



Mortimer Adler  
in  
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THE  
GREAT BOOKS  
OF  
2066

• IN TWO PARTS •

*history, science, philosophy*

OF THE 74 authors included in *Great Books of the Western World*, only three—Leo Tolstoy, William James and Sigmund Freud—straddle the line that separates the past from the present century; and of these, Freud more than either Tolstoy or James is truly a 20th Century figure. I would give heavy odds that any literate person in 2066, asked to name the great books of the 20th Century, would put Freud on his list.

Who else would be on it? When the 20th Century is over, and enough time has elapsed to make a sober judgment about this century's accomplishments, how many of its authors will be elected to join the company of the 70 or more illustrious names that represent the peaks of literature and thought in the long stretch from Homer to the end of the 19th Century?

Fascinated by that question, I recently drew up a list of 50 nominees—50 candidates who might be considered in 2066. Before I name them and give you my best guess about which of them will survive and flourish in the minds of our descendants, let me tell you my reason for thinking that, when the final tally is in, the number is likely to be not less than 10 and not more than 15, or 20 at the most.

Considering the 74 authors in *Great Books of the Western World*, I have plotted their distribution in the past and have come up with some figures that serve to guide us in thinking about the present century. One writer—Homer—belongs to the remote past. The 300 years from the Fifth to the Third Century B.C. give us 12 names: Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Herodotus, Thucydides, Hippocrates, Plato, Aristotle, Euclid, Archimedes and Apollonius. In the 600 years from the First Century B.C. to the Fifth Century A.D., we have only 11 comparable figures: Galen, Lucretius, Virgil, Nicomachus, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Plutarch, Tacitus, Ptolemy, Plotinus, Augustine. Then, after a long break, we find 8 great authors in the 400 years that cover the closing days of the Middle Ages and the beginning of modern times: Dante, Aquinas, Chaucer, Copernicus, Gilbert, Machiavelli, Rabelais, Montaigne.

The 17th, 18th and 19th Centuries taken together account for considerably more than half of the total list. If we regard the present century as the beginning of postmodern times, then the modern epoch, comprising these three centuries, has done better—at least quantitatively—than the 20 or more preceding centuries. The 17th Century, called “the century of genius” by Whitehead, produced 14 authors of great books (Galileo, Kepler, Newton, Huygens, Harvey, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Milton, Hobbes, Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza, Pascal, Locke); the 18th Century—the age of the enlightenment—produced 13 greats (Berkeley, Hume, Boswell, Swift, Sterne, Fielding, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Adam Smith, Gibbon, Kant, Lavoisier, and the three collaborating writers of the Federalist Papers here treated as one—Hamilton, Madison and Jay); and the 19th Century produced 12 (Hegel, Goethe, J. S. Mill, Darwin, Marx, Engels, Melville, Fourier, Faraday, Tolstoy, Dostoievsky and William James).

If we plot the curve and dare to extrapolate it on so little evidence, we might conclude that our century would produce only 11. But there are altered circumstances that tend to modify this prediction. On the one hand, there are so many more books being written and published in this century than ever before that we might reasonably expect the trend to be reversed. Our times may produce between 15 and 20 great authors—more than any previous century by far. On the other hand, as I will explain presently, the conditions under which intellectual work is done in the 20th Century may lead to the opposite result—a smaller number of great books in spite of the larger number of books published.

I mentioned earlier a list of 50 authors writing in this century who deserved consideration as among the possible greats of our time. This list was presented last spring on the back page of an advertising supplement that appeared in *The New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*, to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the publication of *Great Books of the Western World*. The readers of that supplement were asked to choose the ten that they thought were the most likely candidates for lasting eminence. The response confirmed my belief that people generally like to play this guessing game about the future. (A list of the first 12 authors appears at the end of this article). I hasten to remind **PLAYBOY** readers that the name of Freud is omitted from this list only because Freud is the one 20th Century author included in *Great Books of the Western World*.)

Not to deter, but rather to provoke its readers to engage in this parlor sport, **PLAYBOY** asked Mr. Fadiman and me to draw up our own list of great authors—as seen from the vantage point of 2066. Mr. Fadiman and I decided to divide the task. He took the general area of belles lettres—the domain, as he puts it, of the men of imagination. That left me with everything else—the domain of the men of thought.

It is conceivable that some great contemporary figures might fall into both camps. In fact, however, we found little overlapping—Sartre is the main exception—and so the division of labor worked out well. Mr. Fadiman, therefore, treats the contemporary poets, novelists, dramatists and critics who have written what he thinks will be considered great books in 2066. I deal with the contemporary philosophers, scientists and historians whose works, in my judgment, the human race will continue to return to in the future. (It should be observed here that we agreed to consider only Western authors. The reason for this decision is not good, but it is obvious. Neither of us knows enough about the literature of the Far East to make a responsible judgment.)

