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THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS & CULTURE

JEAN-MARIE DAUTEL/PALAIS DES BEAUX-ARTS DE LILLE

“The Holy Family With a Pomegranate,” circa 1507–8, by Raphael. Pen and ink over traces of black chalk and stylus indentation with squaring in red chalk; 14 1/2 inches by 9 3/4 inches. Palais des Beaux-Arts de Lille, France.

FINE ARTS

IN AWE OF RAPHAEL’S DRAWINGS

‘The Credit Suisse Exhibition: Raphael’ at The National Gallery, London

LORRAINE FERRIER

LONDON—Anyone who has played charades knows how hard it is to convey an idea without words. An artist’s challenge is to convey a moving narrative without words on a two-dimensional surface. Masters such as Italian Renaissance artist Raphael appeared to achieve this effortlessly. The foundation of these artists’ skills lies hidden behind the scenes in the mountain of drawings they made. These drawings are the DNA of great works, the building blocks of artistic mastery.

Stand in front of any of Raphael’s artworks and I dare you not to be moved. Raphael excelled in creating harmonious, often complex, compositions full of motion, gestures, and individual personalities. He honed his art to communicate abstract ideas such as philosophy, as seen in one of his greatest works: “The School of Athens” fresco in the Vatican’s Stanza della Segnatura.

I recently visited “The Credit Suisse Exhibition: Raphael” at The National Gallery in London, where 90 exhibits are on display, many by Raphael and some made from his designs in media that he didn’t practice in, such as bronze. Viewing Raphael’s work, I lost count of the number of times I found my hand on my heart, in awe.

For me, viewing Raphael’s artworks first elicits empathy. His work appeals to our human nature, and it’s this aspect that acts as a palpable conduit to divine truths. His work therefore has a transformational presence that seems beyond this world. We can easily see this in his Madonnas, whereby he successfully connects us to the universal experience of motherhood, which then leads us to the true meaning of the work: the divine bond of the Virgin and Christ child.

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HISTORY

Bed Time: *Mats, Four-Posters, Sleep, and Culture*

JEFF MINICK

Most of us were created in one, many were born in one, and many have died in one. Most of us spend a third of our lifetime in one, where we read, converse, make love, sip a glass of evening wine or a cup of morning coffee. It is a hospice of health and restoration, a refuge where the anguished can weep alone, a protective castle to which small children flee in the middle of the night to escape the terrors and specters cloaked in the darkness. It is both bastion and battleground for husbands and wives. It is the vehicle that carries us from light, lucidity, and reason to a land of dreams and nightmares.

I refer, of course, to the bed.

This often unremarked piece of furniture is frequently a backdrop for literature and art. Indeed, in the fairy tale "The Princess and the Pea" and the classic "The Arabian Nights" the bed is center stage. In paintings from around the world, we find artists depicting sleepers, lovers, children, and the dying and the dead, each of them lying on a bed.

And if we broaden the definition of culture beyond the realm of the arts to include the customs and social practices of a society, we find the bed not only a conveyance to sleep but also at times a stage for comedy, drama, and tragedy.

A Brief Look Back

The earliest humans were less concerned with a full 40 winks than with becoming a midnight snack for predators. Anthropologists speculate that these ancestors often made their resting places in the branches of trees.

The first known beds are estimated to be 77,000 years old, shallow pits dug into the soil of South Africa and lined with grasses and plants that would repel insects. As communities developed, rude huts included sleeping spaces shared by kinfolk and whoever else was attached to the clan.

In societies like Egypt and China, while most people continued to sleep on mats or grasses—"to hit the hay" as a euphemism for bedtime clearly has a long shelf life—beds over time became more sophisticated, in terms of both comfort and status. Some Chinese, for example, built brick platforms that could be heated in cold weather. Egypt's pharaoh Tutankhamen slept beneath a sheet made of gold, and other rulers of that country also owned similar elaborate beds adorned with finely wrought images and statuary made of precious metals.

The bedrooms in the upper-class Roman "domus," or house, were called cubicula, from which we draw our word cubicle. Like those spare working spaces in our modern office buildings, these quarters were sparsely decorated and designed for sleeping. For guests and family gatherings, the Romans preferred the garden or the triclinium, a dining area made up of three sofa squares with one side left open so that slaves might bring foodstuffs to the table. The Romans reclined while eating, much like those moderns who take a late-night snack to the sheets.

Gathering Places ...

In many societies, bedrooms were often large shared spaces, even the sleeping quarters of kings. Poor families, for example, throughout the centuries fell asleep together in a single room, in part to save the costs of fuel. Moreover, for much of our history, cultures in many lands had a very different sense of privacy and communal living than we moderns do in our age of nuclear families and individuals living alone.

The epic poem "Beowulf," for example, begins in a great hall, Heorot, and with a feast of meat and mead. King Hrothgar eventually takes his leave of the festivities, but the newly arrived Beowulf, his men, and the king's retainers all bunk down in the hall, where Beowulf will that night do battle with the monster Grendel. Throughout the Middle Ages, it was not unusual for these great halls to perform this double service, with men slumbering on the same tables at which they had eaten.

France's King Louis XIV daily conducted business from his luxurious bedroom every morning. Surrounded by servants, scribes, courtiers, and members of the nobility, and with the strictest royal protocols in place, Louis dispatched orders and letters, consulted with his advisers, and engaged in lively conversations.

In many societies, bedrooms were often large shared spaces.

During World War II, Prime Minister Winston Churchill sometimes did the same, though in a more democratic style, meeting with various military and diplomatic personnel, and writing or dictating memos and instructions, all while in the comfort of his bed. His companions during these meetings were often his cigar and a glass of whiskey and water.

... And Shared Spaces

Until after the Civil War, travel for many Americans also meant sharing rooms and sometimes the beds themselves with acquaintances or even strangers, a circumstance utterly foreign to today's culture.

In the fall of 1776, for example, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin shared accommodations one night in a New Jersey inn. The room was tiny, "a chamber a little larger than the bed," according to Adams, and with one small window. When Adams, who feared the night air, closed the window before bedtime, Franklin implored him to leave it open. He would, he told Adams, acquaint him with his "Theory of Colds." Adams opened the window, climbed into bed, and fell asleep listening to the older man lecture him on the benefits of fresh air.

Unlike the bed shared by Adams and Franklin, some beds in inns and private homes were enormous. One of the grandest of these, which visitors today can see in the Victoria and Albert Museum, was the Great Bed of Ware, installed in Ware, England, at the Crown Inn. Mentioned in the writings of several poets, including William Shakespeare, this monstrosity is 11 feet long and as wide as two modern double beds, and can sleep four couples quite comfortably.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

Necessity often makes our beds. "The Dream," 1888, by Édouard Detaille. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

Today we see our beds as places of comfort. Cropped image of "The Sick Girl," 1882, by Michael Peter Ancher. Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, Denmark.

As railroads opened up lands like Great Britain and America to extended travel, and with an emphasis on greater privacy during the Victorian era, the inns and hotels that followed these developments began featuring individual rooms such as we know today.

Rough Nights? It's Not Just the Bed

In his short but delightful book "On Going to Bed," novelist Anthony Burgess not only discusses the role of the bed in our culture but also brings us some colorful anecdotes about sleep: our dreams and night terrors, insomnia, somnambulism, and the sensation of sleeping in various types of beds from ship berths to army cots. Scores of images of beds and reproductions of famous paintings of scenes set around a bed enhance Burgess's writing.

