



The Greatest Minds and Ideas of All Time

Will Durant

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A wise and witty compendium of the greatest thoughts, greatest minds, and greatest books of all time -- listed in accessible and succinct form -- by one of the world's greatest scholars.

From the "Hundred Best Books" to the "Ten Greatest Thinkers" to the "Ten Greatest Poets," here is a concise collection of the world's most significant knowledge. For the better part of a century, Will Durant dwelled upon -- and wrote about -- the most significant eras, individuals, and achievements of human history. His selections have finally been brought together in a single, compact volume. Durant eloquently defends his choices of the greatest minds and ideas, but he also stimulates readers into forming their own opinions, encouraging them to shed their surroundings and biases and enter "The Country of the Mind," a timeless realm where the heroes of our species dwell.

From a thinker who always chose to exalt the positive in the human species, *The Greatest Minds and Ideas of All Time* stays true to Durant's optimism. This is a book containing the absolute best of our heritage, passed on for the benefit of future generations. Filled with Durant's renowned wit, knowledge, and unique ability to explain events and ideas in simple and exciting terms, this is a pocket-size liberal arts and humanist curriculum in one volume.

The Greatest Minds and Ideas of All Time Details

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From Reader Review The Greatest Minds and Ideas of All Time for online ebook

Doug Wells says

Will Durant was an amazing historian. He and his wife Ariel wrote The Story of Civilization series. As well, he wrote a list of the top 100 books any historian should read (although there are many to be added since he died). This is a great, concise compilation...

Schehani says

The Greatest Minds and Ideas of All Time by Will Durant, was really a great read for me. I liked the organization of books; however, the sections dealing with 100 Best Books to read for an Education, Ten peaks of human progress and 12 vital dates of world history I liked the most. Just reading the last two chapters - 10 peaks and 12 dates - takes you quickly on a time travel Jim no time at all. If you haven't read history before, you must read these two chapters first before you touch any history book at all.

One thing I noted in the book is that Durant has focussed too much on European thought; the World civilization must acknowledge the debts of Indian, Arab and Chinese civilizations.

As for 100 Best Books to read, I 'll add my own 100 on top of that, for really a great, unbiased education. How could he miss such great books as Bible, Quran, Vedas! How about Muqaddimah (the science of historiography originated by Ibn e Khuldun), and many other great books from other civilizations. Let's be fair here.

Overall , I really loved the effort put in by Will.

Ariel says

Contains a few articles Durant wrote, thrown together in a book. It contains his reasons for including items on the lists but it doesn't have much discussion of ideas or concepts themselves.

Roy Lotz says

I am, apparently, slowly but surely paying Durant the compliment of reading his entire oeuvre. And it is quite a compliment, considering how massive a collection of writings he left behind. Thankfully, this little volume, a posthumously published collection, was very slim. Much can be forgiven of a book if it can be read in a day.

In my last review of a book by Durant, I noted his unfortunate penchant for superlatives; and the very title of this work (though I don't think he chose it) illustrates this perfectly. Here you will find Durant's opinions of the ten most influential thinkers, the ten greatest poets, the ten most important developments in human history, the one-hundred best books for a liberal education, and the twelve most important dates in history.

To be frank, I find lists of this kind exceedingly puerile—as if philosophy were a sport, and poetry a beauty pageant—but I would also be lying if I didn't admit that I'm a sucker for lists of books.

As for his choices in these lists, I can't strongly object—although I find his inclusion of Francis Bacon and Voltaire into the list of the greatest thinkers of all time rather baffling. More vexing was Durant's heavy-handed advocacy of the “great men” view of history. Durant actually says that the history of France is not the history of the French people, but of the greatest French thinkers and artists—because ordinary people are much the same everywhere, but geniuses are what give a country its particular flavor. Now, I'm actually quite tolerant of elitism in artistic and intellectual realms; but this is so elitist as to be incoherent. In fact, it's hard to know where to begin in arguing against a claim like that, so I will move along.

By far the most winsome chapter in this collection is Durant's prescription of books for a complete education. It is written with verve and eloquence, and his enthusiasm for his subject is contagious. What's more, I was pleased to see Durant include H.G. Wells's *Outline of History* in his list, a marvellous book which was a milestone in my own quest to educate myself. Other than this chapter, however, I found this book to be rather pointless. Do I really need Durant to tell me that Kant and Newton were great thinkers, and that Keats and Shakespeare were great poets?

And, while I'm at it, do you really need a reviewer like me to tell you that a book entitled *The Greatest Minds and Ideas of All Time* will be both elitist and juvenile? I suspect not.

