the Bolsheviks struck the set.

Charles Reich, *The Greening of America* (1970)

Out of blue jeans, marijuana, free love, and the monumental egoism of a generation that refused to grow up, a Yale Law School professor concocted an adolescent fantasy: Consciousness III. Groovy, man.

Wilhelm Reich, *The Function of the Orgasm* (1942)

The notion that sitting in one of Reich’s orgone boxes would lead both to a happy individual and to a healthy and free society was only one indication of Reich’s absurdity. If only the real thing had worked as well as Woody Allen’s orgasmatron.

Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person* (1961)

Rogers disconnected human feelings from nature, disconnected the human and the spiritual from both real religion and the rigor of science, and ruined countless Roman Catholic religious orders in the process. Made B.F. Skinner look good.

Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979)

The best, and therefore worst, exposition of American philosophical pragmatism. Had devastating effects on the study not only of philosophy but also of literature.

Jerry Rubin, *Do It!* (1970)

The Bible of the lazy and the crazy.

Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not A Christian* (1936)

Known to be harmful to your spiritual health.

Margaret Sanger, *Woman and the New Race* (1920)

This founder of Planned Parenthood published Adolph Hitler's eugenics guru in her magazine in the early 1930s. That *Women and the New Race* sprang from Sanger is no surprise.

Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth* (1982)

Amidst much amateur philosophical rumination, Schell proposed a syllogism: Nuclear war necessarily means the extinction of the human race. No human value (such as political liberty) can justify such an act. Therefore, unilateral disarmament is morally mandatory. Meanwhile, Ronald Reagan's vigorous confrontation with the Soviets ended the Cold War and saved us from the fear of Armageddon.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (1945)

Whig History sees past ages striving bravely to become...us. In Schlesinger's Boddhisatva history, every age has a liberal Enlightened One who comes to battle the conservatives.

B.F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (1971)

Swallowing whole the superstitions of modern scientism, this psychologist was convinced that the human *psyche* was nothing but a superstition.

Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (1966)

Don't think. Just feel.

E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1964)

The book that ruined social history. In over 800 pages, Thompson recasts the story of English working folk into a simplistic Marxist romance. This would become the cookie cutter for a generation's worth of bland dissertations and predictable monographs.

Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (1952)

Believing in modern meaninglessness more than in "the God of theism," this theologian preached Courage (self-assertion "in spite of") rather than Faith. But would the Romans have even bothered to throw him to the lions?

H. G. Wells, *The Open Conspiracy* (1928)

Wells emerges as the comically earnest would-be John the Baptist for a new religion of temporal salvation to be ushered in by a vanguard embracing "the supreme duty of subordinating the personal life to the creation of a world directorate." Oh, my.

Woodrow Wilson, *The New Freedom* (1913)

According to H.L. Mencken, a book for "the tender-minded in general." He staggered to behold "the whole Wilsonian buncombe...its ideational hollowness, its ludicrous strutting and bombast, its heavy dependence on greasy and meaningless words, its frequent descents into mere sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Malcolm X (with the assistance of Alex Haley), *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965)

"By any means necessary"? No, violence was not, and is not, the answer.

The Fifty Best Books of the Century

THE VERY BEST ...

1. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907)

Pessimism and nostalgia at the bright dawn of the twentieth century must have seemed bizarre to contemporaries. After a century of war, mass murder, and fanaticism, we know that Adams's insight was keen indeed.

2. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (1947)

Preferable to Lewis's other remarkable books simply because of the title, which reveals the true intent of liberalism.

3. Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (1952)

The haunting, lyrical testament to truth and humanity in a century of lies (and worse). Chambers achieves immortality recounting his spiritual journey from the dark side (Soviet Communism) to the—in his eyes—doomed West. One of the great autobiographies of the millennium.

4. T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays, 1917-1932* (1932, 1950)

Here, one of the century's foremost literary innovators insists that innovation is only possible through an intense engagement of tradition. Every line of Eliot's prose bristles with intelligence and extreme deliberation.

5. Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History* (1934-1961)

Made the possibility of a divine role in history respectable among serious historians. Though ignored by academic careerists, Toynbee is still read by those whose intellectual horizons extend beyond present fashions.

... AND THE REST OF THE BEST

Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951)

A very big brain and not without flaws. Still, her account of the peculiarly modern phenomenon of "totalitarianism" forced many liberals to consider the sins of communism in the same category as those of facism, and that is no small achievement.

Jacques Barzun, *Teacher in America* (1945)

Barzun fought a heroic struggle against the Germanization of the American university.

Walter Jackson Bate, *Samuel Johnson* (1975)

The most psychologically astute biography of one of the most psychologically astute writers who ever lived. In an age of debunking and trivializing biographies, Bate's beautifully written book stands out as a happy exception.

Cleanth Brooks & Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry* (1938)

Interpreting literature in the style of the New Criticism was the vehicle by which a half-century of Americans gained access to the intellectual life. This textbook by two of the brightest lights of the most important literary group in America this century—the Vanderbilt agrarians—has never been out of print.

Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931)

Every day, in every way, things are getting better and better? No, and Butterfield provides the intellectually mature antidote to that premise of liberal historiography.

G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908)

The master of paradox demonstrates that nothing is more “original” and “new” than Christian tradition.

Winston Churchill, *The Second World War* (1948-1953)

A work comprehensive in scope and intimate in detail by a master of English prose whose talents as an historian have been vastly underrated. Indispensable for understanding the twentieth century.

Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy* (1946-53)

The most comprehensive, accurate, and readable history of philosophy, written by a philosopher who believed that the purpose of philosophy is the search for Truth.

Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (1950)

An essential work of European history that shows how the rise of Christianity altered civilization in the West. Credits the Roman Catholic Church with keeping civilization alive after the fall of Rome and during the barbarian invasions.

Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (1992)

Revisionist history as it was meant to be written: as a correction to centuries of Whig historiography. Demonstrates that the brute force of the state can destroy even the most beloved institutions. What do you know...Belloc was right.

Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative* (1958-74)

The American *Iliad*.

Douglas Southall Freeman, *R. E. Lee* (1934-35)

The tragic life of a great Southern traditionalist beautifully chronicled by a great Southern traditionalist.

Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962)

They are connected, after all—a great anti-communist book.

Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1972)

The finest analysis of slave life and culture, the complexities of the master-slave relation, and the impact of slavery on American history that we are likely ever to have.

Frederick von Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960)

Thoughtful reflections on the conditions and limitations of liberty in the modern world, written by a deeply cultured Austrian who found his home in the Anglo-Saxon world. The *Summa* of classical political economy in our century.

Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (1955)

The first sociologist to take religion in America seriously.

Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961)

Jacobs was the first to see that modernist architects and urban planners were creating not simply ugly buildings but entire urban environments unsuited to human communities.

Paul Johnson, *Modern Times* (1983)

Somehow the most personal, yet the most objective, history of our time.

James Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (1976)

A tour de force of military history that often explains strategy and tactics in terms of culture.

Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind* (1953)

Did the impossible: showed a self-satisfied liberalism that conservatism in America could be intellectually respectable. A book that named a major political movement.

Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (1936)

The classic historical narrative of the coherent and complex worldview that lies at the foundation of the West.

Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (1981)

Won a new hearing for virtue ethics after nearly two centuries of intellectual domination by Kantian morals. We live today in the time "After MacIntyre."

Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time* (1948-81)

A masterpiece of monumental historical biography. Malone's prose, narrative, and analysis are wonderfully eighteenth-century in their balance and restraint.

H. L. Mencken, *Prejudices* (1919-27)

This century's greatest exhibition of satire in non-fiction, demonstrating extraordinary aesthetic and literary taste. The author had street smarts too. Ah, the glory that was Mencken.

Thomas Merton, *The Seven-Storey Mountain* (1948)

A Catholic convert and Trappist monk, Merton's natural gifts as a writer enabled him to introduce tens of thousands of readers to the spiritual fulfillments of contemplative life—a stunning achievement for an American.

Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941)

A biting critique of secular thought and a persuasive and inspiring exposition of man's Christian destiny.

Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community* (1953)

Anticipated all the concerns of contemporary communitarians and did so with the sophistication of the century's premier sociological imagination.

Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being* (1978)

The beautiful letters of America's most profound writer this century. The best imaginable bedtime reading.

George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (1952)

The savagely incisive song of a great writer's disillusionment with the bloody inhumanity of the Left.

Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos* (1983)

True therapy for the therapeutic age. Percy shows that the best human life is being at home with our homelessness, not to mention that modern science, properly understood, need not have atheistic and materialist implications.

Richard Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (1986)

This magisterial, balanced account of the world's most ambitious scientific project serves as a vigorous retort to those who make much of American naiveté—or who would deny the American century.

Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (1966)

A neglected classic. Rieff shows that the real danger to humanity in our time is not socialism but *therapy*.

George Santayana, *Persons and Places: Fragments of Autobiography* (1944)

Like everything else from the pen of George Santayana, *Persons and Places* is elegant, witty, perspicacious, and profound—a distinguished autobiography relating the tangled transatlantic life of one of the century's most original minds.

Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (1942)

A great economist presents a dark vision of politics in a book which is accurately reasoned and brilliantly written.

Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (1953)

Strauss revealed the philosophical nerve of the Modern Project and retrieved the political dimension of classical philosophy.

William Strunk & E.B. White, *The Elements of Style* (1959)

An extraordinary little book that explains with clarity the use and misuse of the written word. In it the reader will not only learn the difference between such words as "while" and "although," and "which" and "that," but also find demonstrated beyond a doubt that language and civilization are inextricably intertwined.

Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (1950)

Trilling shows that literature is relevant to politics not because it affirms any political doctrine but because it provides a corrective to any political ideology whatsoever.

Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (1920)

Using as his primary sources beliefs that earlier had been *felt* rather than *thought*, Turner made those most American characteristics—optimism, grit, unflinching determination—central to the study of American history. One of the few truly original works of history this century.

Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (1952)

Here, one of this century's most learned political philosophers powerfully critiques the modern quest for secular salvation.

Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (1901)

A classic of Southern autobiography describing one man's heroic and successful efforts to overcome the legacy of slavery.

James D. Watson, *The Double Helix* (1968)

An eminently readable book about the unraveling of DNA, one of the most important scientific discoveries of the century. The book also offers an interesting look at English society after the Second World War.

Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore* (1962)

A careful reader of American literature works to restore our past.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953)

In a century littered with ill-considered arguments about the linguistic "construction of reality," this landmark of the later Wittgenstein stands in a wholly different category. At once ingenious, humane, and humble, it puts philosophy on the right track after the sins of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and others.

Tom Wolfe, *The Right Stuff* (1979)

The dazzling story of the test pilots and Mercury astronauts is narrated by Wolfe as a compelling affirmation of the American spirit and traditional values.

Malcolm X (with the assistance of Alex Haley), *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965)

The spiritual journey of a sensitive and intelligent man who had to wrestle with his own demons and contradictions while battling the condescension of paternalist liberals and the enervating effects of the welfare state on his people.