November 7, 2014

**What Book Changed Your Mind?**

*The Chronicle Review* asked 12 scholars what nonfiction book published in the last 30 years has most changed their minds—not merely inspired or influenced their thinking, but profoundly altered the way they regard themselves, their work, the world.

**Doping and Plagiarism**

I am fortunate to have had regular encounters with transformative books: books that change my sense of what can be done in the novel (Sebald, Bernhard, Knausgaard), of what kinds of story can be told about 18th-century literature and culture (Albert O. Hirschman’s *The Passions and the Interests*, the philosopher and intellectual historian John Passmore’s extraordinary book *The Perfectibility of Man*), of the amazing possibilities that exist in the space between academic literary criticism and the essay (Geoff Dyer’s *Out of Sheer Rage*).



The nonfiction book that most changed my mind about something of significance, though, came from a quite different arena of reading.

Tyler Hamilton’s *The Secret Race: Inside the Hidden World of the Tour de France: Doping, Cover-Ups, and Winning at All Costs* (2012), written with Daniel Coyle, gives an account of why cyclists dope that shattered my beliefs about cheating and judgment. Like all academics, I am intolerant of plagiarism. It is anathema to me, and though I am capable of a "hate the sin, love the sinner" position in individual cases, I have never been able to understand why people do it. The rewards are so meager, the risks so high, and doing the work for real is so much more satisfying. Hamilton, though, as he describes the milieu for young professional cyclists in the 1990s, portrays a world in which being invited to dope is the sign that you’re being taken seriously. It’s not just that if you don’t dope, you’re definitely not going to win; doping is a prerequisite for staying in the game.

It turns out that doping isn’t like plagiarism at all. Because what became clear to me as I read *The Secret Race* is that when I was a Ph.D. student, in the 1990s, although I would rather have died than plagiarize, if someone had said to me, "The only way you are going to be able to do top-quality scholarship and get a tenure-track job is if you take a cognitive-enhancement drug that is illegal and dangerous to your health—everyone who gets the jobs and who is able to publish good work is taking it, and you owe it to yourself to stay in that peer group"—I would have taken the drug with very little agonizing.

Luckily for me, there is no enhancement drug of the sort pictured in Alan Glynn’s novel *Limitless*, no intellectual analog for what doping does for cyclists. I was able to do the kind and quantity of work required without illegal chemical assistance. There were no hyper-fast-talking, brilliant, drugged competitors acing the interviews and keeping me out of the place I wanted to be. If there had been, I do not imagine that I would have made the "right" choice, the ethical choice. If there is something we really want, something that concerns our professional vocation in the deepest sense, how can we turn it down?

 —*Jenny Davidson is a professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University.*

**A Bold, Lyrical Theory of Experience**

For me, that book was by Julian Jaynes. *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (1976) is one of those lush, overambitious books that gets many things wrong, but in such an interesting way that readers, on finishing it, find that they think about the world quite differently. At least I did, although I think the book crept up on me year by year until I suddenly decided that this odd book I’d read in college had a fundamental insight—and had presented to me the puzzle that became my life’s work.



Jaynes taught psychology at Princeton, back in the days before psychologists had walled themselves off from literature, and he noticed that in the Homeric epics, the gods took the place of the human mind. In the *Iliad* we do not see Achilles thinking. Achilles acts, and in moments of strong emotion, he acts as the gods instruct him. When Aga­memnon steals his mistress and Achilles seethes with anger, Athena shows up, grabs him by the hair, and holds him back. Jaynes argued that Athena popped up in this way because humans in archaic Greece had no words for inner speech. So when they felt compelled by this strong internal force, they attributed that sensation to the gods. "The gods take the place of consciousness."

Moreover, Jaynes thought that in these moments, the ancient Greeks heard with their ears the gods speak. He thought that the inability to name the sensation as internal altered the sensation so that in moments of powerful feeling, moments when one feels pushed from within by one’s own overwhelming rage or joy, the Greeks heard the cognitive trace of that emotion audibly, as if it were coming from outside. "Who then were these gods that pushed men about like robots and sang epics through their lips? They were voices whose speech and direction could be as distinctly heard by the Iliadic heroes as voices are heard by certain epileptic and schizophrenic patients, or just as Joan of Arc heard her voices."