Arkskier says

In college it was Durant's “The Story of Philosophy” that got me into reading more philosophy. Ever since, I've been trying to get his now-rare eleven-volume “The Story of Civilization,” which took him 50 years to write. Due to his encyclopedic mind, Durant has been asked by many people who he considers the greatest thinkers, the greatest poets, the peaks in human progress and history, and the one hundred best books for a man's education. In this short book, editor John Little compiles the essays that Durant wrote to answer these questions, essays which he published in periodicals and gave as lectures.

Durant exudes high eloquence. By turns he is magisterial, funny, authoritative. When I read him, I feel like I'm listening to a professor who's read everything and will never run out of things to say about absolutely anything under the sun. He considers Keats as the finest poet, Edward Gibbon as the greatest historian, and Dostoevsky as the greatest novelist. He makes sweeping statements that have in them the force of papal bulls: Ibsen's “Peer Gynt” is the “greatest poem since Faust.” Rolland's “Jean Christophe” is the supreme novel of our century. Li Po is China's Keats. Anatole France is the “distilled essence of French culture and art.” Poe is “a bit overrated”. He reminds us in passing that even Shakespeare was reviled by both Voltaire and Alexander Pope. The Andante from Mozart's Quartet in D Major is “absolute music... meaningless beauty.” You don't even have to agree with everything he says to benefit from them, the same way that you don't have to agree with your professors to learn from them.

Durant advises us to read Faust Part 1, but not to get tricked into reading Part 2, a “senile hotch-potch of nonsense.” If you want to know how religion began, read Frazer's “Golden Bough.” If you want to read Europe's history, read Breasted's “The Human Adventure.” Milton raised English prose “to its highest reach,” but when it came to poetry, he only wrote “tolerable verse.” To Durant, the French Enlightenment was the peak of human history, even greater than Greece ever was, or Rome, or Italy.

I enjoyed this short book. Anyone who is looking to read the best books ever written, will find here the brief introduction and guidance they're looking for.

Winston Elliott III says

From The Greatest Minds and Ideas of All Time by Will Durant:

"If I were rich I would have many books, and I would pamper myself with bindings bright to the eye and soft to the touch, in paper generously opaque, and type such as men designed when printing was very young.

I would dress my gods in leather and gold, and burn candles of worship before them at night, and string their names like beads on a rosary. I would have my library spacious and dark and cool, safe from alien sights and sounds, with slender casements opening on quiet fields, voluptuous chairs inviting communion and reverie, shaded lamps illuminating sanctuaries here and there, and every inch of of the walls concealed with the mental heritage of our race. And there at any hour my hand or spirit would welcome my friends, if their souls were hungry and their hands were clean. In the center of the temple of my books I would gather the One Hundred Best of all the educative literature in the world.

I picture to myself a massive redwood table by the artists who carved the wood for King Henry's chapel at Westminster Abbey (I must be an old reactionary, for I abominate the hard materials that make our concrete homes and iron beds and desks today, and I find something organically responsive to my affection in everything made of wood.) Along the center of the table would stand a glass case protecting and yet revealing my One Hundred Best. I picture my friends treated comfortably there, occasional hours of every week, passing from volume to volume with loving leisureliness."

I too love important books beautifully bound. Will Durant may border on idolatry in this excerpt from chapter four of The Greatest Minds and Ideas of All Time, at least my wife suggested the possibility that this may be so. However, she was a gentle critic of this bibliophile exuberance since she knows her beloved husband would have written this essay himself if he had Mr. Durant's facility with words. Thank you Will Durant for this gift to all lovers of great books bound in gorgeous leather, well shelved in a library of dark wood and comfortable leather chairs. Let the contemplation of great ideas and beautiful words never end. Amen.

Pavel Annenkov says

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Raphael Amar says

Durant's way of describing historical events in an almost poetic style is at first enthralling and amusing, but after a while it just gets outright nauseating.

Judith says

This is an interesting little book by the author of an 11 volume " History of Civilization " so he knows whereof he speaks. He won the Pulitzer Prize and the Medal of Freedom and he is quite a brilliant philosopher. The book contains chapters that include: 10 greatest thinkers; 10 greatest poets; and 100 "best books for an education".

It's quite intimidating really to see what Durant considers you should be reading compared to what you'd like to read and/or are likely to read. If only I could ingest by osmosis Plutarch, Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus, instead of actually sitting down to read them.

David says

"Let me have seven hours a week and I will make a scholar and a philosopher out of you."
~Will Durant

The Greatest Minds and Ideas of All Time is the culmination of the 50 years of scholarship and research Will Durant invested to write the 11-volume **The Story of Civilization**. Following publication of these volumes, he wrote a series of essays and gave speeches culling the most significant people and events in history. These essays and speeches are gathered together in this book.

