



# **Dead White Guys: A Father, His Daughter and the Great Books of the Western World**

*Matt Burriesci*

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**Dead White Guys: A Father, His Daughter and the Great Books of the Western World** Matt Burriesci  
*Dead White Guys* is a timely defense of the great books, arriving in the middle of a national debate about the fate of these books in high schools and universities around the country. Burriesci shows how the great books can enrich our lives as individuals, as citizens, and in our careers.

Extending the argument first made by Anna Quindlen on the act of reading itself, *How Reading Changed My Life*, ("It is like the rubbing of two sticks together to make a fire, the act of reading, an improbable pedestrian task that leads to heat and light,) Burriesci reminds us all of the enormous impact reading has on our lives. After his daughter was born prematurely in 2010, Burriesci set out to write a book about 26 Great Books, from Plato to Karl Marx, and how their lessons have applied to his life. As someone who has spent a long and successful career advocating for great literature, Burriesci defends the great books in this series of tender and candid letters, rich in personal experience and full of humor.

## Dead White Guys: A Father, His Daughter and the Great Books of the Western World Details

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# From Reader Review *Dead White Guys: A Father, His Daughter and the Great Books of the Western World* for online ebook

## Kenia Sedler says

Incredible journey through the wisdom from some of Western civilization's most prominent teachers. I'll definitely be referencing this as I come to read each literary work discussed in each chapter of this book.

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## Annie says

Matthew Buresci's *Dead White Guys: A Father, His Daughter and the Great Books of the Western World* is a blend of memoir and epistle. Buresci shares the wisdom he had learned from Plato, Aristotle, John Locke, Niccolò Machiavelli, Michel de Montaigne, Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and others and stories about his life with his young daughter. The premise is that Violet is to read this book when she turns 18. Buresci hopes that Violet might avoid some of the mistakes he made, as well as understand why the world—its politics, traditions, and philosophies—is the way it is. This is a task for which I have much admiration. I imagine that it's the sort of thing I might do if I had kids myself. (I might do something like this for my nieces and nephews—probably to the horror of my siblings.)

*Read the rest of my review at [A Bookish Type](#). I received a free copy of this book from Edelweiss for review consideration.*

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## Chris says

Disclaimer: ARC via Netgalley.

If this book is anything to go by, Matt Burriesci and his wife are people I would love to met and know.

Yes, this is one of those books.

If you are the product of a college education within the last say 30 years or so, you know that there has been a huge, almost never ending debate, about canon. What should be taught and what should be dropped to make room for the newly discovered important things. On one hand, this is a good thing. Undoubtedly there are writers who have been disregarded when they shouldn't have been. A perfect case would be Christiane de Pizan who was forgotten for many years, and then rediscovered. She can reach across centuries and still speak to students today. On the other hand, however, sometimes what has been rediscovered is better left forgotten. There is a reason why we don't read many women English Renaissance poets. By and large, their poetry sucks. It should be saved for specialist course reading.

So when I saw this title on Netgalley, I thought it would touch upon this debate. Burriesci's book does and it doesn't. Firstly, this book is a father's letter of love to his daughter. Burriesci's daughter, Violet, is a young child as this book is published, so the book is to her future self. This is at once moving and slightly off putting. It is the type of technique that is at once endearing, but, and I am speaking from experience here,

exiling to a reader as well. When I was a girl, my mother tried reading *The Water Babies* to me. She stopped because we both couldn't take the constant use of "my son".

The other drawback to the audience of his daughter is that it in some way limits a book. A mature reader or student, someone who is familiar with the works of literature discussed here, will know everything that Burriesci says about the works. It is here that the debate about canon comes into play, but it doesn't really. There is no discussion of canon, just a reason why the work of each chapter is important.

And therein lays the charm and power of the book. Burriesci structure his book along the lines of the series of Great Books of the Western World, and each chapter focuses on one of these books. The power isn't in the well thought structure of chapters, but in the purpose of each chapter. Each chapter is a basically a letter to Violet about why the book is important, the power that each book has. Burriesci does this by making historical connections that any mature reader will know and by making connections to his own life. And he is brutally honest.

This is the charm and power of the book.

For instance, in a chapter about *The Acts of the Apostles*, Burriesci details how he went from a young man who made fun of homosexuals to realizing he was a bigot and changing that. There is the chapter about his drug use. He uses his life experiences to illustrate the theses of the work under discussion. The chapters become part plea to read the books, but also a parent's request to his daughter to continue to grow as a person, whether or not she learns from his mistakes. The books are way to this self discovery, self realization, and self change.

