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On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century
by Timothy Snyder
reviewed by Jim Mills

On Tyranny is a very short book with a major impact. The author describes the chain of events that have historically introduced tyrannical rule to various countries around the world. Featured are countries such as the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 30s, Germany in 1933 and Czechoslovakia in 1947. Some studies conducted after WW 2 looked at the impression that pre-war Germans were peculiarly susceptible to the attraction of totalitarian rule. These studies concluded that this assumption was not the case, the German people did not significantly differ psychologically from peoples of other nations including the United States. All of us are vulnerable to the lure of the one party state.

The bottom line of On Tyranny is that we are all susceptible to the appeal of those who would limit our freedoms. Today the news that the media provides is derided as being fake by forces in our country that are trying to diminish our faith in our institutions. The derision that public figures voice denouncing various groups within our society is a starting point for directing unorganized and organized violence against them. The author urges citizens to become involved in public affairs and to join various organizations that help to provide diversity in our society and tends to muffle voices that would reject other fellow citizens who may be of differing origins. The principal trend in our nation in recent decades has been a major split in our society with a lack of trust extending across the divide.

Timothy Snyder is a professor of history at Yale University and is the author of Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin and Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning. In one quote from the author he states: “Today, our political order faces new threats, not unlike the totalitarianism of the twentieth century. We are no wiser than the Europeans who saw democracy yield to fascism, Nazism and communism. Our advantage is that we might learn from their experience.” The onset of tyrannical rule can be subtle. Citizens gradually learn to accept limitations placed on the freedoms of some aspects of society such as a free press or the rights of a minority. The impact of this gradual loss of freedom was illustrated in 1946 by the German Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller (1892–1984):

“First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out - Because I was not a socialist.
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out - Because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out - Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”

Timothy Snyder’s On Tyranny urges us all to develop an awareness of trends in our society and to face down injustice as it appears and to promote the liberties and opportunities for all of our people.
The Reckoning (420 pages, 2018)

by John Grisham

reviewed by Stuart J. Bassin

In the first 20 pages of this best-selling novel, Pete Banning—the patriarch of a prominent Southern family and a highly decorated World War II hero—walks into the local Methodist church and assassinates the respected minister. He confesses his guilt to the local sheriff and announces that he will say nothing more about his motives for the killing. Why?

The remainder of the novel explores that question and takes readers along for the ride. We learn about Pete’s youth, his family’s background, and his experience balancing a successful military career with his role as a gentleman farmer. The book then describes his war-time experiences, focusing upon the horrific Bataan Death March and his amazing adventures as a guerrilla during the Japanese occupation of the Philippines. After the killing, we follow the efforts of Pete’s family, friends, and lawyers to investigate the mystery and uncover the truth, pausing to consider the effect of the murder on all of those around Pete.

Along the way, Grisham paints a nuanced view of small-town life in the Deep South during the 1950s. He gives us several perspectives on race relations in the Deep South and the workings of the justice system when confronted with wrong-doing by a member of the local power structure. We observe the workings of the previously close-knit Banning family in the face of the challenges created by the murder and its aftermath. I found the experience of the young adult Banning children particularly interesting.

As with all of Grisham’s work, the prose and pacing of the novel are exemplary. The author tells a complicated tale with his usual twists and turns. His characters are fully drawn, replete with the usual mix of admirable and unbecoming personal attributes. The book is a quick read, which I finished within two days.

Many of us familiar with the Grisham catalog have been increasingly dissatisfied with much of his more recent work. This reader has found several of his recent novels somewhat disappointing. The characters are unexceptional and the plot lines are amusing, but the overall effect is that the books are produced by a factory. The stories are page-turners and the writing skill is there, but something is missing. It is like tasty but unsatisfying junk food. You enjoy the experience but come away wishing you got more out of the time invested in reading the book.

In contrast, The Reckoning is a welcome return to form for Grisham. He has chosen an engaging topic, written believable characters, and provides us with an interesting scenario to explore and educates us about an unfamiliar time and place. The book tells us a story worth reading and it is provided with Grisham’s trademark style. Well worth a read on a long winter evening. It is a riveting and rewarding tale.

John Grisham

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The BLL Book Reviews
Also appear on the Brewster Ladies Library Web Site
http://www.brewsterladieslibrary.org/
Those successful in *The Confidence Game* are masters in dealing with human nature. They understand just how to establish trust with the Mark (potential victim). Many of these victims after having lost most of their life savings and even after the Con artist has been exposed, will still maintain a high level of trust in the person or persons who brought about their misfortune. The confidence man or woman operates in many differing areas, finance, religion, fortune telling, spiritualism, and yes politics.