One of the most striking features of Will Durant is his unabashed humanism. He openly worships at the altar of human achievement and the heroes of history. He notes the inability of modern people to acknowledge the greatness of other men and women for fear it takes something away from ourselves. For his part, Durant finds contentment and "stimulus" kneeling before the great artists, scientists, poets, and philosophers of history. For to contemplate a great book or a great work of art "is a call and an open sesame to the Elysian Fields."

The essays in this volume are lists of the greatest in history: *The 10 Greatest Thinkers, The 10 Greatest Poets, The 100 Best Books for an Education, The 10 Peaks of Human Progress, and 12 Vital Dates in World History*. While not given equal treatment in terms of time and attention, Durant recognizes eastern contributions to the development of civilization by including the introduction of the Egyptian calendar, Confucius, the Buddha, and Muhammad among his lists.

It must be noted that Durant isn't dogmatic about the people and events included in his essays. He encourages the listener to think freely and add or subtract from these lists as he or she sees fit. He goes so far as to confess his own subjectivity in the greatest poets essay. In my opinion, however, while it's certainly appropriate to question why this person or that person is or is not included, Durant's essays are the crown of five decades of scholarship and merit respect and much reflection.

"Nothing so cleanses the dross out of a man as the creation of beauty or the pursuit of truth."

~Will Durant

I recommend this book to any lover of history, philosophy, poetry or the arts. There seems to be something for everyone in these essays and admiration can come in unexpected place. Even I have been inspired to do the unthinkable: to purchase a book of poetry- most likely Keats or Shelley. Or perhaps both.

My sole reason for giving 4 stars is due to the audio narration. While the narrator enunciates clearly, he reads quickly making it difficult in some places to capture names and titles. He read the best books essay at such a dizzying pace I was forced to stop and play back many sections.

In conclusion, I consider **The Greatest Minds and Ideas of All Time** essential reading for any lover of literature. Durant's humanism is a refreshing break from the partisan world of mudslinging that seemingly rules the day. The audio version is eminently sufficient, but a printed version may be preferable in order to more easily garner names and titles.

(12/26/2016)

J4 says

More people like Will Durrant are needed in our world. Awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Pulitzer Prize, he and his wife Ariel co-wrote the Declaration of Interdependence:

"ROOTED in freedom, bonded in the fellowship of danger, sharing everywhere a common human blood, we declare again that all men are brothers, and that mutual tolerance is the price of liberty." -Will Durrant-

-The Greatest Minds and Ideas of All Time -

Although outdated, this short book, is a summary of what Will Durrant holds as the best of all that is to be human. Unlike his peers, his positive views of human history focus on the inventions and progress of humanity rather than the atrocities brought on by the darkside of mankind. His books always opens my mind to the possibilities of hope in what it is to be human.

Ruth says

First, the idea that anyone can attempt to support a thesis such as this in less than 150 pages is laughable. Second, the author *more than once*, when faced with a staggering array of "greats" to whittle down to the ones that he thinks are the best of the best, cops out by encouraging the reader to "make his own lists," which rather defeats the purpose of reading the book, I'd say. Third, there are several totally subjective and sweeping philosophical/theological/sociological statements which raised my hackles. No arguments are offered to support these statements, as you can imagine in a book of this length.

For all that, there were some positives to be gleaned. His little essay on the impact of Shakespeare, for instance, was one of the best of its type that I've read, and considering its length, managed to encompass

rather a lot. I also found his short essay on Dante to be both informative and well-crafted.

Dvir Oren says

The Greatest Minds and Ideas of All Time by Will Durant

The short 130 page book was a very different read than what I'm used to. Will Durant writes poetically and talks about a lot of history and great people who changed it.

I felt like I was in history class again, but it was more interesting. Still I skipped some parts (at least I didn't ditch the entire thing like in high school lol).

I recommend the book if you're interested in a very short overview of important figures and events over history, personally I didn't enjoy it very much other than the first chapter, which is good (about the worship of heroes, Tai talks about it here, worth a listen imo <http://www.enjoygram.com/m/8015409161...>)

Durant talks about his top lists of world event, poets, thinkers, peaks of human progress and such. It was very alien to me and perhaps a good opportunity to learn some general knowledge which I'm not very found. of.

star rating: 3/5

The Greatest Minds and Ideas of All Time by Will Durant

Dvir

Unto the next book: The lean startup!

John Conquest says

Excuse the blog post.

I liked the way the 100 books to read was presented. Sort of like 'if you spend 1 hour a night reading from this, you can finish the list in a few years and you will be "well-read." While you get no \$100,000 check from the Big Brain Association or certificate of completion at the end, you will have an above-solid grasp of history, philosophy, themes/writing styles, etc..'

Which made me think of a recent thread on r/books (i'm a sadomasochist) that I believe was a reply to that buzzfeed article "Stop Reading Books You Don't Actually Enjoy".