Well, maybe yes and maybe no. To me the point was that the way we pay attention to inner sensation changes the nature of the sensation, sometimes profoundly. The way we recognize mental events and deem them significant, the way we reach for what we take to be real—those differences shape what we know of God and madness.

The book begins: "O, what a world of unseen visions and heard silences, this insubstantial country of the mind!" I feel drab in Jaynes’s company. I just want to get the facts right. But this was another of his lessons. He taught me that data can sing.

 —*T.M. Luhrmann is a professor of anthropology at Stanford University.*

**A Journey Into Deep Time**

"Biological Determinism," the class that Stephen Jay Gould team-taught with Richard Lewontin, had a final exam that wasn’t graded. In fact, it was optional, meant less to test us than to let the professors know how much we’d learned. We all showed up. And I, for one, remember more from that class than from any other, though what sticks in my head is a lot of words—"punctuated equilibrium," "branching evolution," "the spandrels of San Marco"—words that I was never able to reconnect on my own into anything like those fierce polemics that we heard twice a week.



So it was a revelation when I saw *Time’s Arrow, Time’s Cycle* at [Moe’s](http://moesbooks.com/) (I was in Berkeley that summer, 1988). Like everyone else, I’d read Gould’s popular books, like *The Panda’s Thumb*, *Hen’s Teeth and Horse’s Toes.* But this one was different. It was dry, abstract, not colorful. The first chapter, "The Discovery of Deep Time," states matter-of-factly that, on the scale of geological time, human life on earth is no more than a "milli­microsecond at the very end."

What does it mean to be part of that millimicrosecond? We might know how many zeroes to add after the 10, but "getting it into the gut," Gould says, is another matter. Punctuated equilibrium was his way of getting deep time into his gut. Contrary to popular understanding, which simply equates the concept with violent ruptures, Gould sees it as a baseline rhythm resulting from the paradox of long duration, in which continuity and change might turn out to be indefinitely and unpredictably alternating. His lifelong argument against any kind of determinism is based on that durational uncertainty: The world is driven not only by arrows, by linear directionality, but also by nonlinear processes, by cascading variations and unforeseen side effects that in turn generate branching trajectories of their own.

For me, it was as if he was talking directly about literature—about the vicissitudes of periodization and the folly of shoehorning everything into an airtight causal model, whether chronological determinism, economic determinism, or national determinism. Thinking about long duration also gets me to say out loud what I’ve always felt in my gut: The epic is the genre that most closely tracks the history of the human species, there from the first, and likely to remain till the bitter end. It took me a while to write *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time*. Gould had been dead for five years when the book came out. But it almost doesn’t matter. That milli-millimicrosecond at Moe’s had done its work.

 —*Wai Chee Dimock is a professor of English and American studies at Yale University.*

**Other Ways to Live**

The Yale political scientist James C. Scott’s *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009) gave me the resources to come out as an anarchist. Subtitled "An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia," the book describes the traditional cultures of the Zomian highlands, a region that spreads across the national boundaries of Laos, Thailand, Burma, and other countries.



It is hard to announce one’s anarchist convictions as an adult in polite society, since to do so invites accusations of hypocrisy: You use government roads, don’t you? You live a life that is totally integrated into the state structure, benefiting from it in numerous ways every day, don’t you? Yes, but there are other ways to live, and there is an increasingly urgent need to learn from people who have retained and perfected these other ways.

Marxism and other varieties of left statism typically look to forms of organization best suited to urban industrial workers and hold that these forms can and should be brought about for society as a whole. In socialist countries such as France and Norway, this can easily come to resemble a protection racket or gated country club, where people already in the system are given tremendous membership privileges, while the outsiders who show up and attempt to insert themselves remain on the margins or are simply squeezed out.

