



What We're Reading

Edited by Peter Skinner

EDITOR'S NOTE: Beginning with this issue, we launch what we hope will be a semiannual feature, in which we invite friends and contributors to let us know about a book (or books), new or old, fiction or nonfiction, magisterial or maverick, that has inspired them to think anew about public affairs in the broadest sense. Our first installment follows.

ROBERT KAISER, *Associate Editor*, *The Washington Post*

I seize this opportunity to alert readers to *The Dream Life of Sukhanov* by Olga Grushin (Putnam, \$29.95). This is not my discovery—Jonathan Yardley gave this young Russian-American's first novel a rave review in the *Washington Post* early this year. Perhaps because of my own experience in Russia (I arrived there for a three-year assignment in 1971, the year Olga Grushin was born in Moscow), this book has resonated powerfully with me. Grushin has written a novel about the corruption of the Soviet intelligentsia from the late 1950s until Mikhail Gorbachev's assumption of power in 1985. She does this by inventing the title character, Anatoly Sukhanov, a promising avant-garde painter who as a young man becomes a consummate Soviet hack as editor of an important art magazine. This he uses to denounce bourgeois tendencies and modernist apostasies.

This remarkable work of literature, fully worthy of its Russian ancestors, is set in 1985, when the same currents that had floated Gorbachev to the top of the Soviet Communist Party were unhinging the world in which Sukhanov established his personal and professional niches. Grushin writes with mystical power and breathtaking control, combining dreams and multiple realities to powerful effect.

This book illuminates the biggest problem confronting the new Russia (i.e., the still "old" Russia). Today's Russians generally avoid their own past. Thus Stalin now enjoys an eerily high "approval rating" in opinion polls, and no attempt at all has been made to confront the Russian nation with the many horrors in its closets. Grushin compels Sukhanov to examine his own skeletons, with devastating effect. But she—now an American, a graduate of Emory University, the wife of an American, and clearly a master of our language—has written this book in English. Will it ever appear in Russian? I hope so.

STEPHEN SCHLESINGER, *Director*, *World Policy Institute*, *The New School*

The new biography of Mao Tse-Tung, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (Knopf, \$35), according to its critics, should have come with a distinct warning label—namely, that the authors, Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, harbor a deep personal grudge against Chairman Mao. It is true that from the opening pages the Mao depicted in this extraordinary narrative is seemingly a one-dimensional figure composed in equal parts of venality, lust, vindictiveness, and raw manipulative power. Surely, one thinks, he must also have had charm and magnetism and some sort of exalted persona to rally the largest population in the world to his banner.

Nonetheless, as one reads more deeply into this sordid and heavily footnoted tale, the authors clearly show how, out of the terrible miasma of China in the 1920s and 1930s, Mao emerged as one of the most monstrous figures of the twentieth century. Just like the Soviet dictator, tracked in the equally compelling and also highly readable book by Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (Knopf, \$30), Mao climbed to power over the bodies of thousands—and never looked back.

This biography is a thoroughly propulsive account of a demonic individual who grabbed power by whatever means available and used it to twist, bend, and rip apart his country—and then to completely reconstruct it according to his own ideological whims. Yet, by the book's end, when one remembers all of the terrible killing fields that resulted from his "experiment" in communism, one begins to feel that the authors' biases about Mao might be eminently defensible.

SHASHI THAROOR, *Undersecretary-General of the United Nations*

Tom Friedman's *The World Is Flat* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$27.50) has aroused very varied responses—and my concern is with the sweeping conclusions that he draws. I fear that in celebrating the flatness of his world Friedman fails to address four major problems. The first is that the state is still indispensable to most people. It provides, or should provide, physical security, law and order, economic infrastructure, and basic services. However, for most people in the world, the state is not strong enough to provide those vital requirements. The second is that the specters of poverty, disease, and malnutrition are stalking Friedman's flat new world—problems to which he is seemingly oblivious. He writes of 3 billion people entering the global market, but most of them (and indeed 3 billion people overall) are living on under \$2 a day. The threat of the combination of poverty, conflict, famine and AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa—arguably the most elemental set of challenges facing humanity at the start of the twenty-first century—features nowhere in this book. The third problem that Friedman neglects is that of the digital divide. His "leveling" and "flattening" are not yet true in the developing world, except for the tiny minority of the empowered. The stark global reality of the Internet today is that one can tell the rich from the poor by their Internet connections. The gap between the technological haves and have-nots is widening, both between countries and within them. Finally, in advancing what Friedman calls his "Dell Theory of Conflict Prevention," under which no two countries will go to war if they are part of the same globalized supply chain, he forgets that most human conflicts are fueled by emotions rather than calculations. Economics cannot explain everything. As Francis Fukuyama discovered before him, it is not yet time for "the end of history."

