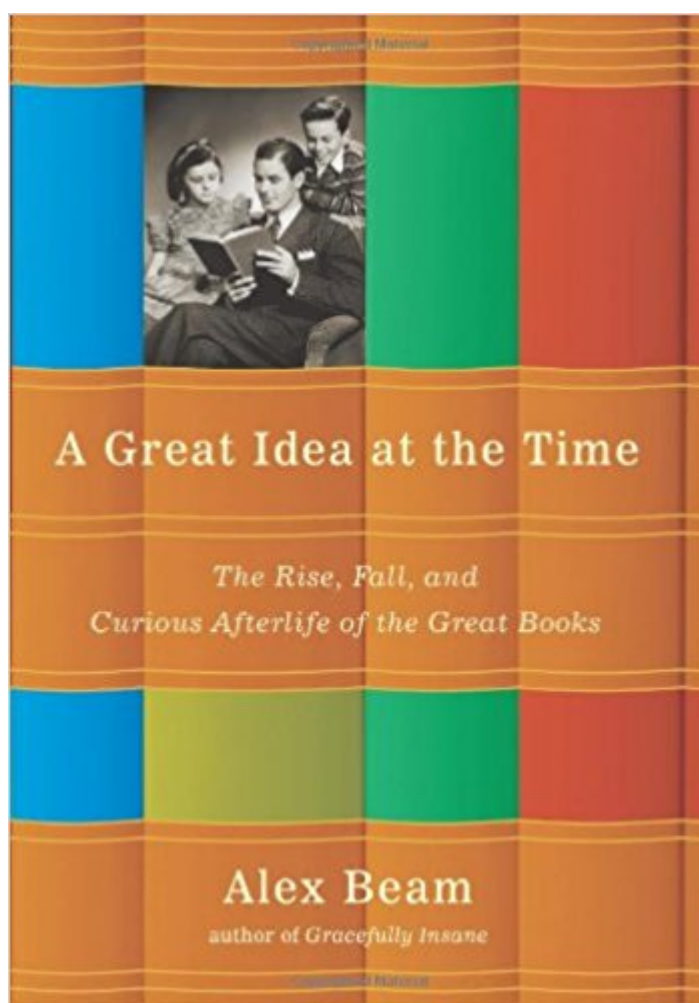


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# A Great Idea At The Time: The Rise, Fall, And Curious Afterlife Of The Great Books



## Synopsis

Today the classics of the western canon, written by the proverbial 'dead white men,' are cannon fodder in the culture wars. But in the 1950s and 1960s, they were a pop culture phenomenon. The Great Books of Western Civilization, fifty-four volumes chosen by intellectuals at the University of Chicago, began as an educational movement, and evolved into a successful marketing idea. Why did a million American households buy books by Hippocrates and Nicomachus from door-to-door salesmen? And how and why did the great books fall out of fashion? In *A Great Idea at the Time* Alex Beam explores the Great Books mania, in an entertaining and strangely poignant portrait of American popular culture on the threshold of the television age. Populated with memorable characters, *A Great Idea at the Time* will leave readers asking themselves: Have I read Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* lately? If not, why not?

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Before the dawn of the television age, in an ambitious effort to enlighten the masses via door-to-door sales, Encyclopedia Britannica and the University of Chicago launched the Great Books of Western Civilization, "all fifty-four volumes of them... purporting to encompass all of Western knowledge from Homer to Freud." Led by the "intellectual Mutt 'n' Jeff act" of former University of Chicago president Robert Hutchins and his sidekick Mortimer Adler, the Great Books briefly, and improbably, caught the nation's imagination. In his discussion, Boston Globe columnist Beam looks at how and why this multi-year project took shape, what it managed to accomplish (or

not), and the lasting effects it had on college curricula (in the familiar form of Dead White Males). Beam (*Gracefully Insane: Life and Death Inside America's Premier Mental Hospital*) describes meetings endured by the selection committee, and countless debates over Euripides, Herodotus, Shakespeare, Melville, Dickens and Whitman ("When it comes to Great Books, no one is without an opinion."), but tells it like it is regarding the Syntopicon they devised-at "3,000 subtopics and 163,000 separate entries, not exactly a user-friendly compendium"-and the resulting volumes, labeling them "icons of unreadability-32,000 pages of tiny, double-column, eye-straining type." By lauding the intent and intelligently critiquing the outcome, Beam offers an insightful, accessible and fair narrative on the Great Books, its time, and its surprisingly significant legacy. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Alex Beam clearly has an eye for definitive and damning details: nearly every reviewer repeated his observations about the Great Books of the Western World being printed in faux leather and in nearly unreadable type, as well as his characterization of Mortimer Adler as a "Hobbit." Reviewers also contrasted (and commended) *A Great Idea's* readability with the thick tomes it addresses. But several reviewers also turned Beam's wit on its head, noting that while *A Great Idea* is a good book, it is not a great one. Some reviewers found fault with the author's occasional tendency to sound too folksy. Others didn't know whether to treat the Great Books phenomenon as an effort to save civilization or middlebrow hucksterism-or both. So do you want to read great books, or just read about them as a phenomenon? We'll take the former. Copyright 2008 Bookmarks Publishing LLC

I interrupted reading David Denby's "Great Books" to read this and couldn't stop. I enjoyed looking at the cultural pressure of the time of my youth as if it were quaint rites of some isolated tribe. Now it's back to Denby. The two books complement one another well. As one who remembers the History of Western Civilization course required of me as a freshman in college as the best learning experience of my life, the flight from this focus in the 1960s and 1970s I felt was a tragedy. Denby deals with this in the 1990s, and somewhat agrees. But Beam chronicles the hucksterism of the parallel pressure to own the 102 great books, a product more sold than bought. The three interesting figures about whom Beam's delightful gossip revolves are Robert Hutchins, Mortimer Adler, and William Benton. If these names are familiar to you, you are pretty old, and you may enjoy "A Great Idea at the Time."