As someone who has read the works in question, I can't say that I found anything new here; however this book should be given to every incoming college freshman (or freshman woman to avoid sexism) because it is about the power of learning, the power of books, and the power of thought.

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### **Nina says**

LOVED this book. Should be required reading for college students in a facilitated class. The author succinctly summarized the wisdom of "dead white guys": Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Lycurgus, Alexander, and even Machiavelli, et.al, and applied their thoughts to lessons for modern life in this book that is essentially a letter to his young daughter, to be read when she turns 18. The great questions are: How are we to behave in an immoral world? How do we know the truth? What is justice? Why do bad things happen? What do I owe my family? When should I break the law? What is courage? And more. Well written, with plenty to ponder. Highly recommend.

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### **Rachel Martin says**

*Dead White Guys* is one white guy's letter to his daughter in which he summarises much of the Western canon, linking each figure/writer's (Plato, Jesus, Locke, Smith etc) ideas to life lessons his daughter may need in the future. The premise of the book is interesting - while the ideas of many canonical writers are now not taught or discussed, their thinking continues to impact much of Western society. Burriesci does acknowledge that the shift away from their ideas is partly because modern thinking recognises the socio-

cultural bias inherent in their privileged position, however he quickly brushes over this. I would have enjoyed the book more if the ideas of these 'dead white guys' were set alongside the ideas of more diverse thinkers and leaders.

Having said that, I did find it a very interesting read, and while I had a basic understanding of many of the figures, I learned a lot, and found his observations about how the ideas connect with our modern society very thought provoking. I will recommend this book to any of my older students with an interest in history, philosophy or political thought.

I received a free digital ARC of this book via Netgalley in exchange for an honest review.

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### **Amanda says**

To be blunt: what an AWFUL book! The author divulges enough details about himself and his temperament for me to know that, to put it as nicely as possible, he is, we'll say, not the sort of guy I would want to hang out with. He makes incorrect assessments about America (we're a Christian nation whether we like it or not? umm, no!), he spends more than a third of the book discussing ancient Greco-Roman philosophers (would we call them white guys?) when from the title I would have expected more post-Renaissance classics, his literature analysis is EXTREMELY short-sighted, and he spends an odd amount of time pondering the history and evolution of government and economy in a book that is meant to be a letter to his prematurely born, now-six-year-old daughter on her eighteenth birthday. Not at all the heartwarming story of the lessons we can learn from literature about love, life, and self while divulging the lacks present in literature told only from the white male perspective that it could have been. Filled with doom and gloom, and he manages to end it by saying he fears for his daughter and her generation because they are just not as industrious as generations of yore. What a jerk!

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### **Rebecca says**

(2.5) *Dead White Guys* takes the form of a letter from the author to his daughter. It comes with instructions that she should read it in 2028, when she's 18 years old. With all the talk about diversity in texts, he fears that books by "dead white guys" will gather dust and go unread by future generations. No one will read them or teach them, but—he insists—they are important! Our Western society as we know it was founded on the principles and ideas from these books, so we can't let them fade into obscurity.

I have to take issue with this premise. A few personal anecdotes: Since high school, I've made an effort to diversify my reading selections. I took postcolonial lit as an undergrad and a grad student. Latin American lit, African American lit, Chinese American lit.—all kinds of non-canonical stuff. Still, I doubt I have come anywhere near reaching "equality" in my readings.

Without a doubt, most of the books I've read in my life have been written by men—dead white men. So it's pretty difficult for me to buy this argument that no one reads or teaches these texts anymore. I mean, I read a Shakespeare play every year of junior high, high school, college, and graduate school. My daughter is in fourth grade and has already done units on Shakespeare and Ben Franklin. These guys aren't going anywhere.

Perhaps, as someone who is the author's age, I was not the audience for the book. After all, the audience is (ostensibly) young people, twelve years in the future. I do think *Dead White Guys* makes classic readings more accessible to a younger audience who may want to get a jump start (or refresher) on some of the seminal works of Western culture.

But . . . as someone who is older, it was hard not to feel condescended to at times. Reading this book is like hanging out at a party when some guy comes over and starts lecturing me about a bunch of things I already know about. Dude, I'm familiar with the allegory of the cave and the golden mean. And I have heard the story of Hamlet before. And I know the definitions of "bourgeoisie" and "proletariat."