Impoverished migrants flocking to urban centers are desperate for the advantages the state can provide. But not everyone is. Some people, often found hidden away in hard-to-reach mountainous zones, practicing subsistence agriculture, are largely indifferent to what the state has to offer. They do not understand why they should be bothered with keeping identity papers or that other sort of paper that can be exchanged, in accordance with strange magical beliefs, for commercial goods. Pushing your way into the system, via politics, is not the only way for groups of human beings to thrive. One can also stay off the radar, slip through the cracks, and still realize something like the human good.

This is not to excuse the status quo: another accusation commonly leveled by statists, who seem to believe that it is a violation of human dignity to accept life in the cracks, that the only acceptable form of thriving is the one that gets official recognition. Scott shows why such a view is misguided, as it portrays the plight of peoples like the Zomians as if in a zero-sum competition with the political claims of oppressed groups in the face of state power.

Petition the state for justice, when you have to, or fight against the state, when it shows itself unwilling to respond to the demands of justice. But skirt the state when you can, and don’t elevate it to the ultimate source of all social goods. Learn, in other words, as Scott invites you to do, from the Zomians.

 —*Justin E.H. Smith is a professor of history and philosophy of science at the University of Paris Diderot.*

**How Culture Evolves**

In my University of Chicago Ph.D. program, we were encouraged to explore applications of economic principles to unexpected domains. Influenced by cognitive anthropology, I was always curious about the role of culture in economic choices, and how it might be modeled. *Culture and the Evolutionary Process* (1985), by Robert Boyd and Peter J. Richerson, provided an apparent answer. It was close enough to economic formalism to be understandable, but different enough to be thrilling.

Their idea is simple: Cultural practices are transmitted within societies in a way that is analogous to, but clearly also distinct from, genetic evolution. To show this, Boyd and Richerson used mathematics—extraordinarily so, in anthropology—to "check the logic" of cultural evolution, and to establish bounds on what could evolve culturally, and how.

Much later I began to appreciate that the essence of their idea was something even more profound: Genes that make acculturation fast, and the cultural practices themselves, can coevolve. In my view, this idea effectively "solves" the longstanding puzzle of how behaviors beneficial to groups can evolve through individual genetic selection (at least as much as any social-science puzzle is solved).

Another potential insight from the gene-culture coevolution idea is an answer to the question: How can humanity have gotten so good so fast? The candidate answer is that genetic adaptations that occur over lengthy time scales can facilitate cultural evolution over much shorter time scales. So we can hypothesize how human cultural practices could spread rapidly enough for our species to rule the world in just 100,000 years.

The gene-culture coevolutionary approach is now starting to bear even more fruit as people search for particular genes (or markers of genetic variation) to pin down how exactly genes spread culture. The coevolutionary approach also allows a graceful and formal way to think about how cultural practices construct niches, which, in turn, affect genetic selection. I hope that cultural neuroscience will also find the coevolutionary framework useful, since genes are a blueprint for building the brain, but the brain also assimilates cultural learning and expresses it behaviorally.

Finally, Boyd and Richerson’s book showed the fertility of ignoring traditional boundaries between fields. Boundaries should be treated as chalk marks dividing one soccer game from another. When the sport changes, erase the marks and draw new fields.

 —*Colin Camerer is a professor of behavioral finance and economics at the California Institute of Technology.*

**The Sweet Lies We Tell Ourselves**

Reading *The Second Shift* (1989), by Arlie Russell Hochschild, was a revelation. When I graduated from college, I had refined the tools of academic success, but I didn’t know where to aim them. It wasn’t until I read *The Second Shift* that I understood what nonfiction could do: reveal ourselves to ourselves, without pity or condescension, and with great stores of empathy. I do what I do today—write about the triumphs and struggles of everyday people, of how we pinch and squeeze and fit ourselves into the boxes created by broad social and economic trends—because of that book’s example.



*The Second Shift* is more than just a study of how dual-career couples negotiate housework. It is about the sweet lies we tell ourselves so that we can reconcile ourselves to the compromises we make to stay married. It is about the measure and mismeasure we take of each other, comparing loved ones with neighbors, friends, and relatives. It is about the gifts of contemporary intimacy—of deeply, fundamentally recognizing each other—as well as the tragedy of mismatched generosity, of wounding each other with gifts we don’t want. It is about the rivers of gratitude and resentment on which modern love sails and founders.