After a description of the elaborate beds of Egyptian Queen Hetep-Heres I and Tutankhamen, Burgess writes: "We may divine that kings and queens did not sleep any better on their ornate machines than peasants on their mud floors (Shakespeare is always going on about this), but the elaboration of a bed had nothing to do with somniference."

Even today, in our age of memory foam mattresses and baby-soft sheets, many of us have trouble sleeping. That this is evident may be deduced from our flourishing market in sleeping potions, the steady stream of articles on how to sleep better, and our own frequent complaints of insomnia or failing to get eight hours of shut-eye. We might take some consolation from the fact that, rumors to the contrary, recent research has shown that earlier generations slept no better than do we.

The Slippery Definition of 'Bed'

At the end of "On Going to Bed," Burgess, despite writing such a book, tells his readers that he himself has not slept on a bed in his own house in years, but on a mattress on the floor. He has, he writes, a tendency to fall out of raised beds, plus he enjoys spreading around his mattress piles of books, "a tea-making apparatus," a record player, and even a small refrigerator.

Now for my own confession. For the last 18 months, I drift at night into a La-Z-Boy, a recliner tilted backward as far as possible. After my daughter and her family moved north for work and school, I in turn moved from the basement and bedded down on the first floor in this mechanical chair rather than establishing my quarters for sleep on the second floor. I feel more comfortable and secure knowing that I'd have access to three exits.

Does Burgess's mattress qualify as a bed? Given that so many humans have spent their nights on mats or straw, it would certainly seem so. And the La-Z-Boy? Despite its silly name, I would say yes again. At any rate, like those cowboys who once claimed that months of stretching out on the ground made a feather bed impossible for sleep, I have come to prefer my somewhat cramped chair to the beds upstairs. To add a twist to an old adage, "I've made my non-bed and now must lie in it."

As Burgess writes of his mattress: "This, being a place reserved for rest, sleep, love, writing, reading, listening to music, and other activities or non-activities which make no direct contribution to the wealth of the world, may well be considered to be a bed as we have so far, without tedium or definition, understood it."

Perhaps, like our predecessors—the peasants who slept on dirt floors beneath thatched roofs or the nobles who snored in four-posters in manor houses—we might simply call a bed that place where we regularly lie down and seek respite in slumber.

And with that loose definition, good readers, I bid you good night. Sleep well.

Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, N.C. He is the author of two novels, "Amanda Bell" and "Dust on Their Wings," and two works of non-fiction, "Learning as I Go" and "Movies Make the Man." Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See JeffMinick.com to follow his blog.

PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE OF THE CAMPANIA REGIONAL MUSEUMS DIRECTORATE/COURTESY OF THE MINISTERO PER I BENI E LE ATTIVITA CULTURALI

"Moses Before the Burning Bush," 1514, by Raphael. Charcoal and black chalk with heightening, pricked for transfer; 4 feet 6 inches by 4 feet 7 inches. Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte, Naples, Italy.

FINE ARTS

IN AWE OF RAPHAEL'S DRAWINGS

'The Credit Suisse Exhibition: Raphael' at The National Gallery, London

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"Of all the artists of his day, [Raphael's] the one who had the greatest impact on European art, from his own time right down to the 20th century," the Ashmolean Museum's keeper of Western art, Catherine Whistler, said in a video.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the exhibition is the sheer number of Raphael's drawings on display, around 40 in all. To see Raphael's drawings is to almost see into the artist's mind, and how he overcame challenges to create a clear, comprehensive composition.

TIM NIGHSWANDER/IMAGING4ART

"Study for the Head of an Apostle in 'The Transfiguration,'" circa 1519–20, by Raphael. Black chalk over pouncing; 14 3/4 inches by 10 7/8 inches. Private Collection.

Raphael's drawings can take us on an adventure into the artist's world.

Disegno: 'True Art'

Our idea of drawing today may be no more than an artist putting ideas onto paper in the form of a quick sketch, a preparatory drawing for a painting, or a finely finished stand-alone drawing. But during the Renaissance, drawing or "disegno" in Italian, wasn't just the act of drawing itself; it was more profound.

"Disegno" is translated as "design" or "drawing" in English, but the concept of disegno isn't so literal. For Renaissance artists, disegno represented their technical brilliance and inventive genius bearing fruit on paper. This wasn't rote copying. Artists created these drawings by engaging the wisdom, intellect, knowledge, and imagination that they'd learned from their apprenticeships and ongoing art practice.

Renaissance art apprentices trained long, hard, and methodically to understand and re-create a variety of forms and the human figure. First they'd copy ancient and contemporary sculptures and architectural reliefs in monotone before they could copy from life (the male figure). Then, only when they were competent in drawing in monotone could they introduce color. These artists knew the human figure so well that by the end of their apprenticeship they could confidently and effectively move figures around in complex compositions.

Traditionally, the art of disegno was held in high esteem. According to the Visual Arts Cork encyclopedia website, in 15th-century Renaissance aesthetics "disegno was seen as true art, while colorito [coloring, favored by Venetian artists such as Titian] was considered more of a craft."

An Intimate, Traditional Art Practice

Raphael's drawings are the closest we can get to the master's mind. Whereas we can read the writings of his peers, Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, to get insight into their character and how they lived their lives, there are only two surviving letters written by Raphael (both addressed to his maternal uncle, who raised him).

Raphael himself rendered each one of his drawings, whereas many of his paintings are workshop pieces that he made with his band of assistants. An artist's drawings can be likened to a writer's journal. And if we let them, Raphael's drawings can take us on an adventure into the artist's world: his imagination, thought process, and journey to mastery. "Raphael's drawings are like a behind-the-scenes view of his artwork," a fellow exhibition visitor said to me.

THE ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

"Study for God the Father Appearing to Moses," circa 1513–4, by Raphael. Pen and brown ink, possibly over minimal stylus indications; 10 5/8 inches by 15 3/4 inches. Presented by a body of subscribers, 1846, The Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

ARTOTHEK/STADEL MUSEUM

"The Incredulity of St.Thomas," 1510–11, by Raphael. Silverpoint on pink prepared paper, retraced with a stylus by another hand, contours and interior details retraced with the point of the brush and light gray ink; 8 inches by 7 3/4 inches. Städel Museum, Frankfurt.

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM, CAMBRIDGE

"The Incredulity of St. Thomas," by Raphael, circa 1510–11. Pen and brown ink; 9 1/8 inches by 14 7/8 inches. Lent by the Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge.

JEAN-GILLES BERIZZI/RMN-GRAND PALAIS (MUSEE DU LOUVRE)

"Standing Female Nude," circa 1517–18, by Raphael. Red chalk over stylus indentation; 14 1/4 inches by 10 inches. Department of Graphic Arts, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Some of his drawings are finely finished stand-alone works, but most often these drawings are the working documents that he made to prepare a composition. Some of the drawings are displayed in the exhibition next to the finished work (a print, painting, bronze, or tapestry, to name a few), enabling visitors to see Raphael's work from conception to completion. And some of his drawings, such as the exquisite piece "The Holy Family With a Pomegranate," he generously gifted to other artists as models or studies to make their own works.

What's wonderful to see in some of the exhibition's studies are the fast strokes and repetitive lines of a sketch or composition in transition. Some of these marks are unintelligible to us now, but for Raphael, they would've been part of his artistic process. Some-such drawings survive only because they're on the back or corner of a more significant study. Some drawings also show slight adjustments in the tilt of a head, for example.