I might have enjoyed the book better if less time was spent summarizing the works and more time discussing this issue of diversity in books. How do we hang on to the classics (which, I agree, are still relevant to twenty-first century readers!) and add in other perspectives and voices? Burriesci makes it sound like people are just hating on dead white guys. I have a feeling that he doesn't see any sort of real value to cracking the canon apart or questioning the status quo. You can read Plato *and* Toni Morrison, I promise.

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## **Kris says**

This book is full of contradictions -- it's like the author is trying to give lots of advice to his daughter and readers, but hasn't quite figured out his own worldview yet.

He seems to believe in some Christian values, but is not a practicing Christian? He has a chapter on much of the "golden rule" stuff Jesus said, but nothing about the demands he made of his followers, or all the sadness and anger and grief that filled his life and gave his teachings meaning -- nothing about why he died and what that says about his truth and means for us. Nothing about the true mixture of hardship and grace that fills a Christian life.

The vagueness continues. One moment he's talking about deities and the divine, but then otherwise casually assumes evolution is a fact. He asks why people do bad things, but doesn't ever come to the conclusion that man is naturally good or bad. He claims there is justice and virtue in the world, but doesn't say where it comes from (God, anyone?), or how we find it, or who defines it. He tells Violet to "be who you are" and "follow your soul" -- whatever that means.

There are other facts that are simply untrue. In chapter 22 on religions he claims "The Christians began to *embrace* martyrdom as a way to reach heaven. To Christians martyrdom was the best thing that could possibly happen." Now hold on a moment. Being martyred has never been a guaranteed "way" into heaven, and if Christians claimed this as such, it would be against Jesus' teaching, which claims that only God's grace allows us into heaven, nothing we do. Plus, I doubt very much those who were killed, or the families of those killed, would say being tortured to death is the "best thing that could possibly happen." It's a horrible pain that should never be wished on anyone, no matter how glorified it appears.

Shortly after, in another chapter, he says that Supreme Court Justices are "appointed for life" and "essentially accountable to no one." More generalizations -- justices are not guaranteed life-long terms, and they are held accountable to good behavior. Amy, help me on this?

Basically Burriesci should stop generalizing, think through his arguments more, and quit assuming things about major people groups. I realize for a book like this, which is a trade book meant to be short, easy,

entertaining, and humorous, that's a tall order.

But Burriesci has some other good ideas -- life and learning shouldn't just be about consuming products or downloading information; learn about ancient history because it's still relevant today; question things and consider the impact your actions have on others. He also summarizes many points in the writings of Socrates/Plato/Aristotle well.

There are lots of valuable ideas and lessons in here, but it's definitely a mixed bag. I wouldn't recommend it, just because I both agree and disagree with so much in here. I was expecting more, and disappointed overall.

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## **David Huff says**

Don't let the unusual title freak you out --- this is a book with a creative premise. Matt Burriesci, who has a love for the "Great Books", and a recently born daughter, Violet, whom he loves even more, is worried that the Great Books won't be taught much, if any, as she moves through her school years. So this book, *Dead White Guys*, is a book-length love letter to his daughter, Violet --- which she's not to read until she turns 18 - - to introduce her to the Great Books.

An in-depth study this is not --- and there's some occasional mild language here and there -- but it is witty, funny, sometimes profound, and an easy quick read. It would be a good way to introduce someone to the Great Books, at a basic level, in a fun way. Burriesci, in each chapter, takes a philosophical question or concept, and links it to a particular book. For instance:

"Is There Any Justice In The World" Plato, Republic  
"Is Greed Good" Adam Smith, Wealth of Nations  
"Do The Ends Justify The Means" Machiavelli, The Prince  
"What Is Happiness" Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics

Each chapter takes but a few minutes, and his writing overall is engaging and clear. I wasn't expecting a masterpiece, but I found it to be a suprisingly good read.

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## **Dee says**

When I was in my early twenties, I wouldn't even pick up a paperback if it said, "New York Times Bestseller" on the cover. I always had a respect, love and admiration for the classics, and believed in looking towards the trusted and time-tested masters of whatever field I studied. Though my reading is now, thankfully, a lot more eclectic, my blood pressure still rose when I read how most English majors these days can get their degree without ever reading Shakespeare.

When I first came across *Dead White Guys*, a book that defends the classic Western canon, my little heart warmed. While I believe women and minorities have been underrepresented in the canon, I also believe we can swing too far in the other direction until we get graduates who've read Djuna Barnes and Richard Wright, but not Shakespeare.