The book also reveals the historical and cultural backdrop behind these issues and their newfound salience. We hear about women and men, and a stalled revolution that managed to transform one gender and not the other, even as they still have to live with each other, side by side, in many homes. We learn about a corporate world that still presumes that an ideal worker is one unfettered by care obligations, who can work late and move where needed, whose total devotion to work requires someone else doing what needs to be done at home. The book renders visible the threads of power and gender underlying our social world, and the consequential links between society and self.

*The Second Shift* also unveiled for me some of the glories of sociology. I had studied political science, but (with apologies to its current practitioners) I suppose I lacked the imagination to be able to find the corners of that discipline that attended to real people, and instead found myself trapped in questions about the state, voting patterns, and great men. When I discovered *The Second Shift*, I was newly married, new to California, new to sociology, and the book was like a special decoder ring, helping me to decipher my new life. Nonfiction could indeed be powerfully relevant to ordinary people and yet have profound implications; it could be based on research but written with elegance and grace; it could lay bare our inequalities and yet be fundamentally humane.

 —*Allison Pugh is an associate professor of sociology at the University of Virginia.*

**Pessimism and Its Discontents**

Bjørn Lomborg’s *The Skeptical Environmentalist* (2001) changed how I look at the world, both literally and figuratively. The book made me realize that we humans are not despoiling our planet, contrary to so much I’d been hearing, and that, in fact, most societal and environmental indicators have been improving in recent years instead of worsening. Lomborg supported his arguments not with rhetoric, appeals to emotion, or sad and vivid anecdotes but rather with reams of data from reputable and mainstream sources. His work is a sustained assault on ideology with evidence. The counterattack against him was rapid and often nasty; it was also largely ineffective. This is because Lomborg has the great majority of facts on his side.



His broader point is not that we don’t need to be concerned about the environment, but rather that we should be heartened by the clear fact that our solutions, foremost among them democracy and technological progress, are working admirably. As the data have accumulated, Lomborg has modified his position on climate change, but maintains (correctly, in my view) that research and innovation are the best responses to it, and are the only realistic ones. Our environmental challenges are far from over—species loss in particular concerns me—and the positivism of *The Skeptical Environmentalist* seems to be the right way to muster support to meet them. Many critics thought Lomborg’s message was "There’s nothing to worry about; everything’s great." I took away a very different point: "What we’re doing is actually working, so let’s keep it up."

I place this book in the tradition of clear-eyed, data-rich, encouraging examinations of the state of the world started by the economist Julian Simon. These are never as popular as the dour assessments that continue to dominate the conversation. (It seems that pessimism sells almost as well as sex does.) I wish this weren’t the case, and have tried in my own work to emphasize the many ways in which things are getting better. Simon and Lomborg are much to thank for my optimism.

Since *The Skeptical Environmentalist* came out, I’ve had countless conversations with people who were worried about overpopulation, resource depletion, pollution, and other topics on Lomborg’s "litany of doom." I always ask them if they’ve read *The Skeptical Environmentalist*. I’m still waiting to hear "yes" in response. Ideology remains dismayingly popular, but Lomborg is doing what he can to change that. I’m grateful to him.

 —*Andrew McAfee is a principal research scientist at the Sloan School of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.*

**What Good Philosophy Does**

In the 1990s, I was confident that the world was entirely material. I was an atheist and a newly minted philosopher of science; immaterial entities or properties were mumbo jumbo. So I knew I would disagree with David Chalmers’s *The Conscious Mind* (1996). The book had made him instantly famous as the leading critic of materialist orthodoxy in metaphysics. Chalmers didn’t advocate theism or souls with afterlives, but he did hold that conscious experience requires irreducibly nonphysical properties.