Raphael's red chalk sketch for his painting "The Virgin and Child With the Infant St. John the Baptist," commonly known as "The Alba Madonna" (owned by the National Gallery of Art in Washington), shows how familiar he was with the Virgin and Child motif. His quick study is as if he's jotting down a reminder rather than an exacting image. He placed the figures in a tondo, a round composition that was fashionable in Florence at the time and not the easiest composition to conquer. The study mirrors the composition in the finished painting except that John, who went on to become St. John the Baptist, holds a sheep in the study; he holds a cross in the painting. The Christ child steadies the top of the cross for John, as if to say, "Keep your faith, and God will guide you."

Of the many notable drawings in the exhibition, there are a number of works that are rare or firsts for Raphael. In the late 15th century, Renaissance artists drew only male models in the studio, and these models were also used for female poses. According to the exhibition catalog, Raphael's drawing titled "Standing Female Nude" may be the first drawing to be rendered directly from a female nude since classical antiquity. With its more realistic, fleshy form, this figure shows a marked difference from the more steady, smooth lines of the idealized figure.

Raphael made a couple of designs on the subject of "The Incredulity of St. Thomas" for Perugian goldsmith Cesarino Rossetti to create a pair of bronze medallions (the other was for "The Descent Into Limbo") for the Chigi Chapel, in Rome. These were the first designs he made for a sculptural relief, and he created them without highlights (which would've been necessary for a two-dimensional piece such as a painting). Both medallions are in the exhibition next to the studies.

Meeting God

Nothing prepared me for seeing Raphael's "Moses Before the Burning Bush," a cartoon (full-sized preparatory drawing) that he created as part of the ceiling fresco titled "God the Father Appearing to Moses," in the Vatican's Stanza di Eliodoro (Room of Heliodorus).

At around 4 feet 6 inches by 4 feet 7 inches, it's an imposing work (made up of 18 sheets of paper glued together). And for an over-500-year-old cartoon created in charcoal and black chalk with highlights, it is surprisingly well preserved. Artists created cartoons to transfer their designs directly onto wet plaster when creating frescoes. They would prick a series of holes in the cartoon to outline the design and then punch charcoal dust through the holes onto the painting surface (wall or ceiling) to transfer the image. Some of these cartoons were lost in the transfer process. But this cartoon is what's called an auxiliary cartoon, specifically made for Raphael or an assistant to copy the drawing's details from.

THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

"Study for the Head of St. James," circa 1502–3, by Raphael. Black chalk, with traces of pounced underdrawing; 10 3/4 inches by 8 1/2 inches. The British Museum, London.

JEAN-MARIE DAUTEL/PALAIS DES BEAUX-ARTS DE LILLE

"Studies for 'The Alba Madonna' and Other Sketches," circa 1509–11, by Raphael. Red chalk, pen and brown ink and black chalk (recto); 16 3/4 inches by 10 7/8 inches. Palais des Beaux-Arts de Lille, France.

In the cartoon, Raphael captured the moment Moses sees God miraculously appear in the burning bush to speak with him. Moses humbly kneels in reverence, covering his eyes.

The exhibition catalog notes that Michelangelo had just finished painting the Sistine Chapel when Raphael created this cartoon, which may explain why Raphael, influenced by Michelangelo, rendered Moses more muscular than his usual artistic figurative style.

Raphael's drawing "Study for God the Father Appearing to Moses" is part of the composition that includes "Moses Before the Burning Bush." This work, the catalog explains, is in a style similar to German painter and printmaker Albrecht Dürer's apocalypse series of 15 woodcuts, which he had created based on the Book of Revelation. Raphael exchanged drawings with Dürer, and both were equally aware of each other's work.

Raphael shows God in heaven surrounded by fast-moving clouds and seraphim. His depiction of God here was inspired by Michelangelo's fresco "The Creation of Adam" on the Sistine Chapel's ceiling.

Raphael chose to render God as a line drawing in pen and brown ink. It's a clean, clear drawing showing Raphael's excellent draftsmanship with minimal stylus marks. He used a blind stylus (a metalpoint) to lightly score the drawing surface in a process called underdrawing before he committed to his design. "Above all, blind stylus was a tool that unleashed Raphael's creativity, allowing him to think freely and economically on the paper before turning to visible media," the Ashmolean Museum's research assistant Angelmaria Aceto wrote in the 2020 book "Raphael: Drawing and Eloquence." Researchers continue to discover more about how Raphael used the blind stylus by using technology and techniques such as raking light (directing light at an oblique angle).

That's what I find fascinating about seeing Raphael's drawings up close; it's a more intimate look at the artist's process than what's seen in a painting.

Raphael's study of the head of an apostle was made for his final painting, "The Transfiguration." The painting shows Christ on the top of Mount Tabor, but at the bottom of the painting is an unconventional scene. Raphael chose to depict an episode in which Christ cures a young boy who is possessed. The apostles come to the boy's aid first, but they cannot save him. Each of the apostles' faces shows a different reaction. In his delicately rendered black chalk work titled "Study for the Head of an Apostle in the Transfiguration," Raphael conveyed the apostle's tender response. In the painting, two apostles point upward to Christ, showing that the only way the boy can be saved is to put his faith in Christ.

Universal truths like this make Raphael's art enduring even today, over 500 years after his untimely death at just 37 years old. Raphael died on Good Friday in 1520, and his body lay in state in the Vatican beneath his painting "The Transfiguration."

The long awaited "The Credit Suisse Exhibition: Raphael" at The National Gallery, London, was meant to open in 2020, to commemorate 500 years since Raphael's death in 1520, but the pandemic led to its postponement. The exhibition runs through July 31. To find out more, visit NationalGallery.org.uk

The exhibition is curated by David Ekserdjian, professor of history of art and film at the University of Leicester; Tom Henry, professor emeritus of history of art at the University of Kent; and Matthias Wivel, the Aud Jebsen curator of 16th-century Italian paintings at The National Gallery, London.

BOOK REVIEW

An Argument for a Political Path Forward

MICHAEL B. THOMAS/GETTY IMAGES

Former President Donald Trump gives remarks during a Save America Rally in Mendon, Ill., on June 25, 2022. Author F.H. Buckley considers President Trump a progressive conservative.

DUSTIN BASS

It seems that F.H. Buckley thinks a bit differently than most Republicans and Democrats.

In his book "Progressive Conservatism: How Republicans Will Become America's Natural Governing Party," he makes it quite clear why that is the case. He belongs to a genre of politics that is rare: a combination of the two (or three, if you toss in Libertarian).

This is not to say that Buckley does not belong to a political party. The cover of his book makes that obvious. But it is clear that he has a smidgen of disdain for the current order of the Republican Party, and much more so for the modern American political order.

In his book, Buckley is calling for a more progressive approach to the conservatism of the Republican Party. It's not the type of progressivism found in the Democrat Party, which has handed itself over completely to socialism with tinges of Marxism, but the progressivism reminiscent of Theodore Roosevelt.

Roosevelt isn't the only example the author provides. He bases his progressive conservative thought on Abraham Lincoln and Dwight D. Eisenhower as well. He lauds these three progressive conservative presidents and, surprisingly, adds a fourth president: Donald Trump.

Buckley writes that these four presidents worked more toward bettering the population as a whole rather than catering to their party. He presents his arguments based on these presidents' abilities to address, and often solve, current economic or social issues even when it meant going against their own party members.