The book begins with a beautiful premise: a father in 2015 writes a book to his little daughter Violet, to be read in the future when she turns 18. The book deals with 26 great works of the Western canon, from Plato's *Apology* to Marx's *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, and makes a convincing case for their relevancy and timelessness. The classics still apply to our lives. They still grapple with the same problems we do.

In the flotsam and jetsam of our modern iPhone world, this book is also a father's earnest effort to prepare his daughter for life's challenges, armed with the classics that have given him comfort. Most touchingly, the father offers bits of his personal life (which often include his thoughts on raising Violet) with a candor that will likely make Violet see him as a real human being and not just a "dad" when she grows up and reads this.

There's something charming about an American in a competitive, corporate career picking up a 54-volume set of *The Great Books of the Western World* one night, when he's preparing the nursery for Violet and when the future of his job isn't certain.

And the first few chapters, dealing with the ancient Greek books, are charming. Especially when the question of happiness in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is discussed, and when the father notes that he learned to be happy from watching his innocent, in-the-moment daughter dancing at a sandwich shop without a care.

Then it all goes downhill, and the book gets way too US-centric. In several points, it's literally telling Violet how great it is to be a patriotic, Jesus-loving American in the greatest country in the world. Religion aside, the nationalism made me wonder whether I was at a rodeo, or whether I was reading about books I thought were supposed to teach us about our common humanity.

In a chapter about Machiavelli's *The Prince*, I came to a passage about Hiroshima and Nagasaki that I reread a few times in disbelief, each time with growing disgust:

*"These acts were far more 'cruel' than anything Machiavelli could've imagined. But the goal of these bombings was not necessarily to destroy Japanese capacity; it was to break the will of the Japanese people.*

*Were there alternatives? Maybe everyone could've sat down and discussed things? Not so much. And what were the moral qualities of the slaveholding South, or Imperial Japan? Were these morally virtuous cultures? After the application of a great amount of cruelty, the Union was preserved and Japan surrendered. What happened to the conquered states in these examples? Eventually, over time, they became prosperous, free, and virtuous."*

Violet, don't listen to your father. It's best to be loved and respected, and I hope your generation will no longer live by the maxims of medieval texts.

There's more chest-pumping national pride in the chapter about *The Declaration of Independence*:

*"And as an American, Violet, you are one of 400 million Supermen in the world. Like Superman, you have accidentally grown up in a unique environment that grants you immense powers and privileges. Consider what you get just for showing up: ... 3. Access to clean water, public education, and a social safety net ... 11. Social mobility, or at least the freedom to move between classes"*

Violet, when you grow up (and if you can afford it,) travel and see as much of the world as you can. Realise there is nothing special about your country. It's no better or worse than any other and it's dangerous to think that you're exceptional because of your birthplace. Your standard of living isn't better than Switzerland's, Canada's, the Scandinavian countries, etc. Don't be arrogant.



I later googled "Western canon" and found the author had skipped books like *Don Quixote* and all of Nietzsche to talk about America's wars and the executive and legislative branches of government. This may have been written for an American girl, but if it was more universal maybe it would have a wider and more timeless appeal instead of being, at times, a dated monologue on US politics.

The last chapter on Marx and Engels' *Manifesto of the Communist Party* asks, in a world where children work in sweatshops and labour union organizers are tortured in underground prisons: Does Capitalism Work?

The author lacks a full understanding of both communism and capitalism, like many who grew up during the Cold War. Naively, he thinks that equality will take away people's individualism (Don't let zee Ruzians steal your Freedom, Mr. Bond.)

When Marx speaks of equality, he means living standards, not people becoming identical robots with no special talents or abilities. Equality will actually increase individualism. How many Einsteins and Martin Luther Kings existed but passed away without a whisper because they were too worried about their stomachs to write, paint, compose, think?

How many great individuals died in Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

This last chapter is a perfect example of the main fault of this entire book. It supposes to be a book from a father to a daughter asking her to read the classics, which tell her to think for herself and question all authority. But in the end, the author's own biases shine through, and the book is less of an exploration of classic literature, independent thought and debate than a praise of what the author believes and holds dear.

More reviews on my blog.

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## **Rebecca Ray says**

A Father, who becomes interested in the "Great Books" of the Western World, decides to write a book for his daughter to read at the age of 18 defending the great books. He attempts to show why she should read them and what he has learned from the books. He spans from Plato to Marx in his consideration, but tends to cherry-pick certain books and has over-representations from a few authors in the Western Canon without any representation from other great authors. He also often has historical facts (and occasionally interpretations of the works) incorrect, which stresses me out as a reader, and made me wonder if he had really read the great books.

