

One New Book for the Preacher

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GREAT BOOKS: MY ADVENTURES WITH HOMER, ROUSSEAU, WOOLF, AND OTHER INDESTRUCTIBLE WRITERS OF THE WESTERN WORLD by David Denby. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996. 492 pages.

This is the one.

For thirteen years as Director of Advanced Studies at Columbia Theological Seminary, in varied formats, I tried to help those whom I taught or addressed to see that we/they look at reality through the eyes of modernity, that modernity is like implanted contact lenses through which we see everything that we see, and since they are implanted contact lenses we are not even aware of them. I would patiently try to articulate the characteristics of modernity, its origins, and implications, especially the way it conflicts with the gospel and even prevents us from seeing that the gospel is presenting a different view of reality. I would try to describe Descartes' program of doubting everything it is possible to doubt until one arrives at those ideas which one perceives so clearly and distinctly that it is not possible to doubt them, and I would try to show how that program became the foundation of modernity and its implications. The result was always puzzled stares, scratched heads, sleepy eyes, and "so whats." I despaired over my lack of skill.

But this past week I attended a worship on preaching for Advent/Christmas/Epiphany and listened to William Willimon, as skilled a communicator as there is on the current scene, talk about Epiphany as the manifestation, the revelation, of the unknown intruding into the world view of modernity and the inability of moderns to comprehend this strange, uncongenial, and offensive reality. Most nodded in agreement because Willimon's illustrations are so graphic and persuasive, but one sensed that there was no fundamental comprehension because there is no in-depth comprehension of modernity or indeed of the intellectual and literary culture of the West.

That is why I say this is the one. It means I have become convinced that we can understand the issues of modernity and the gospel only if we as ministers learn the intellectual heritage of the West; until we learn this heritage we will not only be unable to understand the gospel but will think that modernity is the gospel.

This is the one. The book will provide the most delightful, engaging, stimulating, imaginative guide to our intellectual heritage I know. So rather than a critical review, let me share a general orientation to the book as a way of enticement to the prospective reader.

David Denby is a secular Jew, forty-eight years old when he wrote the book, married with two children, movie critic of *New York* magazine. In 1991 he decided to retake the Great books courses at Columbia University, "Literature Humanities" and "Contemporary Civilization," which he had taken as an undergraduate a generation earlier in the sixties. The book is his recount of that experience.

In it Denby shares with the reader the feeling that he had been absorbed and consumed by the media and the media culture; that he had gotten caught up in the information age where information and ever more information is the function of the

intellectual life, and he no longer had any convictions, values, knowledge, or wisdom; that he had no soul. And when the professor in the first class told the freshman Columbia students that the purpose of the course was to give them a self, they were uncomprehending, but Denby thought he was being offered manna.

In it Denby gives an introduction to and his personal reading of many of the major works of the West. He does not try to provide an expert's guide through each of the works, but rather that of the naïve amateur, the impressions of a lover who is trying to get to know the beloved with all the passion, false starts, mistakes, prejudices, and delights attendant to such relationship. Through this approach, Denby encourages us to become his companions and to believe that we can participate even though we are not experts.

In it he shares with us the difficulty he had reading any work because he had ceased being a reader of anything but articles of books of fluff; he shares how he had to train and discipline himself to just sit and read and struggle with engaged intellect hour upon hour and how this exercise alone changed the shape and structure of his life. All of us who are "busy" will feel he is talking about us!

In it Denby tells us not only what the different works are about but how they engaged and challenged his life, or called in question, or blessed his life. Poignant indeed is his conversation between Shakespeare's King Lear and his own life with his mother and father in their declining years and death. Informative as well is his repeated discussion of the impact of his experience in the course of reading on the issues he and his wife face in the rearing of their two children in the atmosphere of late modernity.

In it he becomes engaged with the whole issue of the appropriateness of reading the great books of the West and their expression of the hegemony of Dead White European Males. His charge: neither William Bennett, who claims that the virtues will be learned by the reading of such texts, nor those of the left, who claim that the works are oppressive, have read the works. If they had, they would have learned that rather than uniformity of position among the works, each work tends to call in question the other. (It is this sense of challenge of one world-view by another that I hope will tend to dislodge the implanted contact lenses of modernity from our eyes.)

In *Great Books*, Denby provides a comprehensive reading list of things to read over a lifetime. If, during Advent/Christmas/Epiphany, the preacher also makes a New Year's resolution to begin a program of serious and significant lifetime reading, then this is a good guide.

This is the one.