The author discusses the careers of many successful con artists starting with Ferdinand Demara, active in the 1940-1960 period who was made famous by the 1960 film *The Great Imposter* played by the actor, Tony Curtis. Demara played many roles during his career including a naval surgeon, a civil engineer, a sheriff's deputy, an assistant prison warden, a doctor of applied psychology, a hospital orderly, a lawyer, a child-care expert, a Benedictine monk, a Trappist monk, an editor, a cancer researcher, and a teacher. In each role he was able to show enough expertise to continue to function for a considerable time before being found out. Even then he was not prosecuted but allowed to leave quietly. As in many cases the Mark would be too embarrassed by being taken in by the scam to want any undue publicity.

As the author points out the scam victims cover the whole range of intelligence and experience. In recent years, a financial scam of stupendous proportions was carried off by Bernie Madoff. Madoff was an established investment advisor in New York who promised and delivered substantial investment returns over several decades. His technique was the Ponzi scheme perfected by Charles Ponzi during the 1920s. As their renown spread both Ponzi and Madoff were able to return substantial returns to their investors by recycling the increasing premiums payed by later investors. They essentially made no investments and were able to skim off a substantial portion of the revenue. Such a scheme cannot persist indefinitely, since it feeds upon itself, and the con artist is eventually found out. The Madoff scam cost his investors around 18 billion and Madoff is scheduled to be in prison until 2039 when, at the ripe age of 101 he is scheduled to be released. Many of his victims were astute investors, greed drives many Marks into the hands of the Con artist.

Religious motivations have been exploited by cult leaders throughout recorded time. For most of us outside of these cults it is hard to understand how so many people can be taken in. In many cases the final episode of the cult can be devastating such as the Jonestown Massacre in 1978 when over 900 cult members died. Many other cults deal with a projected end of the world scenario and the belief in the cult does not decline when the projected end does not arrive as predicted. The Confidence agent has established a level of trust that cannot be lost even after the con has been repeatedly exposed. Other cons discussed are in the art world where recently produced copies of Old (and new) Masters continually enter that world and sell for substantial sums. At any given time there is no knowing how many of these fakes are still accepted and displayed in museums and wealthy homes.

Evolution has created a human mental structure that looks for certain characteristics that new contacts should exhibit to engender trust and confidence in their sincerity and legitimacy. The con artist has perfected the knack of exploiting human nature by sharing common interests with the Mark making him feel very much at ease. Once this aura of shared values has been established it would take only a massive contrary event to shake that confidence. This unshakeable confidence can extend into the political arena. On 23 January 2016, presidential candidate Donald Trump caused controversy when he stated the following during a campaign rally in Iowa: “I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn’t lose voters.” Whether this observation is correct, this belief from a presidential candidate in the confidence he has created shows just what he believes about his powers. Human nature can serve us well in most circumstances but at time can be very misleading. It is this misleading confidence that provides the fuel for *The Confidence Game.*
Pachinko
by Min Jin Lee
reviewed by Susan Carr

Like my favorite books I read as a youngster, Pachinko kept me up late at night. Filled with
turns and twists and surprises and fascinating characters, it is a compelling novel and well worth the loss
of sleep.

The story starts in Korea, which the Japanese annexed in 1910. Treated as a colony, the
fortunes of the Korean people went downhill rapidly. In the town of Yeongdo, we meet Hoonie, the only
surviving son of elderly parents who was born with a cleft palate and a deformed foot. Because of his
appearance he had never entertained any hope of finding a wife. But when he was 28, the match maker
came to visit. She had observed that his parents who ran a boarding house would probably have
sufficient goods to purchase a bride. The girl she had in mind was Yangjin, the fourth daughter of a
tenant farmer who had lost his lease when the Japanese took over and was anxious to have his daughters
married. The deal was struck and the two were wed on the day they met.

They were kind and accepting of each other. After losing three children Yangjin finally
conceived a daughter, Sunja, who survived. She was the apple of her father’s eye. The boarding house
gave them a living but as time went on, into the Great Depression, life for Koreans became even harder.
I had now reached page 9…Yes, the story moves quickly.

The book follows three generations of the family, with Sunja moving from Korea to Japan,
living with her husband’s brother, and their connection with the Pachinko world of gambling. The author
features many characters representing different values, and many surprises. Sunja and her sister-in-law,
Kyunhee are the core…their strength and resolve stagger the imagination.

One of the reoccurring themes of the book is the suffering of women…”A woman’s lot is to
suffer,” says one character. Another woman reported that “her grandmother and mother has been more
or less worked to death. She had never once heard her mother laugh.” Working from dawn until late at
night, they carried their families on their backs. Sunja and Kyunhee, epitomize this…they manage to
support the families by cooking food day and night, selling it on the street as their husbands become
unable to support them.