*The Conscious Mind* is tightly argued—a model of lucidity and scientifically informed philosophical rigor. The back-cover blurb by the great materialist philosopher David Lewis captured my initial reaction precisely:

Legions of materialists are no doubt busy writing their rejoinders; but there will be few points left for them to make that Chalmers hasn’t made already. We of the materialist opposition cannot go on about how he has overlooked this and misunderstood that—because he hasn’t. All we can do is to disagree about which way the balance of considerations tilts.

Chalmers argues for the bizarre view that consciousness is a fundamental, natural feature of the world, like charge or mass; that it exists (probably) everywhere, even in very simple systems like thermostats; and yet it itself (probably) lacks causal power (raising awkward questions about how we can detect its existence). Panpsychist epiphenomenalist property dualism! Surely this can’t be where our best reasoning about consciousness leads us?

But the brilliance of Chalmers is this: He shows how, if you wish to avoid his conclusions, you are forced into other commitments no less bizarre. Lewis’s materialism, for instance, is also no great monument to common sense. Plunge deeply enough into the metaphysics of consciousness and watch your pretheoretical commitments explode in a confusing chaos of self-contradiction. That’s what good philosophy in this area does.

But how can we decide "which way the balance of considerations tilts"? As Chalmers nicely shows, existing empirical studies don’t take us very far toward settling the most fundamental questions about consciousness in general (or even human consciousness in particular). But neither, seemingly, can we resolve these issues by appeal to theoretical elegance or common-sense intuition. The considerations are too weak and confused, and they point in conflicting directions.

Indeed, I’ve slowly come to think that views even more radical than Chalmers’s deserve consideration—for example idealism, which holds that the world is fundamentally composed of minds and their experiences, the seeming material world just a mental construction. No empirical test or philosophical argument decisively refutes idealism. Nor is it palpably more bizarre or awkward than Chalmers or Lewis.

Chalmers shows that something that seems crazy must be true about consciousness. But which of the crazy alternatives is actually correct? I no longer see how we can know.

 —*Eric Schwitzgebel is a professor of philosophy at the University of California at Riverside.*

**'My Neighbor Is a Jew'**

"Do you know how many letters denouncing Jews the police receive every day?" Catherine Deneuve asks her Jewish husband in François Truffaut’s film *The Last Metro*, set in Occupied France in 1942. "Give me a number."

"I have no idea. 300?" her husband replies.

"Fifteen hundred! Fifteen hundred letters a day saying ‘My boss is a Jew,’ ‘My neighbor is a Jew,’ ‘My brother-in-law is a Jew.’ "



Laurent Joly’s 2012 book, *La délation dans la France des années noires* (*Denunciation in France During the Dark Years*), quotes from some of the millions of denunciations sent to France’s Occupation authorities between 1940 and 1944. Many were anonymous, composed with letters cut from a newspaper, while others were written on letterhead and signed, but all aimed to destroy someone—a boss, a neighbor, a relative, a rival.

Not all were written. One day in March 1943, "Eugénie D." (seven decades on, French law protects the identities of many of those studied by Joly), who worked for the Occupation authorities and consorted with German soldiers, was walking home when René J. shouted at her: "Whore!" Eugénie turned round and hissed: "Now you’ll find out what a whore does." A few moments later she returned with two German military policemen, who arrested René. A military court judged his remark an insult to the German Army and deported him to Mauthausen, where he died a month later. After the Liberation, a relative of René denounced Eugénie for "horizontal collaboration," and a French court sentenced her to five years’ hard labor.

It’s easy to forget the wounds inflicted by foreign military occupation, whether in Europe after 1939 or in Iraq after 2003, especially when the occupied country is deeply divided—a circumstance that often encourages some of the vanquished to seek revenge on their domestic enemies through cooperation with the victors. We can multiply the denunciations of René and Eugénie by hundreds or thousands, each one resulting in the death, imprisonment, or humiliation of a French man or woman.

The legacy of hurt and hatred that such behavior creates takes generations to dissipate. Even today, in every French town or village, everyone knows which side their neighbors, or their neighbor’s parents or grandparents, supported during the Occupation. They also now know who denounced whom.

