

Books that Make Us Stupid(er)

by Robert Gear (April 2018)



Young Woman in Blue Reading, August Macke, 1912

According to John Milton, “a good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit.” Yes, and a bad book is the precious life-blood of a destructive ideology. Such are those that have on balance contributed to misery on an incalculable

scale. The big ones, naturally, are the iniquitous Marxist and Leninist volumes and their later 20th Century poisonous offshoots. Their 7th Century rivals in offensiveness, devised by desert-dwellers of the religion of peace, are well up in the millennia-long competition for inducing unfathomable horrors. But some books just create stupidity, with perhaps a degree of unpleasantness trailing behind. As a general rule, we should keep in mind when reading these, that an ostrich eye is said to be bigger than its brain. The large visions of some scribblers emanate from brains shrunk by imbecility.

Most of us read for the sake of gaining knowledge or for entertainment; or perhaps for a mixture of the two. But certain books usually check the "none of the above" category. These have made their consumers, eagerly dipping into a meal of fakery, into something less smart, and have probably not entertained them. Such publications could be read as test cases on the silliness of mankind's (or if you prefer, the Trudeaupian coinage, "peoplekind's") ability to be suckered by saphead ideas. In no particular order, here are some "recommendations" with a few comments on why they might fill careful readers with concern, suspicion and perhaps mirth.

Paul Erlich's *The Population Bomb* should be on everyone's list of hare-brained volumes. This book made those who plowed through it stupider than they were when they opened it. How much more so? Here are the details. Butterfly collector, Erlich, basically declared the imminent end of humanity in this wrong and wrong again prophetic inanity. To read it now is to delve into the mad mindset of a generation of suckers and seekers after erroneous ideas. Erlich's generation clustered as monarch butterflies on milkweed onto the simple-minded belief that it was almost too late to save the planet. Whereas John Fowles's fictional butterfly collector was

responsible for the death of one innocent soul, Erlich, the actual butterfly collector, merely prophesied the death of billions, and helped to engineer a mindset of catastrophism that is still with us, and still producing silliness on a lavish scale.

As is now widely known, not one of Erlich's predictions about the events of the following decades on what he coined "spaceship Earth" came true. Perhaps lepidopterists, and entomologists in general, should stick to their interesting and valuable discipline of learning more about the natural world. Those who are familiar with Kobo Abe's novel, *Woman in the Dunes*, about an entomologist who gets trapped and is held captive in a deep sandpit with a strange woman, might suspect that Abe was onto something about bug-seekers. But no, the narrative is really a richly challenging probe into the conundrums of human existence. The protagonist makes Sisyphean efforts to escape. And this was written well before Erlich got trapped like a bug in an ideological hole of his own making (and while about it, trapped many a seeker after silliness).

Anyway, here are some of Erlich's predictions:

The people of the United States would soon be dying of thirst and hunger. Right, who can forget the tens of millions of innocent Americans dying of thirst in the great drinking water shortages of the late 20th century? And what about the coast to coast food riots? Anyone remember them?

A new ice-age would destroy agricultural productivity in the temperate regions. As a man from the icy north once said, "Ho

ho ho." Well, true, as many of us do recall, there was some hysteria in the sixties and early seventies about global *cooling*. That, of course, followed earlier media-driven alarmism (not on the scale of the current hysteria) about global warming. That can be traced back to the 1930s or earlier. Make your mind up, alarmists. In fact, some embryonic glimmerings of the global cooling frenzy are moving their slow thighs once again. And, of course, since the Earth has cooled many times in the past we can expect *at some unknown time in the future* more frigid winters.

Erlich went on to prophesy a crisis in food production brought on by soil deterioration. Most people would turn to vegetarianism since meat would be too expensive. Since those scary days, (whether you like it or not) the number of people regularly eating meat has risen by an some unknown huge factor as tens of millions of Asians have adopted a more "Western," middle class lifestyle.

One third of the world's population might die within a few years due to disease and malnourishment. Hmm, I don't remember that one either.

These and several other predictions entered the environmentalist creed of foolish fear-mongering. We don't have to become too Panglossian, but we can say that those who read Erlich erred (can we say Erliched?) in their assessment.

Not surprisingly, these failed prophecies went underground but, like rodent plagues, occasionally resurface in the guise of unread weirdos. Only the other day, I heard about a growing

tendency of certain folk in the (for the most part) comfortable West refusing to reproduce because of these awful and perhaps secretly wished, or just devoutly believed, scenarios which would make their offspring's lives unliveable. I have a small suggestion for such persons—*read history*.

What about a *novel* that makes people slightly more imbecilic? How about *The Handmaid's Tale* by renowned author, Margaret Atwood? Apparently, this book has spawned a riveting TV series. When a modern literary work (as with other cultural products) is overly feted by the media, our critical faculties should be aroused. Such works tend to offend against Keats's warning in a letter to Leigh Hunt, "We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us" The context of Keats's remark suggests that he is talking about a "palpable design" that is *pretending otherwise*. Perhaps we can extend that admonition to the modern novel. I'm not here commenting on the *literary* qualities of this yarn, which have earned Atwood accolades from Tinseltown to Timbuktu. What is curious for the unsuspecting reader is the underlying grinding of axes about "Fundamentalist Christianity." Compare, the prophetic visions of Huxley, Orwell or Burgess, which are unnerving in their divinations of at least some of our current social trends. But Atwood would lead us to believe that religious *Christian* puritans can take over the United States. Ah yes, these were the Reagan years and a coup from the "extreme Christian right" was imminent, at least according to elements within the limousine leftist gang. Interesting too, is that the TV series can somehow be linked by trolls and tweeters to "Trump's America," or something. Right on, comrade. Cool.