A Return to Pre-Revolution Aristocracy

The author points out that one of the primary problems in America is the decline in economic mobility. He questions why the country has slowed down, if not moved backward, in arguably the most important category for a country's citizens.

He believes, and makes the case, that politicians have reverted to a pre-Revolution aristocracy, where "who you know gets you where you want to go." It's the "old money" system, just with "new money."

He further notes that America is laughably behind in the economic mobility category (among many other categories) among First World countries. The author uses Canada, our neighbor to the north, as a prime comparison. He describes how Canada, which is just as diverse as our country, offers far better economic mobility for its citizens. One of the reasons for this is our faltering (and that is putting it mildly) education system.

While progressive liberals have dominated the scene in secondary and post-secondary education, our once exalted system is in shambles. With each new generation subjected to our abysmal education system, our country falls further behind.

Another issue at hand is the completely out-of-control immigration problem along our southern border, oft-ignored by Democrats. The massive and continual influx of immigrants, who provide little if any benefit to our country, is taking a toll on our economic, educational, and political systems.

Buckley suggests, however, that Democrats see the mass migrations, legal or otherwise, as a benefit to their party. This, in turn, provides no incentive for modern progressives to halt or minimize the number of immigrants.

The author demonstrates how this influx of migrants (who are typically uneducated and poor) and the high percentage of teenagers graduating from a high school program that has dumbed down American intellect has catered to and even bolstered the modern American aristocracy.

He argues that Americans need to go back to a nationalist idea.

Corruption at High Levels

Several times, Buckley references the Founding Fathers' attempt to stifle corruption in political office. They were aware that eliminating corruption altogether was a fool's errand, but tried to minimize it through laws as well as checks and balances they hoped would prove sufficient.

The author agrees that this worked to an extent, but in the modern 20th- and 21st-century era, laws (predominantly regulations) have created a massive bureaucracy with a vast abundance of corrupt bureaucrats.

He argues that the administrative state, with agencies like the EPA and the FBI, has become more powerful than the elected officials, those who are supposed to be in charge of running the country.

The author further pinpoints that there are so many rules and regulations created and administered by the administrative state that it stifles business, especially small businesses. The steady growth of the regulatory state has created a deterrence for small businesses to grow and for entrepreneurs to start businesses. Large corporations, on the other hand, benefit from the regulatory state by facing less and less competition. Buckley correlates this and the rise of our aristocracy.

What Is Nationalism?

In "Progressive Conservatism," Buckley discusses how the term "nationalism" has been corrupted. This corruption started in the middle of the 20th century, but before that time, nationalism was looked upon favorably.

He argues that Americans need to go back to a nationalist idea, and that doing so is the natural order of nations. Nations, like individuals, are naturally concerned first with self-preservation.

He suggests that the ones advancing a move toward global preservation over national self-preservation are globalists. These globalists, like those of the World Economic Forum, are the global aristocracy.

Buckley further argues that it takes a strong leader—like a Lincoln, Roosevelt, Eisenhower, or Trump—to push against the national-global aristocracy. The purpose of his book, however, is not to convince a political figure to become a progressive conservative but to convince citizens, Democrats and Republicans alike, to become progressive conservatives.

His argument is that this is the only way forward. He states that other philosophies, like libertarianism, integralism, and naturalism, are not the paths forward. His arguments are not hyperbolic takedowns of various political philosophies, but rather coherent reasons for disagreement. His arguments are interesting and often convincing.

2 Extremes

Buckley is a self-proclaimed progressive conservative. He worked with Trump as a speech writer. And although he refers to many of the former president's successes, he doesn't believe that Trump is the president of the future. In his view, Trump is too divisive a figure, a lightning rod for controversy.

Regardless of your perspective on Trump, Buckley does make proper use of the 45th president. Trump, as polarizing of a figure as he was, was neither a liberal nor a conservative, but rather progressively conservative. Though it may sound like a contradiction in terms, Buckley makes the case that it is not; his book is dedicated to that premise.

He argues, to an extent pleads, with readers not to choose between the two extremes of conservative or liberal. Unfortunately, Buckley is right: The two have become polar extremes in that one must not agree with the other.

For those who are on the fence politically or who are staunchly conservative or liberal, this book will cause readers to reconsider their positions on numerous political issues.

Buckley finishes the book with a list of tasks that must be performed in order to place our country back toward the top of the First World countries. These are all issues that need resolution. Buckley's view is that they can most likely be accomplished only by a progressive conservative.

Dustin Bass is the host of Epoch TV's "About the Book: A Show about New Books With the Authors Who Wrote Them." He is an author and co-host of The Sons of History podcast.

'Progressive Conservatism: How Republicans Will Become America's Natural Governing Party'

Author
F.H. Buckley

Publisher
Encounter Books

Date
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Hardcover
272 pages

SUMMER READING

A Delightful Book of Whimsy and Depth

SEAN FITZPATRICK

"The Wind in the Willows" is a glorious summer book that may be one of a kind in its ability to stir the soul to the joys of the good life.

Written by English author Kenneth Grahame in 1908, "The Wind in the Willows" is about the friendship of animals who represent, in a sense, types of people. Mole and Rat become friends after Mole runs from the doldrums of spring cleaning and discovers a river and a companionable Rat, a water vole who lives on the river and introduces him to this new expanse of the world.

These two befriend Mr. Toad of Toad Hall and are often engaged in keeping him out of the trouble he causes himself due to his chasing after new fads, especially motorcars. Their adventures lead them to seek and find the mysterious Badger of the wild woods, see Toad manage a madcap prison break, and besiege Toad Hall to rid it of the weasels who take it over.

The tale brings a charming anthropomorphization of complementary temperaments with such tremendous depth of feeling and, as the opening of the tale puts it, a "spirit of divine discontent and longing."

'The Wind in the Willows' may be the quintessential children's story for adults.

This is also a book that hints to us a little of what secrets the wind whispers to the willows. It reveals the rumors of the river, and it pauses in the music that plays at the gates of dawn. Grahame's masterpiece praises the commonplace, just as summer reminds all of the praise due to common marvels.

"The Wind in the Willows" may be the quintessential children's story for adults—a book that requires patience, pondering, and even a prayerful attitude. It is a book that is committed to the whimsical world it creates. And by taking seriously even the silly little things that make up its events, it discovers a strangely enduring wisdom that lies in such trifles as spring cleaning, dark forests, picnics, and messing about in boats.

Summer invites reflection and self-reflection by way of the happy memories, making "The Wind in the Willows" a perfect companion for this season of merriment and meditation. What's more, it is a story that even reflects its reader, just as the leisure activities of summer days do. The author A.A. Milne, creator of Winnie-the-Pooh, called Grahame's story a touchstone of one's worth:

"['The Wind in the Willows'] is a test of character. We can't criticize it, because it is criticizing us. ... When you sit down to it, don't be so ridiculous as to suppose that you are sitting in judgment on my taste, or on the art of Kenneth Grahame. You are merely sitting in judgment on yourself. You may be worthy: I don't know. But it is you who are on trial."

Grahame's story is not exactly a children's book, but children are the ones who appreciate it most readily. Perhaps they feel there is something more to the story than what they can understand, which is the way children experience the whole world, and what makes it (and this story) wonderful to them. "The Wind in the Willows" is like viewing the whole world through a child's eyes. It passes over the panorama of wood and field, of wilderness and home, of calm and crisis, of oars and cudgels, of comrades and competitors—with joy, practicality, humor, and, most of all, wonder.