The comment section was jam-packed with micro-brain takes. The first type I saw was that there is no such thing as being "well-read" for various reasons (one that stuck with me was that because you would have to read literature from every culture on Earth to be 'well-read,' its just not possible.) This seemed an intentionally dishonest interpretation of what being 'well-read' means.

Then people saying they lasted about five pages of Plato/The Bible/*book that is considered challenging* before giving up because it was hard. Here you have an inability to even comprehend that the delayed gratification you can get from reading a 'classic' may be worth more than the instant gratification of the latest genre fiction off the shelf.

Finally my favorite nuclear hot take was that 'women read much more than men, yet they are never considered well-read,' the assumption being that the amount of words you look at on paper is directly proportional to how 'well-read' you are. I have worked in a library for years and I will give you the quick armchair psychoanalysis of the average woman reader that comes through our doors. Overwhelmingly white, boomer, possibly middle-aged. The stack of books she checks out at the same time will generally follow this blueprint;

1. A recent diet meme-book. So think a title like "The Obesity Code" or "The Fat Revolution." These are the 250-300 page diet books where you eat 32 eggs a day or they are trying to justify being morbidly obese. Calorie-in/calorie-out, exercise, or just putting down the fork are alien concepts. These are so popular, with the material inside being so contradictory and incoherent, that it almost seems like the people who check them out subconsciously know that they will fail in their quest to lose-weight/improve their health, which is where the second book comes in.

2. A religious meme-book. Think Joel Osteen or the wife of some televangelist whose message is that if you really try or pray hard enough, you can absolve yourself of responsibility for nearly any issue in your life. This goes perfectly with the diet book because when your 'diet' miserably fails, you can then turn to the religious book and think "well God herself must want me to be fat."

3. A romance book. Now there is some diversity in this field. You have the standard 'Scottish Highlander Prince Hairy Chest Chiseled Abs Man' who inconceivably falls for the sassy 42 year old, three children having American divorcee from Staten Island.

Second most popular, for reasons I am still unsure of, you have 'Amish Romance' novels. My only theory is that because these leave out the smutty sex scenes, housewives feel more comfortable taking them home to read in front of their husbands. They unfortunately do not feature sweaty, neck-bearded, top hat wearing men fucking their wives in the back of a horse buggy.

Third will be the broad 'ethnic-romance genre', dominated by writers like Zane, K'Wan, and Mary B Morrison. I remember one in particular by maybe Adrienne Byrd I skimmed through and noted that in the acknowledgements the person mentioned thanking Jesus and the support of their local parish, without whom none of this would be possible. Then the first chapter opened with "I couldn't believe I had waited until I was 55 years old to experience anal sex with a big dick for the first time," and well that was enough for me.

And that's not to say that men aren't checking out James Patterson and Clive Cussler by huge margins over 'classics' but from what I can see from the shelves, the Tolstoy/Dostoyevsky/Joyce tier stuff gets checked-out with greater frequency than the Virginia Woolf/Zora Neale Hurston stuff. Then again we have a waiting list 100-deep for the works of Rupi Kaur so maybe I am the brainlet after all.

S.Ach says

Life is better than literature, friendship is sweeter than philosophy, and children reach into our hearts with profounder music than comes from any symphony, but even so these living delights offer no derogation to the modest and secondary pleasures of our books.

When life is bitter, or friendship slips away, or perhaps our children leave us for their own haunts and homes, we shall come and sit at the table with Shakespeare and Goethe, and laugh at the world of Rabelais, and see its autumn loveliness with John Keats. For these are friends

who give us only their best, who never answers back and always wait our call. When we have walked with them awhile, and listened humbly to their speech, we shall be healed of our infirmities, and know the peace that comes of understanding.

...this comes from the person who had read all the books in the world.... well almost all worth reading.

When I saw the title "The greatest minds and ideas of all time" coming from one of my favourite authors, I didn't think even for a minute before adding it to the cart in the online portal. But, when the book was delivered, I was little disappointed. How can such a slim volume (100 odd pages) contain even a single good idea, let alone all the great ideas of human history.

The book doesn't really describe any of the great ideas or attempt to decipher the great minds. It just lists them.

If a man wants to read all the books that would make him educated, what would be those? What could be the greatest dates in the history of mankind? Who are the most original thinkers?

Durant tries his best to make these lists objectively, without having any personal bias, providing ample justification for his selections. Of course you can question the rationale of some of the entries, but show me a list in this world that remains unchallenged. Every sentence, every paragraph of these essays show the range of Durant's knowledge.

Will Durant is undoubtedly the one responsible for my interest in philosophy. In "the 100 best books for an education", he omits his much acclaimed "the story of civilization" that he spent half a century researching and writing. That book and the ones he listed become my dream read.