Mr. Fadiman and I realize that we are sticking our necks out in making judgments of this sort. Making private guesses about the greats of the present century is one thing—just good, clean fun; but publishing one's guesses with an air of authority is quite another. Hence I, for one, want to protect myself just a little by hedging, in two ways, the predictions I am about to make. (Mr. Fadiman also can nudge himself under this protective umbrella if he wants to.)

In the first place, the creativity of human beings is unpredictable. Not all the men or women who may produce significant books in this century have yet begun to write. A third of the century remains. The next 30 years may see the production of works that outshine most of the books with which we are at present acquainted. Hence any projection in 1966 of the judgments that will be made in 2066 about this century's writing must have the inevitable defect of shortsightedness.

In the second place, the contingencies of history itself are unpredictable. This is an era of rapid change, not only in technology, but also in education, in world political alignments and in warfare. It is conceivable, the world being what it is, that a system of education might be imposed on the human race sometime in the next hundred years that would sharply limit the capacity of our descendants to become acquainted with some of the authors on my list of future greats. That would exclude these writers from consideration in 2066, quite apart from the merits of their work. A radical change in world political alignments might have a similar effect. If, for example, Communist China is ruling the world—or what is left of it—in 2066, any list of great books drawn up then in Peking would differ markedly from Mr. Fadiman's proposals and mine. If another world war deprives man of civilization and all that it entails, it is conceivable that the only book to endure might be a well-thumbed copy of the Army's survival manual.

With these *caveats*, I am almost ready to name the 20th Century writers who, in my judgment, stand a good chance of joining the greats of all time. I said "almost ready" because, before doing that, I would like to discuss the criteria for judging whether or not a writer in the domain of thought—a philosopher, a scientist or a historian—deserves to be classed with Thucydides, Plato, Aristotle, Euclid, Aquinas, Galileo, Newton, Kant, Darwin and Marx—to whom must now be added Freud. What makes the 11 authors I have just named so unquestionably great that the excellences in which they abound can be used as the measure for judging others?

Over the years, trying to answer the question, What makes a very few books truly great books? I have gathered together a set of criteria for selecting that few from all the rest. I formulated some of

these 25 years ago when I wrote *How to Read a Book*; some emerged in the course of the editorial conferences that we held to select the works to be included in *Great Books of the Western World*; and some I have come upon more recently in explaining the role of the great books in liberal education. In restating them here for the purpose of predicting who are likely to be the great authors of the 20th Century, I am going to put them down in a form that is most applicable to writers who are men of thought rather than men of imagination.

1. Great books are original communications. Their authors are communicating what they themselves have discovered, not repeating what they have learned by reading the books of other men.

2. Great books have intellectual amplitude; each draws light from and throws light on a large number and variety of ideas, all of them basic.

3. Great books are universally relevant and always contemporary; that is, they deal with the common problems of thought and action that confront men in every age and every clime.

4. Great books are the only books that may be deemed indispensable, every one of them, to a genuine, sound liberal education.

5. Great books are the only books that never have to be written again—that do so well what they set out to do that they cannot be improved upon. (For this simple but penetrating statement about the nature of a great book, I am grateful to my friend Carl Van Doren.)

6. Great books are inexhaustible; they are indefinitely rereadable, each time with additional profit; understandable to some degree on the first reading, they continue to deepen our understanding every time we reread them, and we can never exhaust their power to enlighten us; no matter how many times we read them, there is always more for us to understand.

7. Great books are addressed to human beings, not to some special group of students, scholars or experts; they are seldom written by professors and, if they are, they are never written exclusively for professors.

These seven qualities intrinsic to great books account for two further properties that adhere to them extrinsically: They tend to exert a lasting influence on human life and thought; and they tend to be widely read; seldom if ever best sellers, they are the only perennial sellers.

It should be immediately obvious that very few books in any epoch reach the pinnacle of excellence set by these seven criteria taken together. Some of them are so stringent—especially the fifth and sixth—that if one were to apply them strictly, without the quality of mercy that tempers justice, not even all the works included in *Great Books of the Western World* would survive the test. Instead of 74 authors, there might be no more than 30, perhaps fewer, who would stand up as the unquestionable greats of the last 25 centuries. In that case, to expect to find as many as 10 in the 20th Century would be an exorbitant demand.

In addition, so far as the sphere of thought is concerned, I am embarrassed by a fact about 20th Century authors that does not apply to the writers being considered by Mr. Fadiman. Most of the important works in the field of science, history and philosophy are written by professors for professors and so, even when they are books instead of monographs or periodical articles, they fall short of being great books by the criteria enumerated above. Hence I will have to relax my criteria somewhat, or apply them with some latitude, in order to select the authors who, in 2066, will be recognized as deserving to rank with Thucydides, Plato, Aristotle, Euclid, Aquinas, Galileo, Newton, Kant, Darwin, Marx and Freud.

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## WEBSITES OF INTEREST

### *A Philosophical Health Check*

<http://www.philosophers.co.uk/games/check.htm>

### *A Morality Test*

[http://www.philosophers.co.uk/games/morality\\_play.htm](http://www.philosophers.co.uk/games/morality_play.htm)

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