Sean Fitzpatrick serves on the faculty of Gregory the Great Academy, a boarding school in Elmhurst, Pa., where he teaches humanities. His writings on education, literature, and culture have appeared in a number of journals, including Crisis Magazine, Catholic Exchange, and the Imaginative Conservative.

METHUEN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Four friends with very different personalities. Cover illustration for "The Wind in the Willows" by Michael Hague.

ALL PHOTOS BY FUQUA FILMS/AMAZON STUDIOS

Lt. Cmdr. James Reece (Chris Pratt), attending a succession of funerals for his long list of fallen comrades in arms.

FILM INSIGHTS WITH MARK JACKSON

Mark Jackson grew up in Spring Valley, N.Y., where he attended a Waldorf school. At Williams College, his professors all suggested he write professionally. He acted professionally for 20 years instead. Now he writes professionally about acting. In the movies.

TV SERIES REVIEW

Written by a Former Navy SEAL, About SEALs, for SEALs

MARK JACKSON

The Rotten Tomatoes skew for "The Terminal List" now stands at audiences: 95, critics: 38. What that ridiculous discrepancy means, in this case, is that America's patriotic Silent Majority are enjoying this well-told military tale, while the effete critic-crew daintily sip their cappuccinos, sniff, and pronouce feh! upon the proceedings.

Part of that 38-rating is due to many critics questioning the casting of Chris Pratt in the lead role of a Navy SEAL commander. Pratt plays Navy SEALs all the time. He was a SEAL in "Zero Dark Thirty," also in the "Jurassic Park" series, and now in "The Terminal List." He's put considerable time into researching how best to portray SEALs on screen.

One has to use common sense when dealing with Rotten Tomatoes. For example, it stands to reason that actual SEALs can more correctly gauge Pratt's performance as a SEAL than film critics can. And since the audience for this TV series undoubtedly contains quite a few actual SEALs (because it's about SEALs, and is written by ex-SEAL Jack Carr)—when that particular audience rates the show 95, that should tell you something.

Lt. Cmdr. James Reece's one-man wrecking crew and his methodical eye-for-an-eye vengeance spree also rankles critics. It's so depressing! It's not philosophically and morally uplifting! Even though it is pretty dark stuff (it's war; war is hell), I say it is uplifting. It's warrior creed, and it is what it is. To quote the quote I often quote in reviews about films with military content:

"We sleep soundly in our beds because rough men stand ready in the night to visit violence on those who would do us harm."

That quote is from Richard Grenier, who was actually reformulating something that Rudyard Kipling said, which is:

"Men can only be highly civilized while other men, inevitably less civilized, are there to guard and feed them."

The military is old school and Old Testament. Traitors die. It's New Testament as well. But that's how America stays safe. I've read this five-book series a few times, and I can tell you, if war stories are your thing, "The Terminal List" is worth your while. That 95 percent, as mentioned, is likely active-duty and retired SEALs, other active-duty and retired spec ops military communities, regular branches of the military, and patriots nationwide.

8 Episodes

"The Terminal List" is eight highly binge-watchable episodes, executive-produced by Antoine Fuqua, the man who brought us the inimitable "Training Day," "The Equalizer," and "Shooter." These are manly man minimovies, which womanly women who like manly men will also like. These are definitely not 50-genders-and-a-rainbow-colored-unicorn TV episodes.

"The Terminal List" successfully weaves together different action-thriller elements. The first two episodes, "The Engram" and "Encoding," are about Reece when he is back in the USA after a disastrous SEAL op results in his entire team being KIA, except him. He's exhibiting significant PTSD symptoms, as well as some kind of disturbing, escalating, medical condition that leaves him dangerously delusional.

After the initial setup, it becomes clear that "The Terminal List" has a double meaning: Reece now has a list of suspects who sold him and his men down the river (and the traitors on this list need terminating); but he himself is a ticking time bomb, medically speaking, and might also be terminal.

"The Terminal List" then slowly morphs into a political thriller as Reece, along with seasoned war correspondent Katie Buranek (Constance Wu of "Crazy Rich Asians"), chases down various conspiracies to expose the coverup of why his platoon's mission may have been intentionally sabotaged (hint: pharmaceutically) as well as why his wife and daughter were also targeted for execution.

'The Terminal List' is eight highly binge-watchable episodes.

'The Terminal List'

Directors:
Antoine Fuqua, Ellen Kuras, M.J. Bassett, Frederick E.O. Toye, Tucker Gates, Sylvain White

Starring:
Chris Pratt, Taylor Kitsch, Constance Wu, J.D. Pardo, Jeanne Tripplehorn, Tyner Rushing, Sean Gunn, Jai Courtney, Riley Keough

MPAA Rating:
TV-MA

Running Time:
8 episodes, 55 minutes each

Release Date:
July 1, 2022

★★★★☆

There follows a series of—I hesitate to say "satisfying," but there it is—executions where Reece crosses names off that terminal list that's written in pencil on the back of one of his daughter's drawings. Lacking a pencil at one point, his bloody fingertip crosses off the final name. As mentioned, it's a warrior tale by, and for, warriors.

Episodes 5 and 6

In "Disruption," and "Transience," Reece starts making a move on the main bad guy of the series, Steve Horn (Jai Courtney). Horn is president of wealth management group Capstone Industries and a tech mogul making huge money exploiting the military.

Military personnel will enjoy loathing this character. His hobby is playing at being an operator, practicing room-clearing with a team of shooters in a "kill house" on his lunch break, and sporting a bone-frog tat. The frog skeleton tattoo is beloved of SEALs (since they are frogmen, and this is how they honor their fallen brothers), but if a civilian were to get caught with one of these, by actual frogmen? Showing it off to ladies in a bar? And he hadn't actually earned it, and was therefore engaging in "stolen valor"? As the Bible puts it, "It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea. ..."

The action and intrigue ramp up; Reece's quest gets evermore desperate and foreboding—and cool. A SEAL team is sent after him, one of whom worked with Reece and knows him to be a man of upstanding character. You definitely want to see what happens after the team leader cautions, "If James Reece is off the reservation we have our work cut out for us."

Reece, on his warpath, not knowing how much more time he has on this planet, isn't out to clear his name or bring the cluster of corporate jackals to justice. With both his team and his family decimated, he's the Grim Reaper, hellbent on notching souls and visiting karmic retribution on evildoers before his time runs out.

Favorite Scene

My favorite scene is in Episode 3, when one Adrian Gordonis (played by former SEAL and author Jack Carr himself), a former Marine Raider turned mercenary, tries to sneak up on Reece in a restaurant, where he's being warned about his mental state and brain tumor by reporter Katie Buranek.

Reece's spidey-sense immediately picks up on the imminent threat, and he's out the back of the restaurant in a flash, with Buranek in tow, who's wondering what the heck is going on, thinking Reece is completely delusional. Out in traffic, he suddenly backs his jeep into the car behind him (containing the would-be assassin), gets out, and blasts him to kingdom come. Grabbing a folder out of the dead man's smoking car, he throws it at Buranek. "Read that. That's a professional target package. Still think I'm losing my mind?"

Cast

Pratt's partner, in getting to the bottom of all the evil wrongdoing, is his former SEAL teammate (Taylor Kitsch, who's also played his fair share of SEALs). J.D. Pardo of "Mayans M.C." plays a tough FBI agent, Jeanne Tripplehorn ("Basic Instinct") is a possibly highly disingenuous secdef,

and Riley Keough (Elvis Presley's granddaughter) plays Reece's wife, Lauren. It's a solid cast, with Kitsch and Pardo getting to do somewhat more than their stereotypical roles of surfer-dude "hero's buddy" and "dogged FBI agent on hero's trail" usually allow.

