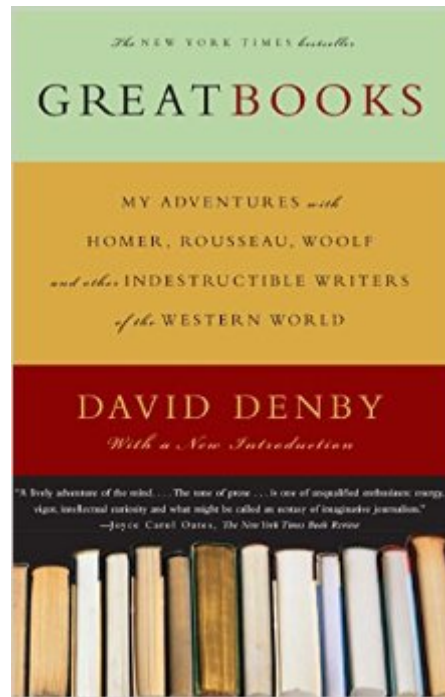


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GREAT BOOKS



Synopsis

THE NATIONAL BESTSELLER At the age of forty-eight, writer and film critic David Denby returned to Columbia University and re-enrolled in two core courses in Western civilization to confront the literary and philosophical masterpieces -- the "great books" -- that are now at the heart of the culture wars. In *Great Books*, he leads us on a glorious tour, a rediscovery and celebration of such authors as Homer and Boccaccio, Locke and Nietzsche. Conrad and Woolf. The resulting personal odyssey is an engaging blend of self-discovery, cultural commentary, reporting, criticism, and autobiography -- an inspiration for anyone in love with the written word.

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Customer Reviews

I have to admit I approached this book with some trepidation. I learned from the jacket liner that Denby was a film critic for *New York Magazine* (I vaguely remember reading some of his reviews) who had returned to the same Lit classes at Columbia he had attended in the late sixties. What was a film critic going to tell me about the classics that I didn't already know? I've read every classic I could get my hands on since I was 13. I expected something along the lines of Adler or Van Doren (brief accounts of the hundred or so "greatest books of all time"). I'm glad now that I gave Denby the benefit of the doubt. Like Denby, I returned to college as an older student and felt a blend of exhilaration and disorientation similar to his. He's particularly adroit in conveying how politics have changed the nature of classroom discourse. There's no need here to get into a debate over the neo-relativist, agenda-driven camp on one side of academia, vs. the liberal, canonical

"traditionalists," although much of the book revolves around these arguments. What I'd like to comment on primarily is Denby's authentic love of literature and the power that it holds to shape lives. This is an old saw, but is still relevant and is eloquently expressed and demonstrated by the author. He argues that "great" literature is not primarily aimed at making us feel good about ourselves. On the contrary, growth usually comes about only after a period of some discomfort and anxiety. The message of great fiction is not that we or our society or culture are superior to other peoples or societies or cultures. In fact, the message is usually the opposite. I have to admit that I found some of Denby's recounting of his private life digressive and not especially engaging.

What makes some literature great? Great literature is inspiring and life-changing, taking us to new places and leading us to think in new ways. It brings you not only into the author's mind but into their whole cultural milieu, to a time and place that we wouldn't have otherwise experienced or understood. Western culture is of course just part of the world's vast storehouse of ideas and stories, but it is one of the deepest and profoundest parts. In "Great Books," film critic David Denby unapologetically focuses on his experience at Columbia with some of the classics of Western literature. Denby regales us with his enviable experience of being re-introduced to great literature as an adult, engaging the classics as an enthusiastic and willing observer instead of a bored and cynical youth obsessed with carving their own niche. Unlike his classmates, Denby has the luxury known mostly only to the mature, to actually enjoy the trip rather than using the readings as a springboard to show his own cleverness and garner good grades. His honest enthusiasm shows through as we experience a taste of great literature through his eyes. While this book is somewhat a summary of some of the classics, it would fail on that basis alone, paling in comparison to the Cliff and Monarch notes, just as those notes pale in comparison to the original works. This is not a book to read to understand the classics of Western literature, nor to help with any scholarly pursuit of knowledge. This is a very pleasant and enjoyable excursion through great literature along with someone in the unique position to be an experienced critic, a skilled writer, and an enthusiastic student viewing the subjects as if for the first time.

David Denby's "Great Books" proves that even if we knew then what we know now, our academic struggles would still be up-hill. Denby gives us essentially a travelogue of his journey through the "great works of Western literature" at Columbia University, where he has returned to revisit the course material. Unsurprisingly, Denby gives brief descriptions of the works on the syllabus, paying particular attention to particular passages that struck his fancy. More surprisingly, Denby also brings

us into the classroom, discussing the professors in detail while relating the other students' efforts to master the material. These exchanges are fascinating because Denby refuses to patronize the students, who seem to be a genuinely scholarly bunch, capable of digesting and reacting personally to the material. Sure, there are some low points, such as when the students run up against Dante and the eternal damnation of the "Inferno," which the students seem to reject as "so non-20th century"(!). On other works, the students are as engaged and insightful as Denby, even though they lack his life experience. Denby avoids looking down on the students for their inexperience, and he tries to see the works from their perspective as well as his own. Perhaps unexpectedly for Denby, his perspective isn't all that different from the students' in one critical regard -- he is reminded how difficult it is to keep up with the reading. In some of the more humorous passages in a surprisingly funny book (not slapstick, mind you), Denby laments falling behind in his reading, or struggling to find a quiet place in Manhattan to read, or finding moments of solitude during the daily pell-mell of parenting.

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