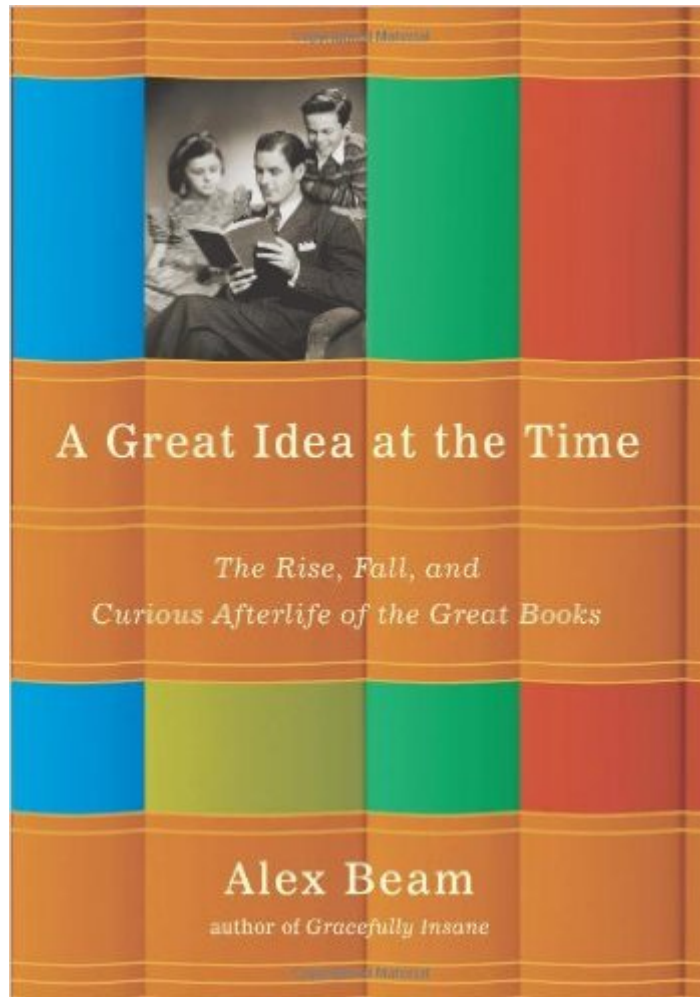


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A Great Idea At The Time: The Rise, Fall, And Curious Afterlife Of The Great Books



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?

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Customer Reviews

As a recently returned veteran in the spring of 1971 I was desperate to make some money. So I took a job with Britannica selling "Great Books of the Western World" door to door. I lasted about two weeks. One guy I talked with didn't want to buy the set because the books didn't include pictures. An older gentleman with every encyclopedia ever printed on his shelves balked at the set's colors. Another woman, however, who seemed very interested in the content of the books, backed off because she didn't like the small print. She also had some things to say about the translation being used in the sample book in my presentation. I quit Great Books and got a job driving an ice

cream truck that summer - made a lot more money. Some years later, now an educator myself, I was in a used book store and saw a set of Great Books, along with 21 yearbooks and a set of introductory lesson plans for the bargain price of \$150. I bought them and much to my wife's horror unpacked them in our small study and put them up on our bookshelves. About a year later she made me take them to work, where they adorn my office. I've read a couple of the volumes cover to cover, browsed through many others. But that woman in 1971 was right; some of the translations are terrible, and now at age 60, I agree with her that the print is too small. Alex Beam's book "A Great Idea at the Time" took me on a nice whirlwind tour of the making and marketing of the GBWW. The story includes dynamic characters like Robert Hutchins, boy wonder/genius who as President of the University of Chicago made the 'great books' curriculum a national phenomenon. Hutchins had a populist approach to education and brought in top notch minds to teach the great works to America's future.

Beam wrote a book about the history of the Great Books concept and specifically the set of Great Books promoted by Hutchins and Alder from the University of Chicago. I found the book unimpressive. What is Beam's point in this meandering book? Is it a history of the Great Books or a critical commentary on the idea and movement? Beam establishes no credibility with the reader, yet offers childish critiques and name calling, particularly of Adler: "brilliant, Hobbit-like sidekick, Mortimer Alder" (2); "William Benton, ad man and hustler extraordinaire" (2); "watching his [Adler's] endless, self-promotional television appearances was a nightmare for which I am trying to awake" (5); "low-born Adler"; "Adler, a troll next to the godlike Hutchins" (25). Is there a hidden fight between Beam and Adler? What is the point of this silliness? Are readers to be impressed with anecdotes and gossip uncovered in working papers and interviews? Do they help the argument or discussion at all? Adler called Aspen Institute attendees business "bozos" (132). "A notorious philanderer, he [Adler] divorced his first wife" (32). Later, Beam writes about an incident where someone recalled that "Adler was hitting on my mother" (142). Yes, the sales methods of the Great Books were misplaced (selling culture books like Crest toothpaste with door-to-door reps who deployed sleazy sales methods, receiving a reprimand by the FTC). Beam and all of us can feel good, I guess, that these highly educated men from University of Chicago made this mistake. What about people who said books had a big impact on their lives? He mentions numerous people including actor Julie Adams (67), Pilot Thomas Hynd (143), plumber David Call (146), Professor Montas (162), and Eva Braum.

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