Burriesci is at his best when he connects the books to his personal history memoir-style and gives personal and loving advice to his daughter. Those parts of the book are truly magical. At his worst, Burriesci is overly involved in current US policy in the Middle East and current American politics and economics. He is too historically close to those events to be able to comment on them objectively as to how history will judge them in light of the principles in some of the great books, and his political and economic writings read like a rant. I found myself struggling to enjoy or even be interested in the parts of the book that have these writings, and as you get to more modern authors and documents, most of the book turns into an economic and political rant, and something that might not even be meaningful to his daughter in 12 years. He's bogged down in the details of his own prejudice. I also have to quibble about the inclusion of such documents as "The Constitution" in the "great books." Perhaps "The Federalist Papers" could have been used. I also hated the

exclusion of classic novels because I can't remember a single fictional document examined except "Hamlet" as I reflect on the book.

I love the concept of this book, and I could easily find myself setting down with this premise and writing something to my children. It's a great and intriguing concept. The chapters near the beginning that reflect personally are wonderful. The lack of diversity in authorship, the errors in history and interpretation, and the political ranting, however, destroy what could have been an excellent book.

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### **Paula Dennan says**

Dead White Guys: A Father, His Daughter and the Great Books of the Western World\* is part memoir, part life advice and part defence of the literary canon.

The idea is that Burriesci's daughter, Violet, will read the book when she is older and can gain a greater understanding of the world's politics, philosophies and traditions while, hopefully, learning from the mistakes of her father.

I thought this would be an interesting companion text to the ongoing discussions about reading more books written by women. After all, reading more diversely doesn't mean we shouldn't consider why the Great Writers were deemed as such in the first place.

It turned out to be a frustrating read. It is full of contradictions and is in parts, to me at least, rather disjointed.

From a literary criticism point of view, I found nothing new or exceptional here the sole selling point is that Burriesci weaves his observations through his experience of fatherhood and the wishes he has for his daughter.

\*I received an eARC, from the publisher, via Netgalley

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### **Ron Jones says**

I just can't finish it..... not giving me anything worth spending my time on.

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### **Linette says**

I am not an American. This was written by an American for an American. The Great books of the Western World were selected by white American guys. So I can accept the thinking that they were thinking about what Americans needed to learn.

I, the not American, learned so much. Whilst there were the odd things that I did not agree with, my not agreement doesn't change the fact that this was an exceptionally good book. Many of the very American sections were still applicable to so many other places and explained things that affect the world at large. Now that I have brain glut I will go away and chew for a bit.

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## **Donn Headley says**

Burriesci's book arises from an admirable premise: urging his young daughter, and the younger generation and the rest of us, to read the great books from the Greek, Roman, Christian, Enlightenment, Modern and other traditions, for the Truth, Goodness, and Beauty they transmit. So much of the ideas and writings of the last few centuries and especially the current one are full of tripe, gutter-language and banality. They are too often not worth anyone's time, especially one who is seeking answers to the big and eternal questions life presents so that she or he might grasp meaning and significance and live life well and to escape from the limitations of our own times. For those larger goals, we must read the old books. Unfortunately, the author is one whom I would call a "selective reader." He definitely approaches the great ideas not from an Enlightenment perspective but from a postmodern one: getting what he can, smorgasbord-style, from any chosen author to confirm his already determined (and often naive and immature) worldview to formulate his comfortable personal truths that come from some kind of therapeutic postmodern pablum. He is unwilling to embrace the absolutes of the great thinkers absolutely. One example is his chapter on how humans must be willing to change: he starts by confessing that he used to make fun of homosexuals for no rational reason, only that such people made him uncomfortable. Then he cites Saint Paul as a man who could change, as a man who persecuted Christians until he himself was converted, and then became a Christian philosopher, teacher, evangelist and church-builder. But Burriesci neglects to mention what I am sure he knows: in Paul's letters, on multiple occasions, he absolutely condemned the practice of homosexual behavior as self-destructive and harmful to the practitioner; in a word, as a sin (an absolute concept in the Christian and other faiths). By chapter's end, Burriesci concludes that now he respects homosexuals, but his respect is based (again) on no rational reason except that he has met some and finds them fine people. No doubt, but one other lesson the author should teach his daughter: do not read your own relativistic suppositions into the philosophies of the great absolutist thinkers. You must take them whole or not at all (my final absolute).

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