When Joly’s book appeared, French television screened a documentary that focused on a few of the cases he documented. One of those featured in the program was the sister of "Annette," a young woman denounced anonymously in 1942 for being Jewish. She was arrested and deported to Auschwitz, where she was killed. Her sister discovered the truth only much later: Annette had been denounced by a doctor because his son had fallen in love and wanted to marry her. To avoid having a Jewish daughter-in-law, the doctor wrote his denunciation on his personal letterhead. His son, Annette’s fiancé, pined until the Liberation allowed him to try to find her—but a German bullet killed him first. So the doctor prompted the death of his own son as well as of the woman who was to be his daughter-in-law. Seventy years later, Annette’s sister (now in her 80s) told Joly that discovering the truth "was like a knife to my heart. And it’s still there."

As I watched and listened to Annette’s story, I learned something that I—born and raised in a country that was never occupied—had overlooked. Long after the foreign troops go home, the harm and mischief that they do, or that they permit or encourage others to do, live on. Nothing, no one, will ever be the same again. The knife is still there.

 —*Geoffrey Parker is a professor of European history and an associate of the Mershon Center at Ohio State University.*

**The Frisson of Discovery**

I was 33 and juggling a young family, research, teaching, and the demands of a busy academic life. With the pressure to publish and to bring in grants as my tenure decision approached, I was also working on an ulcer.

When a friend gave me a copy of a recently published book by Timothy Ferris called *Coming of Age in the Milky Way* (1988), I thanked him and set it aside. It was a popular book on astronomy, and I somewhat arrogantly assumed it had nothing to teach me. When I did pick it up, a month or so later, I was instantly absorbed. By the time I finished it, I was blown away.



Ferris had been an editor for *Rolling Stone*. His entrée into astronomy was working on the Voyager Golden Record, an artifact of human civilization that has now left the solar system attached to the *Voyager 1* spacecraft. He labored for more than a decade on *Coming of Age* and distilled a huge amount of scholarship into its pages. But the real insight was the storytelling. He gave the history of astronomy a narrative arc and created compelling thumbnail sketches of the main protagonists. But he didn’t give the science short shrift; it was presented fully and clearly.

Reading *Coming of Age* reconnected me with the thrill of research and the *frisson* of discovery. It helped in my teaching, too, as I incorporated storytelling into my introductory astronomy class. Moreover, it reminded me that the popularization of science could be a high calling, intellectually the equal of discovering new knowledge.

When I reread Ferris’s masterwork a decade ago, the book changed the vector of my career. I had already shifted my focus toward teaching and education, and I had co-written two textbooks on introductory astronomy. *Coming of Age* convinced me that there was a need for people who could give voice to the search to understand the mysteries of the universe. I didn’t have Ferris’s journalistic chops, but I challenged myself to learn the craft of writing.

I still get stressed out balancing research, teaching, and administration, but Ferris showed me that the excitement of science lies in sharing it with others, so that everyone can feel the curiosity that compels us to understand our situation in time and space. It’s the itch that must be scratched.

 —*Chris Impey is a professor of astronomy at the University of Arizona.*

**Women, Power, and Prestige**

Sometime around 2007, I came across a dark and unassuming paperback while browsing the discount section of the MIT Press bookstore, in Cambridge. The book, Virginia Valian’s *Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women* (1998), had been published a decade earlier. "Why do so few women occupy positions of power and prestige?" the back cover asked.

I thought systematic discrimination against women was on its way out. I was a young Ph.D. student in psychology at Harvard and felt I’d had every advantage. Yet for some reason I didn’t dismiss the book as irrelevant or outdated. Instead I took it home and devoured it over a few dispiriting days.



In *Why So Slow?*, Valian clearly and persuasively reviews evidence on implicit bias: stereotypes and associations that can affect behavior without conscious awareness. Our implicit assumptions about men and women influence actions and decisions in subtle and pervasive ways. We might, for example, judge a man "a natural leader" but a woman as "bossy and aggressive" for exhibiting the same behavior, or we might offer a job to a male candidate over a female candidate because he better fits our implicit prototype of what someone in that role is like. Such disparities might seem small, but over the course of a lifetime they have large and lasting effects.