This could itself have been a great (or at least a very good) book, but IMHO the author wastes

verbiage on his invective against the personalities, so ignoring the substantial breadth and depth of thought within the Great Books series. As a counter-argument to the contemporary quest for more 'stuff' to acquire in order to be fulfilled, there is an older wisdom which contemplates the place and importance of philosophy and the humanities. The observation that the books are challenging is not a reason not to read them. The world might be a happier, more tolerant and just place if they were read more widely. Yet Beam himself seems discordantly ambivalent towards what he did actually read of the Books themselves. And the other books he mentions captured my interest - the autobiography of JS Mill for example.

Many reviewers gave this a hearty "thumbs-down" and I couldn't help but wonder why, since I have owned a set of the Great Books for many years. I reluctantly must agree with Beam in his appraisal of this being a "snobbish" set of books and suffers highly from the oft-criticized tiny type and the intellectual snobbery of their editorial board deciding that footnotes would clutter the copy. What a wonderful set this "COULD HAVE BEEN" if they had allowed the use of footnotes and glosses! I really have to question too, their selection criteria that includes mathematical and planetary data that simply is not even taught any more. I wanted initially to be upset with Beam's constant "dissing" of Adler and Hutchinson, but after hearing him out...He's right. It is a book about a set of books that are now off the market except for the remaining stock that Britannica has on hand. Too bad that Britannica did not give us bigger type and notes!

Interesting read about the history of the Great Books and the men involved in bringing them to the American consciousness in the twentieth century. Would be of main interest to those who have an affinity for classic literature. Just be warned that those who actually read the Great Books come across as being an oddity in this work.

I don't think this is the greatest book on the subject, but was definitely worth reading. In particular, I didn't know how much of a dork Adler was, or how much of a business the whole project was. It was interesting to see how the author, while clearly demeaning the whole fad, still held open the possibility that the study of the great books could be life-changing for some. Even while bashing the idea, he still seemed to respect that. Thus his book makes for good, balanced reading. Also a very short book: take note.

Alex Beam, a columnist for the Boston Globe, found himself intrigued by something new and did

something many of us wish we could do: he researched the subject and wrote a book about it. As any reader of his newspaper columns knows, the author is (all at the same time) erudite, opinionated, occasionally scathing, and often laugh-out-loud funny. In "A Great Idea at the Time," Beam gives all of these qualities a good workout. Many of the Great Books that were promoted as essential reading (for everyone from Joe the Plumber to students at the University of Chicago) are tough sledding, to say the least. By contrast, Beam (as he states in his Introduction) set out to write "a brief, engaging, and undidactic history of the Great Books. A book as different from the ponderous and forbidding Great Books as it could possibly be." In this, he has certainly succeeded. In an era of dinosaur-sized tomes about pretty much everything, Beam has the wit to say his piece in 200 pages. He seems to have done the heavy lifting of reading countless letters, biographies, etc., so that we don't have to - and the result is the more compelling and intimate for it. I'll admit that I was a bit hesitant about the subject matter. After all, the curriculum of "dead white males" has, mostly, fallen out of fashion; therefore, why read about the efforts of other (now-) dead white males to promote it? The answer, of course, is that the journey is more important than the destination. Think books like Simon Winchester's "The Professor and the Madman" - you may not have been desperate to learn about Victorian loony bins or big dictionaries with eye-ruining small type; but once you bought the ticket, you really enjoyed the ride. Here, the same rule applies. Beam's eye for the telling detail, his schizophrenic habit of laying bare the foibles of his subjects while never losing his affection for them, and his don't-blink-or-you'll-miss-it verbal acuity guarantee a great read. (And don't make the mistake of skipping Beam's annotated list of the Great Books at the end of the text - it would be like walking out of "There's Something About Mary" before the credits come on.) Now - I have to make a comment about some of the other reviews that have been posted, although usually I don't find doing so to be a productive exercise. There is one gentleman, who actually appears in the book, who is unhappy because, while the author was not unkind to him, he was "smart-alecky and snide" toward the worthies behind the Great Books movement. Well, as noted, Beam often is opinionated and even scathing; for the typical reader, though, this means that "A Great Idea at the Time" is fun to read and far more than a dry recitation of facts. This reviewer has his own axe to grind, and grind it he may; but the one-star rating is less a review of the book and more a display of the axe. Another couple of reviewers seem to think that Beam set out to write some kind of definitive academic history of a social and literary and educational movement; I would agree with them that this book fails that test. Happily for Beam, however, it is clear that he did NOT set out to pen such a history or answer The Big Questions about what makes for a good education. Instead, as he states in his Introduction, he wanted to answer these questions: "Who \*did\* read these books? Who chose

them anyway? Who bought them? Why did the Great Books die? Or did they? Who is still reading them?" Judged on its own terms and not those imagined by certain reviewers, the book is a great success: a concise, interesting, witty, even charming look at a largely-forgotten part of our recent past. Enjoy the journey.

The book is just what I expected and delivered promptly.

Very Pleased. Quick delivery, in new condition as promised. A fun read for anyone interested in the Great Books. Thank you.

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