What About Next Season?

The intro to the series captures the book's powerful portrayal of student-of-war James Reece's home office and study, packed with military history books and darkly festooned with war mementos that warriors bequeath to one another after notable battles—a pair of crossed tomahawks on the wall, and the like. Normally, I hit the "skip intro" option when watching a TV series, but I enjoyed looking at the photos of bearded SEAL teammates and vintage firearms, repeatedly.

Luckily, this was eight episodes made out of the first book of Jack Carr's series. There are four more books. I will say that this first book, "The Terminal List," is the best of the series.

Reading these military operator thriller books can be problematic, in that they're structured so that you get a chapter that focuses on the hero (and that's excellent reading), but then there are multiple story lines dedicated solely to the antagonists, and I personally am never interested in getting to know evil foreign characters named Osama, Dmitri, Abdul, or Klaus. So I impatiently flip through 'til I find what the hero is up to next: jumping out of airplanes, sniping bad guys, and so on.

The good thing, though, is that this format is intentionally geared toward movie treatments, which means that the movies contain a high probability of being better than the books. Movies make it possible to be interested in the sections about Achmed and Yuri getting terrorist money from Saudi princes to finance dirty bombs to be detonated in Washington. So count on the next season of "The Terminal List" (should it have the same producer crew) to be at least equally as good.

"The Terminal List" is currently available on Amazon Prime Video.

Tony Layun (J.D. Pardo), FBI special agent and head of the Fugitive Task Force, and Mac Wilson (Christina Vidal), a deputy U.S. Marshal and Layun's partner.

Lt. Cmdr. James Reece (Chris Pratt), a U.S. Navy SEAL with eight combat deployments.

Ben Edwards (Taylor Kitsch), a CIA Ground Branch operative. He's a former Navy SEAL and James Reece's former teammate.

FINE ARTS

Rome Is the Prize

French artists competed for an invaluable education in the Eternal City

DA YAN

PUBLIC DOMAIN

"Léon Pallière in His Room at the Villa Medici, Rome," 1817, by Jean Alaux. Oil on canvas. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Under the soaring ceilings of his room and studio at the Villa Medici in Rome, Léon Pallière rested casually. He was a student of fine art who had studied painting at the Parisian Academy before arriving in Rome for his education—as a "pensioner" of the French Academy. By 1817, when the intimate portrait was painted of him was painted by Jean Alaux, the young man was just at the end of his five-year fellowship and about to return to France to commence his artistic career. In the picture, the room opens to a wide vista and is filled with all kinds of everyday objects. He has witnessed the indelible experience of his expatriate life intertwined with art, history, and the airy allure of the Eternal City.

For young artists working in France in the 18th and early 19th centuries, Rome was the ultimate destination, the ideal training ground for them to become immersed in the relics of antiquity and the masterpieces of the Renaissance.

Just as Rome wasn't built in a day, neither was its reputation as an artistic center. During the Middle Ages, the crumbling ruins of the ancient capital came to represent its cultural stagnation and were thought to have induced a "bad air" that delayed its artistic development. It was not until the 15th and 16th centuries that artists began recognizing the achievements of the ancients and seriously studied their sculptural and architectural relics.

Though imitative in the beginning, these innovators of the Renaissance took from antiquity an artistic essence, which helped them create works that in turn celebrated their own new epoch. During the era following the Renaissance, ancient remains were treasured as classical but so were the contemporary artwork of masters such as Raphael, Michelangelo, Annibale Carracci, and Nicolas Poussin. Rome, which boasted a profusion of both ancient and contemporary classical art, thus began attracting aspiring artists from all over Europe.

Coming from a line of legendary painters, the young Pallière was especially privileged for winning the "Rome Prize"—a prestigious government scholarship that provided for five years of undisturbed study at the French Academy in Rome. Established in 1663 under the reign of Louis XIV, the prize had marked the beginning of some stellar careers—those of François Boucher and Jean-Honoré Fragonard, Jacques-Louis David, and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, who owed much of their achievement to the early Roman sojourn.

In 1803, Napoleon Bonaparte moved the academy to the beautiful and serene Villa Medici, a Renaissance palace and garden that has housed the institution since. Each year, students in Paris competed fiercely for this singular opportunity, but only one was selected from each discipline. The triumphant painter, sculptor, and architect would then make the two-month journey to the Eternal City, where they would continue their rigorous training and unrelenting progress. After all, youthful success marked only the beginning of an arduous path, where one was judged not only against one's peers but also against the weighty tradition that had repeatedly brought forth great artistic flowerings.

Rome was the ultimate destination, the ideal training ground for artists.

JEAN-PIERRE DALBERA/CC BY 2.0

The Villa Medici became the center for French academic arts when the French Academy was transferred to the town of Medici by Napoleon in 1803.

Indeed, the books, sculptures, and drawings pictured in Pallière's portrait betray the young man's hard work. Today, however, few nonspecialists in French painting would have heard his name. Winner of the 1812 Rome Prize, Pallière graduated and then painted an altarpiece for a French church in Rome before passing away shortly afterward. A fellow student, François-Édouard Picot, the winner for the following year, went on to have a successful career painting historical and mythological scenes, but he was best remembered as an educator—the teacher of such academic artists as Gustave Moreau, Alexandre Cabanel, and William Bouguereau. Jean Alaux, a fellow pensioner in Rome and the author of Pallière's portrait, ended up directing the Villa Medici following the tenure of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres.

Except for the neoclassical Ingres and the symbolist Moreau, the reputations of those successful painters have been mostly eclipsed by the advent of impressionist and modernist art, which sought to break away from the rigorous training and prescriptive rules of the academy. But those so-called limitations—whether the accurate depiction of the human figure or the skillful rendering of perspectival space—were in fact none other than the foundational building blocks in the construction of a visual narrative.

These building blocks enable the composition of bodies and objects in a picture, which is capable of infinite expressions of stories and sentiments. Though demanding years of laborious study, the art academy managed to develop a sophisticated system of pedagogy, which passed down the achievement of the Renaissance from Italy to France and beyond. For artists today, that academic tradition might well serve not as a constraint but as a productive source of inspiration.

Da Yan is a doctoral student of European art history. Raised in Shanghai, he lives and works in the Northeastern United States.

WELL SAID

Last Love

ELLA WHEELER WILCOX

The first flower of the spring is not so fair
Or bright, as one the ripe midsummer brings.

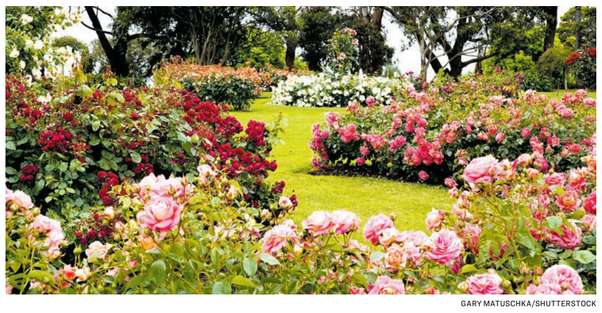
The first faint note the forest warbler sings
Is not as rich with feeling, or so rare
As when, full master of his art, the air
Drowns in the liquid sea of song he flings
Like silver spray from beak, and breast, and wings.

