

What Freud Said to Einstein and Why Books Are My Salvation

By Phyllis Chesler

Welcome to my secret life. After I've done trolling the dark side all day and for a good part of the night, I try to relax by watching movies. Yes, most of my films are about serious subjects but I also happen to love soap operas like "Call The Midwife," and "Outlander."

There. I've said it.

However, last night I watched two full-length movie gems, both about books, book clubs, bookstores, and literate, literary people; there was even a writer in one of them. The films: "The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society" with Lily James, Penelope Wilton, Michiel Huisman, and Tom Courtenay. It does concern the Nazi occupation in Guernsey but it is really about how lovers of literature create community, both past and present, through books.

The second wondrous film is "The Storied Life of A.J.Fikry," with Kumal Nayyar and Lucy Hale. The bookstore takes place in New England, on the fictitious Alice Island, and concerns adopting a precious, abandoned child whose mother wanted her to grow up with a bookstore owner and among people who love books. And so she does.

While I am not a member of any book club, (I'm not a joiner), I am an inveterate book-lover. I love reading, writing, (but not arithmetic), and have indulged in the joy this bring me all my life. I was known, both at home and at school, as "that one, with her nose in a book."

It was not meant as a compliment. But there I was, with my flashlight under the covers reading, reading, long after my curfew—and there I was again, this time in school, reading the book I brought from home, as the teachers droned on. How could I resist such liberatory time travel, so many costume dramas, such a pageant of bejeweled kings and queens, (quite the living tapestry); those awesome Biblical prophets and our even more awesome God; the Greek Gods—there were so many; Sheherazad's splendid and terrifying tales; Grimm's very grim fairy tales—and my own Sir Dr. Freud who, for years, was my secret companion as I endured family life.

Still, I did not receive a proper classical education. For example, by the time I was applying to college, I would not have been deemed eligible to join imperial Britain's early 19th century East India Trading Company. And why? Because when those seventeen year old (uneducated) Victorian-era boys applied, they had to pass “a fairly stiff examination” which consisted of “the four gospels of the Greek testament” and the “ability to render into English some portion of the words of one of the following Greek authors: Homer, Herodotus, Xenophon, Thucydides, Sophocles, and Euripides; some portion of the work of one of the following Latin authors: Livy, Terence, Cicero, Tacitus, Virgil, and Horace.” The exam also included “questions in ancient history, geography, and philosophy...the elements of mathematical science...the first four books of Euclid.”

Even though I keep a copy of Emily Wilson's sublime translation of the Odyssey by my bedside—I would fail such an exam. How might our current crop of wokesters fare? Might the very young among them be literate enough to read the translations of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Proust or the works of Hawthorne, Melville, or Dickens aloud? Could they read, understand, and quote from Shakespeare? Donne? Keats?

Or, would those in college today primarily hold forth on issues of racism, transgenderism, the evils of the Judeo-

Christian white West, and the allegedly Satanic state of Israel—and only cite the most recent works on these subjects? Nothing written before the 21st century?

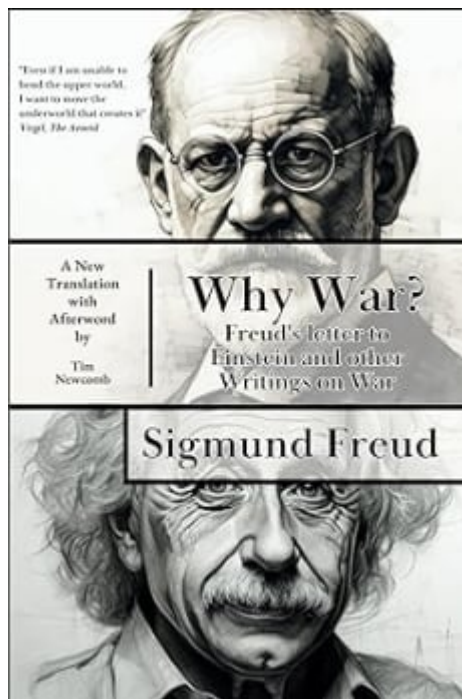
I often despair. I have been sounding this particular alarm for at least a quarter-century. And now, I truly hope that President Trump and his new administration can begin to clean out this Augean Stable. If not—oh, if not, if reason and objective understanding of history are absent, or if they make no difference, then we are as doomed as the brilliant philosopher-psychoanalyst Jon Mills suggests we are in his recent book, aptly titled, “End of the World. Civilization And Its Fate.”

Although his reach is far, far broader than literacy and wokeness, I hereby add this bookish illusion of mine to the many other disasters he addresses which include—well, practically everything: global warming, overpopulation, religious and ethnic wars, tribalism, the “hatred of small differences,” scarcity of resources, famines, economic failures, endless wars, atrocities, terrorism, sadism, epidemics, barbarism, and polarization—but that’s not all.

Mills asks whether or not human aggression and our “death wish” will or will not outweigh our individual and collective desire to survive, as a species. Will Freud’s concept of thanatos ultimately prevail over eros? Mills asks “to what degree will the will towards violence be sublimated into the higher tiers of self-conscious ethical reflection that reason can afford?” Is the urge to death a desire for union with God or simply our desire to destroy everything, including ourselves and each other?

Mills cites “pathological narcissism” and “psychopathic Islamdom” both of which are both upon us. He reminds us that the much maligned Freud was—and still is—really great. Freud said: “Men are not gentle creature who want to be loved;” rather, according to Mills, “they want to exploit, con, use,

conquer, humiliate, torture and kill.” Mills reminds us of this poignant exchange.



“Einstein approached Freud on behalf of the League of Nations and asked the question, ‘Is there any way of delivering mankind from the curse of war? Freud responded with reservation, suggesting that perhaps it may only be mitigated.”

Wherein lies hope? Mills suggests that we would need to become conscious about human nature being “base, primitive, feral..(even though doing so would) fracture all illusory notions of a civilized, just, and loving world, for it only takes one act of barbarism to remind us that evil is no illusion.”

He views the recent pandemic (which we now know was released from a lab in Wuhan), as having “transformed the world in every conceivable way, from restrictions in social, workforce, and economic infrastructure crippling our contemporary societies.” Mills hopes that our children and grandchildren will “reverse our foolish path...But, as it stands, humanity is on a collision course with disaster...If I were a betting man, I would say that we are on the brink of extinction.”

Now you may better understand why I “escape” when I can into books and bookstores and into soap opera series about small, very dear, loving, caring communities.

Let me add: I take no position on climate change; I am neither

a scientist nor an ideologue; and thus do not attribute any single, specific, disaster, (fire, flood, plague, hurricane, the Santa Ana winds, or storms), to global warming—I really do not want to get into the endless back and forth that this subject attracts, at least not here. Not now.

Pace to all of us on earth as it is in Heaven.

First published in [Phyllis' Newsletter](#) and [The Jewish Voice](#)