Next, two books by Verghese Koithara, a retired admiral who is among India's finest strategic thinkers. In his 1999 masterpiece, *Society, State, and Security* (Sage Publishing, New Delhi), Koithara makes a case for seeing India's national security not only in conventional defense terms but as a function of "human security"—the challenge of ensuring the economic, social, political, and environmental well-being of India's people through an effective national security strategy. It is a magisterial work, synthesizing a vast array of material with remarkable clarity and rigor of analysis.

Second, in *Crafting Peace in Kashmir* (Sage Publishing, 2004), Koithara makes the case for a peaceful settlement of that vexing dispute in a way that takes account of not only the preferences of the governments concerned but the needs of the affected Kashmiri people. Though his subtitle, *Through a Realist Lens*, seems to lay claim to the hard-headedness with-

out which no book on Kashmir will be taken seriously by policymakers, Koithara remains realistic. What is striking about his book is his detailed review of experiences in comparable conflicts elsewhere—Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, and Israel-Palestine. Throughout, his analyses are infused with a humane awareness of the need for “human security” to be a vital component of our thinking about national security.

RICHARD C. LEONE, *President, The Century Foundation, New York*

Sean Wilentz’s *The Rise of American Democracy* (W. W. Norton, \$35) is a rich and detailed examination of the struggle, from Jefferson to Lincoln, to extend the promise of political participation to all Americans—a task that is far from over. In addition to the well-known cast of characters (all of whom we find the author knows better than we do), Wilentz brings to life scores of key “players” in these early political wars. It’s grand and reliable history told with the storytelling of a Gore Vidal and the reliability of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. The book reassured me (and I need reassurance these days) that, even when leadership fails us, the idea of America endures and, when nourished, will grow green again.

I reread Evelyn Waugh’s *Sword of Honor Trilogy* last month. It’s a reminder that military folly, even in a “good and long war,” is as inevitable as the human condition itself. Perhaps, in a small way, it’s a consolation to recall that there always have been good reasons to be skeptical of those who claim full understanding of politics and war and promise easy victory in far-away places.

MICHAEL MEYER, *European Editor, Newsweek International*

Asked if he believed in God, Albert Einstein famously replied: “I believe in Spinoza’s God.” That succinct declaration of the modern secular creed, an affirmation of science and reason over mere faith, was (to some) also a declaration of war. For the God of Baruch de Spinoza was anything but a personal god with whom man could have a “relationship.” To the extent that God exists, Spinoza posited, it is as a mystery at the heart of a universe ruled by cause and effect, without purpose or design other than its own natural laws. In the late seventeenth century, of course, that was apostasy.

For his troubles, Spinoza was exiled to The Hague—liberal, tolerant, and globalized, in contrast to, say, Paris. There, another intellectual titan of the age, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the polymath inventor of calculus and a pioneer of modern jurisprudence, devoted much of his life to a campaign that can be summarized as “Stop Spinoza.”

As told by Matthew Stewart in *The Courtier and the Heretic* (W. W. Norton, \$25.95), this is an immensely lively tale of philosophy as combat. And it is anything but dry history. Intelligent design? Faith-based politics? A society where four of ten Americans describe themselves as born-again? Today, secular humanists once again face off against religious fundamentalists against a backdrop of peoples anxious about the apparent purposelessness of our science and technology-driven lives. Stewart explores the origins and evolution of this very modern drama, embedding us in 1676 and the cold November day when Leibniz called on Spinoza, in person, hoping to convince him of the existence of a transcendent God. Instead, he himself appears to have been converted. Drawing on a cache of some 15,000 Leibniz letters, Stewart profiles how Leibniz became a private Spinozist, even as he publicly played the loyal courtier in the salons of Europe, defending the God of an establishment church in the belief that common men needed firm religious mooring in a too fast-changing world. The contemporary echoes are deafening.

DAVID FROMKIN, *Historian and author of A Peace to End All Peace*

With surprising pleasure I recently read the late Roy Jenkins's 2003 biography, *Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (Times Books, \$20). There have been so very many biographies of FDR over the course of the years that I had thought there was nothing left for Jenkins—albeit a fellow politician and an outstanding biographer—to say. But in this Times Books/Henry Holt volume, one of a series on the American presidents, presided over by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., as General Editor, the author assumes that the reader already knows the main lines of Roosevelt's career and political philosophy; instead of a narrative, he offers a discussion, a meditation, and an appreciation. It is as stimulating as the best of conversations.