The artist's earliest effort wrought with care,
The bard's first ballad, written in his tears,
Set by his later toil seems poor and tame.

And into nothing dwindles at the test.

So with the passions of maturer years
Let those who will demand the first fond flame,
Give me the heart's last love, for that is best.

Spring blooms cannot compare to mid- and late-summer flowers.



GARY MATUSCHKA/SHUTTERSTOCK

BOOK REVIEW

The Adventures That Forged Our First President

A great adventure set in historical context

ANITA L. SHERMAN

PUBLIC DOMAIN

Lt. Col. Washington holds night council at Fort Necessity, an illustration by John McNevin; from a book by Washington Irving. The Darlington Collection of Engravings at the University of Pittsburgh.

As I finished the last pages of Peter Stark's "Young Washington: How Wilderness and War Forged America's Founding Father," I could hear the distant bursts of fireworks—early celebrations for the Fourth of July. Very fitting as I closed a read capturing the early life of our nation's first president.

I very much enjoyed (and reviewed for The Epoch Times) another of Stark's books, "Astoria," recounting the two-pronged expedition–one by land and the other by sea—to establish a city on the Pacific Coast near the Columbia River, spearheaded by businessman John Jacob Astor with the blessing of then President Thomas Jefferson. It was a harrowing narrative.

Stark, himself one to embark on wilderness adventures, gives readers another engaging and enthralling narrative, this time taking a look at a young George Washington two decades before he leads America to independence.

A New Perspective

I suspect that most of us grew up learning about a stately, mature, white-haired gentleman known for his military and political prowess, who led the charge against British dominance in the latter part of the 18th century. He was also a farmer, grew tobacco, and lived at Mt. Vernon.

But what of his early life? Was it so glorious and rewarding?

Although esteemed and not without some wealth and property, the Washingtons were not in the first tier of landed aristocracy. Young George was not sent away to England for his education. His father died when he was 11, and his mother did not want him to go to sea. His early years as a surveyor were sort of a punt position. He had grander things in mind.

While always coveting a commission in Britain's Royal Army, Washington, at 22, was a young colonial officer serving the British Empire in the very vast wilderness of the Ohio Valley. He was tall, athletic, a fine rider but inexperienced, naïve, and at that time very self-absorbed and keen on self-promotion. He was often at odds with his superiors. He was given to outbursts of anger and easily offended.

But in the mid-1700s, he found himself deep in territory that the French claimed as their own, the Indians had lived on for centuries, and the British also claimed. His first mission was to deliver a letter from the governor of Virginia, Robert Dinwiddie, to the French commandant. It was not a gold-gilded task.

Lessons to Learn

Sporting a fancy uniform and social standing didn't matter. Surviving was what counted. Washington got several harsh lessons when he found himself in frigid waters after a fall from a rocketing raft, when he faced sleepless nights in dense, unknown forests, or when he disregarded the advice of more experienced guides. Many of his impulsive and rash decisions had dire consequences.

Always patriotic and with a keen sense of honor, Washington also railed continually for higher rank and commensurate pay. In his mind, colonial officers should be on par with their British Royal Army officers.

Stark's writing is so vividly visual and he writes with such strong and powerful narrative that readers will be shivering along with the troops, terrorized by the thought of being scalped, or suffering the pangs of dysentery from poor sanitation or contaminated food.

One of Washington's early encounters with a small French contingency left him feeling quite victorious. How the skirmish was handled was met with mixed reactions. Many historians concur that it may have been a spark that ignited the French and Indian War, a conflict that spanned some seven years.

As Stark notes in his heavily researched and annotated narrative:

"The eighteenth-century British commentator Horace Walpole would famously remark, 'The volley fired by a young Virginian in the backwoods of America set the world on fire.'"

Greatness in the Making

Washington was a big fan of the theater and perhaps saw himself as an actor on the world stage. When in the wilderness, one was brave and courageous. When in genteel society, one dressed well, danced eloquently, and rubbed shoulders with officers and gentlemen. Washington could shift hats easily and with dignity and grace.

Although ambitious, Washington became a caring advocate. The wilderness with all its charm and fury formed and transformed him. He morphed from a temperamental self-achiever into a mature leader.

Enduring summer storms and subzero winters infused a fierce resiliency and growing self-reliance, all preparing him for what he would eventually face at Valley Forge.

He may have made mistakes, but he moved on. These became life lessons rather than a life sentence. Leading troops into battle taught him to set aside his own ambitions and stand in solidarity with those who counted on him for leadership and diplomacy. The welfare of the whole became more important than his own heroism.

Washington survived battles and illnesses. He came to believe that he was destined, protected by Providence, for a greater place in history.

This is no mildewed tome; it's a cinematic adventure set in historical context.

Stark brilliantly tells a story of a young, ambitious Virginian and the trials and tribulations that molded his character and ultimately cast him as the leader of a nation.

Anita L. Sherman is an award-winning journalist who has more than 20 years of experience as a writer and editor for local papers and regional publications in Virginia. She now works as a freelance writer and is working on her first novel. She is the mother of three grown children and grandmother to four, and she resides in Warrenton, Va. She can be reached at anitajustwrite@gmail.com

A look at a young George Washington two decades before he leads America to independence.

An adventure about a young man becoming a leader.

'Young Washington: How Wilderness and War Forged America's Founding Father'

Author
Peter Stark

Publisher
Harper Collins

Year
2018

Hardcover
528 pages

LITERATURE

Fighting the Devil Requires Finding Our Own Goodness

'The Devil and Daniel Webster' by Stephen Vincent Benét

KATE VIDIMOS

RKO RADIO PICTURES

(L–R) Edward Arnold as Daniel Webster, James Craig (in back) as Jabez Stone, and Walter Huston as the devil in a scene from 1941's "The Devil and Daniel Webster."

Sometimes we lose ourselves in our faults, vices, and desires, and they come to rule our lives. We are usurped from the throne of our better self and our sinful side rules.

In his short story "The Devil and Daniel Webster," Stephen Vincent Benét explores these human tendencies.

The hardest and worst luck often befalls man, and this can break him. And so it does to Jabez Stone, for he has the worst luck in the entire village. He owns the poorest livestock and the rockiest fields. His family faces constant struggles: "If he plants corn, he gets borers; if he plants potatoes, he gets blight."

Such terrible luck pushes Stone to the breaking point. Lost in desperation, and with the desire for a little good fortune, he sells his soul to the devil.

Stone does not immediately regret his choice, for the devil provides him with the best luck in the entire community. He comes to have the fattest livestock, the most plentiful crops, and the healthiest family. He even successfully runs for selectman, a New England town officer.

But it comes at a price. Every year, the devil comes to take Stone's bloody signature, and every year Stone grows more tired. He tires of being lost and consumed by this desire for good luck. He regrets selling his soul and wants to free himself from this wicked bargain. However, he cannot free himself on his own.

A Powerful Advocate

Sometimes we need someone else to remind us of who we are and to help us find ourselves again. Stone seeks the help of his neighbor, the great Daniel Webster. Webster is a lawyer of such talent and power that "when he stands up to speak, stars and stripes come right out in the sky." Such is the man that Stone needs to help him fight against the devil.

When the devil arrives to take Stone, claiming Stone as his property, Webster challenges him. Webster and the devil debate, but the devil proves a formidable opponent. As the devil backs Webster against a wall, Stone's soul seems evermore lost.

In an act of determination, Webster cries: "I stand on the Constitution! I demand a trial for my client!" He tells the devil that, as long as the judge and jury are American, the devil can choose whomever he desires to pass judgment.