There are actual places, and uhhm, religions, which truly have similarities to the oppressive vision dreamt up by Atwood. Scenarios vented in the fictional *The Handmaid's Tale* can be

found in some parts of the Islamic world. And, yes, if the religion of peace does become truly dominant in Europe or elsewhere in the developed world, the plight of women could approach more nearly that of the women in this overpraised dystopia. If Atwood were to rename her novel "The Oppressed Dozy Bint's Tale," with adjusted content, then her courage could be applauded. Don't hold your breath. We have neither world enough nor time.

In *I, Rigoberto Menchu*, by the eponymous author, the lies come thick and fast. Many naïve college students and comfortably fed professors of Nothing Very Important were duped by this "work." The book was all the rage, and for all I know is still dribbled out now and again to impress the luckless sophomores whose parents remortgage their houses to pay for their children's diploma acquisition. Does rummaging through such a thick undergrowth of lies make a reader stupider? Well, yes, since in such a case it helps build and buttress a worldview that is worthless, damaging to the ingesters and often to "microaggressors" with whom they come into contact.

Menchu's "autobiography" was an account of her upbringing in Guatemala and of the civil war in that unfortunate land. The conflict was indeed horrific, and perpetrated on all sides with the sadism we have come to understand was a hallmark of the last century (and of many others). When anthropologist David Stoll exposed the falsity of the Nobel Peace Prize winner's "memories," the leftist establishment closed ranks around this newly minted icon of their faith. In brief, Stoll exposed, through interviewing members of her family and acquaintances, a tissue of wildly inaccurate tales. Menchu concocted stories about her upbringing, her family, her village, her connections, her educational background, and probably much else.

Racist!

Of course, she belonged to a victim class, and so criticism was verboten. As Dinesh D'Souza so pertinently put it, "She is really a mouthpiece for a sophisticated left-wing critique of Western society." And any attempt to show the falsity of this near fantasy was met with accusations of racism. Who could have guessed?

Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* is another work that stalks the unwary, a rectangular quarter ream of bound paper suffering from de Clérambault's syndrome. Do these books stalk us, or do we stalk them? That's hard to determine, really, but may involve a bit of both. Again, we cannot say that this now-notorious work promotes wickedness but it did, and probably still does, spread ripples of stupidity. Such ripples intersect on the academic pond surface with the wave motion caused by other pebbles of nihilism or naivety, inspiring credulity in the often turgid waters of the Humanities. Mead's most famous work was part and parcel of the tendency (already underway in the 1920s) to vilify the Western tradition and culture and extoll the apparent virtues of other societies and civilizations. As Roger Kimball noted, in *Tenured Radicals*, Mead was an "anthropological fantasist," and, as such, was a precursor of the politically-correct mumbo-jumbo purveyors now ensconced in the Western academy.

Essentially, the critics of Mead argued that her utopian innocence led her into believing all kinds of nonsense about Samoan adolescent behavior. What Mead saw as the cultural repression of the West was alien to the "happy" Samoans, who

believed in free love, were unconcerned about adultery and failed to attempt suicide as often as adolescents in our repressed part of the world. The anthropologist Derek Freeman exposed what has been called the preposterous gullibility of Mead. The exact degree of hoax perpetrated by Samoan informants on Mead has been questioned. What is surely not controversial is that Mead's influence has undulated out into mainstream academic narrative, imputing not so much that all civilizations are *equal*, but that Western civilization is *worse*. Perhaps Saul Bellow has most succinctly wrapped up this silliness in his pointed question, "Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus? The Proust of the Papuans?" Yes, I'm waiting too . . . But answer came there none.

The tragedy of such widely-disseminated bovine reads is that they may go out of fashion for a time, but they can and do return and spread their silliness out into unsuspecting and steadfastly miseducated new generations. This is not unlike an annoyingly-promoted clothing "sensation" that disappears for a time and then returns farcically gathering new dedicated followers of fashion. New generations are vulnerable to the silly productions of the anointed class. They seek us here, they seek us there, undulating outwards on the surface of the information age.

Sometimes they hitch a ride on to the more truly dangerous works that lurk on the bookshelves of the tenured radicals. These tomes emerge like cicadas every 13 to 17 years to overpower the unwary. According to *National Geographic*, such Hemiptera can produce a sound loud enough to damage human hearing. I would add that some really bad books can damage human brains. The efforts of the more-than-stupid, of perhaps the malevolent incarnate, written by often moronic intellectuals, find a new, willing readership in the half-

educated K through College output.

Of course, readers can compile their own lists of these outpourings. They can, as it were, stick pins in their own entomological specimens and by so doing help to reduce the likelihood of such books “making one mighty DUNCIAD of the Land,” as Pope put it. What about the newly ghost-written “release” with the side-splittlingly mirthful title of “What Happened” by a recently failed Presidential candidate? Of this, the same poet might have jibed, “This book, the Muse shall consecrate to Fame, and mid’st the Stars inscribe Ms. Clinton’s Name!” But I, for one, have no intention of reading this slim volume.

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