BETSY GOTBAUM, *Public Advocate, New York City*

Jim Dwyer and Kevin Flynn's *102 Minutes: The Untold Story of the Fight to Survive Inside the Twin Towers* (Times Books, \$15) is probably the most disturbing book I have ever read. Aside from being a gripping and horrific account of what happened inside the towers on September 11, the book is about systems that failed. The Port Authority's building-on-the-cheap policy and the far from comprehensive safety measures implemented after the 1993 bombing caused many to perish. Additionally, the city's emergency services failed to function efficiently. One sees that this was no fault of the brave men and women of the Fire Department, the Police Department, and the Emergency Medical Service, but of the management of these agencies, severely hampered by lack of interconnected radios.

The book's message is emphatic: we must make sure this sort of failure never occurs again; that no matter when we rebuild at ground zero or what we build, there must be adequate fire protection included in the design and materials. The buildings and the emergency services must be fully equipped for effective disaster management: vital communications systems must be pre-tested and in use. Because of all the noise and bickering around the rebuilding, I fear that these very basic requirements will be neglected.

KARL E. MEYER, *Editor, World Policy Journal*

The American intervention in Iraq has precipitated a landfill of books, among them George Packer's outstanding *Assassin's Gate: America in Iraq* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$26), which examines the optimistic assumptions implicit in the war's origin. Packer, a *New Yorker* correspondent, shared some of the altruistic ideals of some interventionists, and his book offers an extended, credible, and devastating account of his disenchantment. Yet this is not the first occasion in which intervention has misfired. A good companion volume is *Overtbrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq* (Times Books, \$27.50), by Stephen Kinzer, a longtime *New York Times* correspondent in Central America, Germany, and the Middle East.

Kinzer's book is excellent and topical; he has selected 14 examples of American-led regime changes, some little known or forgotten (e.g., Hawaii in 1893, and Puerto Rico in 1898), and in lively chapters relates how decisions were reached, and what followed afterward. With few exceptions, most regime changes turned out badly, opening the way to dictatorship (Chile), guerrilla war (Philippines), theocratic tyranny (Iran), regional instability (Nicaragua and Guatemala), or a quagmire (South Vietnam). Besides those just mentioned, other countries on Kinzer's list are Cuba, Honduras, Grenada, Panama, Afghanistan, and of course Iraq. (I would have added Mexico, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Greece to this roster, but I appreciate Kinzer's problem of limiting his study to a single, 400-page

volume.) The book may glide a little too rapidly through choppy waters, but I regard *Overthrow* as a necessary prolegomenon to a more comprehensive survey, the better to inform and caution us about the downside of treating countries like sacrificial chess pieces.

BLANCHE WIESEN COOK, *Distinguished Professor, CUNY, and biographer of Eleanor Roosevelt*
In 1940, FDR said: “We will have a liberal democracy, or we will return to the Dark Ages!” In this dastardly moment of disenlightenment, dungeons, and torture, there are two places I go to daily for hope: they are Amy Goodman’s “Democracy Now” (available on radio, television, and online), and www.commondreams.org, two essential sources for those of us who write, teach, or ponder contemporary issues. Recently, I have had the great good fortune to interview Dr. Kevin Cahill for CUNY-TV (available online at www.cunytv.cuny.edu) regarding his new book *To Bear Witness: A Journey of Healing and Solidarity* (Fordham University Press, \$24.95). Professor of international humanitarian affairs at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, and director of the Tropical Disease Center at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City, Dr. Cahill has devoted his life to human betterment. During the last 45 years he has been part of medical and humanitarian missions in 65 countries. His memoir of hope and healing in a world of suffering and neglect is truly inspiring and empowering. With the support of his late wife Kathryn, a vivid poet whose many photographs appear in his books, Dr. Cahill has brought to bear a broad vision and profound concern for the troubled areas of our troublous times—and provides immediately useful insights regarding land mines and famine, AIDS, ignorance, fiscal abandonment, and war in Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East.

Another book that recently enriched me with the marvelous nourishment of real hope is *1000 Peace Women Across the Globe* (www.1000peacewomen.org), an extraordinary volume that celebrates the thousand women nominated for the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize. A project initiated by Dr. Ruth-Gaby Vermot-Mangold, member of the Swiss parliament and the Council of Europe, supported by UNIFEM, UNDP, and the Swiss UNESCO Committee, this volume includes portraits of activists for peace and justice in communities across the planet. It serves to connect groups everywhere, often working in seeming isolation, with other amazing efforts to imagine and secure peace, dignity, health, education, clean water, respect, and human rights for all throughout our endangered and embattled world.

As a number of the recommended books focus on the world's problems and challenges, we are ending with an altogether gentler book, suggested by Shashi Tharoor.

V. K. Madhavan Kutty’s *The Village Before Time* (Indiabank, 2000) is a delightful memoir of an eminent journalist’s upbringing in a Kerala village. Simply written in the original Malayalam, the book has been ably translated into English by Gita Krishnankutty; its episodic structure permits the unfolding of a series of richly evocative vignettes about village life in a Kerala still largely untouched by modernization, let alone by globalization. ●