The devil consents and chooses some of the most criminal men in American history to be judge and jury. These chosen men are already dead and damned: Walter Butler, Simon Girty, King Philip, Governor Dale, Morton of Merry Mount, the bloody pirate Teach (Blackbeard), Reverend John Smeet, and (acting as judge) Justice Hathorne.

The trial begins. With the judge, jury, and prosecutor all against him, Webster "begins to heat, like the iron in the forge." When it comes to his turn to speak, Webster plans to "flay [the devil] with every trick known to the law, and the judge and jury too."

Calm Eloquence

As he is about to speak, Webster notices that the hellish fire in the eyes of the judge, jury, and devil burns more fiercely than before. He realizes that he has lost himself in his anger, so much so that "if he fights them with their own weapons, he'd fall into their power," and he would lose and be lost.

Webster calms down, finds himself again, and begins with the utmost eloquence. He shows that Jabez Stone is a man. He shows that "there is sadness in being a man, but it is a proud thing too." He talks of the sorrow, sin, and evil of man. Yet, despite these evils, he shows the goodness, glories, and pleasures of man. He meditates on "the things that make a country a country, and a man a man."

In the story, even those damned men feel their humanity again.

As Eleanor Sickels says in her article "Stephen Vincent Benét," by showing the goodness, pride, and glory in men, Webster "interprets the people to themselves." He finds not only himself but also Jabez Stone and all men. In that instant, even those damned men feel their humanity again. Webster wins the trial, saves Stone, and dispels the devil.

Benét shows that men are sinful—there is no hiding that—but men are also glorious, good, and temperate. They can make deals with the devil, but they can also overcome, banish, and beat him.

By focusing on our faults, vices, and desires, we perpetuate those sinful tendencies. To combat the devil, we must look at the good in man and the good in ourselves so that we can rise above our failings and fight for goodness.

Kate Vidimos is a 2020 graduate from the liberal arts college, University of Dallas, where she received her bachelor's degree in English. She plans on pursuing all forms of storytelling (specifically film) and is currently working on finishing and illustrating a children's book.

REWIND, REVIEW, AND RE-RATE

Director William A. Wellman's Outstanding Western Romp

IAN KANE

I've seen a number of outstanding Westerns starring Gregory Peck, with "The Gunfighter" (1950) and "The Big Country" (1958) being counted among my personal favorites. However, a lesser-known film titled "Yellow Sky" (1948) is perhaps the most unconventional: a hodgepodge of seemingly incongruous elements that, under the guidance of a lesser director, could have fallen apart at its seams.

Yet under the brilliant direction of Oscar-winner William A. Wellman ("A Star Is Born," "The Ox-Bow Incident"), everything coalesces into a beautiful tapestry of drama, high tension, sultry romance, and action-packed shootouts.

Things kick off in the Wild West of 1867, a couple of years after the Civil War (1861–1865) ended. Like scraggly tumbleweeds, a gaggle of seven scurrilous bandits rolls into a little dust-strewn town. The gang consists of leader James "Stretch" Dawson (Gregory Peck), Dude (Richard Widmark), Bull Run (Robert Arthur), Lengthy (John Russell), Half Pint (Harry Morgan), Walrus (Charles Kemper), and Jed (Robert Adler).

After relieving the local bank of its funds, the outlaws ride out of town with Jed taking up the rear to be on the lookout for any lawmen or soldiers on their tails. It doesn't take long for a large group of Army cavalrymen to appear on the horizon in hot pursuit. It also doesn't take long for Jed's body to get perforated by the soldiers' bullets, allowing the other six bandits to get a good lead on their pursuers.

But when they find themselves at the edge of the parched salt flats of Death Valley, in Eastern California, they face a serious dilemma. Should they turn back and risk running into the soldiers or attempt to traverse the 70 or so miles of sun-baked desert to reach the other side, and do so with the little water they have stored in their canteens?

While Stretch decides to ride out into the desert, Dude, constantly jockeying for leadership of the gang, wants to turn back. As the others depart one by one to follow Stretch out into the foreboding expanse of scorching dust and salt, Dude stubbornly falls in line behind them.

The outlaws almost perish in the heat before stumbling upon a small town nestled in some nearby foothills. At first, Stretch thinks he's seeing a mirage and wipes his weary eyes to make sure that what he's seeing is real. But the town is real—only not offering what they think it represents. "Water," the men take turns croaking from their cracked, puffy lips.

Their hopes of finding an immediate water source are dashed when they shuffle into town and find out it's long been abandoned. A large, crooked sign reading "Yellow Sky" is posted above the doors of the ghost town's Main Street saloon.

The stunning backdrop almost qualifies as its very own character.

However, just as the men are about to give up the ghost, hope appears in the form of Constance "Mike" Mae, a rugged tomboy who was raised by local Apaches. She senses that the men probably have less-than-stellar ratings when it comes to morals, so she has her rifle constantly in their faces. But as an innately merciful soul, she does guide them to a nearby spring on the outskirts of town.

After the men quench their thirsts, Stretch decides to linger around for a bit, having been smitten by the rough-and-tumble lassie. The other men ogle her, especially Lengthy.

It isn't long before the band of bandits uncovers what Mike is doing out in the desert all alone with only her grandpa (James Barton) keeping her company. The two are running a clandestine mining operation in the nearby hills and have already secured around $50,000 in gold. Suddenly, things become a lot more complicated.

Tension develops between the pair of prospectors and the gang. Although a budding romance also begins between Stretch and tomboy Mike, Dude remains single-minded in his desire for the gold—all of it. As tensions rise and fits of anger erupt, loyalties shift and double-crosses ensue. There are so many twists and turns throughout the second and third acts of the movie that you never quite know who's going to get filled with hot lead.

But amid all of this tumult, Stretch begins to turn away from his bad-boy ways and eventually emerges as a changed man. But can he do so before getting bushwhacked by one of his men? And then there's that roving band of Apaches that presents an existential threat.

An Early Nuanced Western

Wellman's direction pairs well with the visually arresting scenery, captured expertly by cinematographer Joseph MacDonald. From gentle, dusty breezes to howling desert windstorms, the stunning backdrop almost qualifies as its very own character.

Likewise, the performances by the film's outstanding cast—particularly Peck, Baxter, and Widmark—are gritty and realistic. As in "The Gunfighter," Peck plays a conflicted character running from a shady past. But here, we see the gradual transition from a bad guy with a conflicted consciousness to a good guy who eventually redeems himself.

"Yellow Sky" represents one of the first cinematic glimpses of what Westerns eventually evolved into in the early 1950s. Instead of straight-ahead dramas with uncomplicated good guys and bad guys, we see a more nuanced film with complex characters. There are also some good moral messages to be gleaned, which eventually culminate into a satisfyingly feel-good ending that lightens up the relatively grim subject matter.

Ian Kane is an U.S. Army veteran, author, filmmaker, and actor. He is dedicated to the development and production of innovative, thought-provoking, character-driven films and books of the highest quality. You can check out his health blog at IanKaneHealthNut.com

20TH CENTURY FOX

Constance "Mike" Mae (Anne Baxter) and Stretch (Gregory Peck) face off in "Yellow Sky."

'Yellow Sky'

Director:
William A. Wellman

Starring:
Gregory Peck, Anne Baxter, Richard Widmark

Not Rated

Running Time:
1 hour, 38 minutes

Release Date:
Dec. 24, 1948

★★★★☆