The remarkable and terrifying thing about implicit bias is that it operates even in people who explicitly endorse egalitarian beliefs. Good intentions aren’t enough to override our unconscious psychological processes. And because they’re unconscious, we often don’t realize there’s a problem to be fixed. In fact, women are just as likely to exhibit implicit bias against women as are men.

While Valian’s book is now almost two decades old, the story she tells has been validated rather than challenged by subsequent research. And the processes she documents aren’t restricted to bias against women—the same mechanisms can hinder social change for men (in parenting roles, for example). Additional implicit biases influence other stereotyped groups.

Valian’s book prompts a number of important questions. To what extent are we responsible for our own implicit attitudes? How can we (as individuals, institutions, societies) reduce detrimental biases and their effects? And given that implicit biases are relatively immune to rational argumentation and persuasion at the level of explicit beliefs, is it appropriate to influence people’s behavior using other means, such as strategic changes in their environments designed to influence implicit associations? I’m still grappling with those questions today.

 —*Tania Lombrozo is an associate professor of psychology at the University of California at Berkeley.*

**Notes From an Older Reader**

One of the greatest history books of the past 30 years is Robert Bartlett’s *The Making of Europe 950-1350* (1993). I can think of no better nonfiction book I have read written in that period. But did it do more than teach me something and influence my thinking? Did it profoundly alter the way I regard myself and the world? Not on your life. I suspect that the author, though flattered, would think any reader nuts who so claimed. What Bartlett did show was that it is possible to write a learned book that informs the expert as well as the lay reader. Nary a compromise to dumb it down to sell. Just good writing, good ideas, and powerful material.



No nonfiction books in the past 30 years have transformed me. Some have taught me things, made me hold their authors in deep respect (Bartlett, Bynum). Some have moved me greatly (some of the better soldier memoirs). But knocked me off my horse on the way to Damascus? Nope.

I am 68; if you had asked me the question about a self-transforming book when I was 19, I would have had to say just about half of the ones I read. You could say these books changed my mind, but my mind was pretty much a tabula rasa when I was in my first year of college. Rather they *made* my mind. Each week was a transformative experience. In one course these: the *Pensées*, which made a callow teenage atheist suspend his judgment; *The Red and the Black*, which is fiction, I know, but I took it as how psychology would look if properly done. Besides, my first true love was Madame de Rênal. *Fear and Trembling* followed, and it caused me to give up biochemistry for the humanities, because who in his punk teenage mind would have thought that you could write 46,000 words on 18 verses of Genesis and still not come close to exhausting the topic? It showed me what it meant to read, really read. But then next week it was *The Genealogy of Morals*. Oh, my. Transformed again.

The exhilaration of meeting ideas and thoughts you had not known existed piggybacked on the hard truth that you knew diddly. You were not being transformed so much as formed. But the more you read, the fewer ideas seemed as new or surprising. If you were reading generously and attentively, Thucydides or Montaigne appeared to have been already on to it, at least on psychological and sociological matters. Technological knowledge marched to a different drummer, awe-inspiring as it could also be.

William James says there are two kinds of people in the world, the once born (me), and the twice born (St. Paul). The latter can have a true conversion experience at any age, but it would be unlikely to be brought on by any nonfiction book from the past 30 years. Self-help books? If you think so, your transformation is an illusion; you have remained the idiot you were.

I did, though, have one truly Pauline experience prompted by a book. I read *Njáls saga* when I was 24. I never recovered. It gave me my calling, determined my career. But it did not really transform me; it gave me something to be me about. So getting knocked off your horse can happen, after a fashion, but not at 68, unless you are already showing signs of losing it, or never had read anything except the sports pages, or more positively, if you indeed happen to be one of those who can be twice born.

Even then, why should we think that a character-transforming book turns you from a sinner to a saint, rather than from a saint to a sinner? After all, books can move people to error as well as to truth. And thus I wonder: How many books that have set knowledge backward will have moved some contributors in this feature?

 —*William Ian Miller is a professor of law at the University of Michigan Law School.*

http://chronicle.com/article/What-Book-Changed-Your-Mind-/149839/