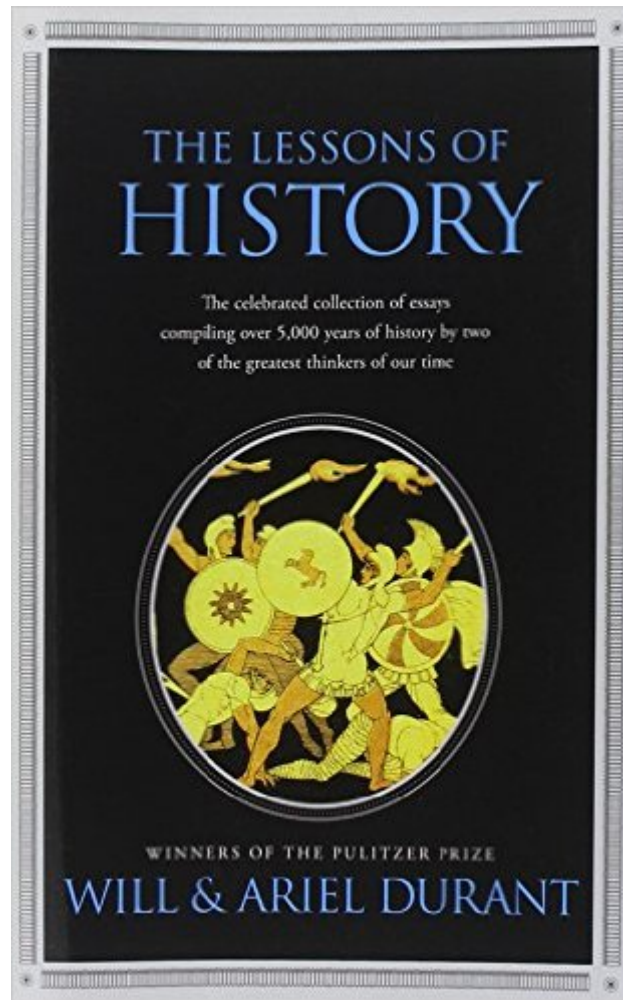


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The Lessons Of History



Synopsis

A concise survey of the culture and civilization of mankind, *The Lessons of History* is the result of a lifetime of research from Pulitzer Prize-winning historians Will and Ariel Durant. With their accessible compendium of philosophy and social progress, the Durants take us on a journey through history, exploring the possibilities and limitations of humanity over time. Juxtaposing the great lives, ideas, and accomplishments with cycles of war and conquest, the Durants reveal the towering themes of history and give meaning to our own.

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Customer Reviews

In one of the interviews that serve as interludes between the chapters of his book, Will Durant says he started his career as a liberal and became more & more conservative during his fifty year career as a historian. If he was a conservative, he was a rather liberal one. Some of the ideas he voices would be anathema to conservatives. E.g. Wealth concentrated into fewer and fewer hands should be redistributed to the have nots. Liberals on the other hand, would be distressed by other of his views. E.g. Once the wealth gets redistributed, government should not attempt to prevent the talented and industrious from re-accumulating it. The paradox is not really paradoxical at all. Obscene wealth in the hands of a very few causes unrest (and eventually revolution) among the obscenely poor. On the other hand, if industry and talent are not rewarded, culture stagnates. Durant gives the fall of the Roman Republic as an example of an obscenely rich aristocracy committing political suicide by refusing to peacefully redistribute some of their wealth to the poor. The economic stagnation of Communist East Europe serves as an example of what happens when

you stop the natural flow of wealth back to the talented and industrious. Durant makes some statements that would get him lynched in the 21st Century American media. E.g. "Only those who are below average really want equality." Durant is probably most accurately classified as an agnostic, but he says that on balance, religion has done far more good than harm for civilization. Durant contends that civilizations and cultures decline and die when they lose their moral compass. And they lose their moral compass when they lose their religion. Simply put, those contemplating crime are more likely to be deterred by the wrath of God than the long arm of the law. Durant voices many other thought-provoking opinions. You may not agree with everything he says (his wife doesn't), but you will certainly be stimulated to deep thought by what he says. I was somewhat amused by the interviews interspersed among the chapters. The reverential awe shown by Durant's interviewer was quite neatly counterbalanced by the sardonic wit of Durant's wife, Ariel. When Durant said something she didn't agree with, she let you know about it and gave excellent reasons for her disagreement. Durant quite wisely did what any intelligent husband would do. He almost always let her have the last word.

Will and Ariel Durant were to history what Carl Sagan was to science: They breathed life into a subject considered lifeless by too many, and clothed the skeleton of recorded history in a garment rich in colorful detail and vast in perspective. "Lessons Of History" is, in my opinion, the finest 100 page non-fiction book ever written, and represents the capstone and encapsulating work of two authors who gave the world their ten thousand page "Story Of Civilization" over a period of 50 years. Within this delightful book, one can view the enormous panorama of human civilization as it developed from, and was formed by, the matrices of geography, religion, science, war, and a host of other factors. The Durants, in a writing style that should have been copyrighted, provide the reader with an engaging view of humanity that few readers will come away from without being touched and awed. To be sure, the Durants' works have had a few (very few) detractors, but they were almost entirely high-browed academics in narrow research areas who most likely envied them their commercial success. If I could give this synopsis of 100 centuries of history more than 5 stars I'd do it in a nanosecond.

After finishing the ten volumes of "The History of Civilization", Will and Ariel Durant went back revising and taking notes from their monumental work and produced this insightful essay. The goal was not to summarize 3,421 years of recorded history in a hundred pages. That would have been silly. The goal was to give some thought to what means to study history; how important is to know

our heritage; can we understand our nature and the relations between individuals or between groups or nations just by analysing the past; can the accumulated human experience tell us where are we heading to? The book was first published in 1968, the worse phase of the cold war, when any perspective of future seemed rather dark and the uncertainties of the period certainly permeate the book. The book might be considered biased and conservative but that is fair game since the authors warn us about that on the first chapter, "Hesitations". "Historians are not free from bias and prejudice", they say and "most history is guessing, and the rest is prejudice". The book was written with great care. The sentences are powerful, elegant, concise and insightful. It brings noteworthy quotes and is itself very quotable. A book to be read and appreciated several times. Leonardo Alves
- January 2001

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