Moment Of Lift
by Melinda Gates
reviewed by Susan Carr

This “carrying their families” leads me to another book, The Moment of Lift; How Empowering Women
Changes the World by Melinda Gates. Melinda Gates, with her husband Bill, leads the largest charitable
foundation in the world. The Foundation provides services all over the world to stem infectious diseases,
to deliver health products, to improve economies, to make schooling available, especially for girls and to
build the relationships that make this all happen. The motto of the Gates Foundation is “All lives have
equal value.”

In 1776 BC, the Code of Hammurabi was created and carved into clay tablets, ie writ in stone. This
divided people into two genders - granting women less value than men, and all people into three classes
- privileged, commoners and slaves. It was simply codifying the standards of the times. This code has
influenced customs and legal thinking for centuries. To this day, the lesser value of women is the
standard in many countries, if not the underlying thinking in many more. Jimmy Carter in his book, A
Call to Action: Women, Religion, Violence and Power, states that “the deprivation and abuse of women
and girls ‘the most serious and unaddressed worldwide challenge.’”

Melinda Gates tells the stories of many women, victims of poverty and abuse, unable to obtain
contraceptives in order to limit the size of their families, unable to get an education and makes a
compassionate appeal to turn this around. She is well skilled at telling the stories of victims as well as
strong women. It makes one cheer to realize that millions of dollars are being spent to right the wrongs
of centuries. Surely, empowering women will make the world a better place.

I strongly recommend each of these books – Pachinko for providing an awareness of Japanese/
Korean history and it’s people along with a captivating story – The Moment of Lift for a realization of
the plight of woman all over the world and what is being done to alleviate the problem.
**Broken For You** (2004 National best seller and a *Today* show Book Club selection)  
by Stephanie Kallos  
reviewed by Pat Bertschy

*Broken For You* is the story of two women who find themselves alone for very different reasons. They are each odd in their own way. Even how they come together is unconventional. The older, 70-something Margaret Hughes decides to rent out a room in her large home. But first she thinks she “would have to ask permission…. She couldn’t just willy-nilly start taking in boarders without consulting her housemates,” as she refers to her collections of antiques. After all, they have lived together for a long time, she thinks. They may feel threatened. She is concerned that her collectables will miss their time in her cupboards, or on their étagère. We later learn that she has a very serious reason for wanting these things out of her house.

The younger woman, 30-something Wanda Schultz, makes art out of destruction. We see flashbacks of Wanda as a girl, abandoned by her parents, but resiliently making her way as a tour de force through a difficult childhood. She is likably feisty: we cheer for her when, as a young girl, she gleefully tears the arms out of her Barbie.

As we get to know Margaret and Wanda, we like their individual oddness. Both women are pleasingly reclusive, so their eventual bond is all the more satisfying. Both women are defended from becoming close, but they gradually come together in a companionship that is as surprising as it is understandable. I enjoy books that tell a sad story - and this one may not be for everyone. Both women have personal struggles and circumstances that no one should have to bear. But sad stories, when the characters develop and find strength from what has happened to them and thrive in spite of sadness makes these tales satisfying.

*Broken For You* tells a serious story with unbridled wit. When Margaret’s doctor shows her images, “slices,” of the cancerous brain tumor that is growing there, Margaret’s brain tries to pay attention and digest the information. Instead, her mind wanders. Her stomach rumbles. “I can’t believe it, she thought. ‘I forgot to eat my jelly toast.’ ”

Often books are appealing either because they tell a good story or they are well written. *Broken For You* is, happily, both. It is an engaging story that develops slowly with a bit of mystery, and at the same time is written in direct, expressive prose. Initially, it is the characters’ quirkiness that draws the reader in, but the story deepens as the two women become house-mates and partners. They begin a very strange venture which brings them each immense satisfaction for very different reasons.

The characters beyond just the two heroines are fully drawn and mostly pleasant, which is a good distraction from the underlying difficulties of the story. If you enjoyed the quirky heroine of *Where'd You Go Bernadette* by Maria Semple or the relationships in *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* by Muriel Barbery, I can almost guarantee that you will enjoy Kallos’ *Broken for You*.

*Broken For You* is an older book, published in 2004. When a friend recommended *Broken for You*, I had no idea that it had been a National best seller. I was a joy to discover this gem by accident, when enough time had passed that I missed the publicity and had no preconceived judgement. *Broken For You* was Kallos’ debut novel. She has two more recent books, *Sing Them Home*, 2009, and *Language Arts*, 2015. I hope they are as enjoyable and moving as this one.
Most of us have seen “behind the music” biographical documentaries about the rise and fall of prominent musical artists. You have seen them, talking heads commenting on the music, tales of the group’s rise to prominence and personal challenges-- maybe some old concert footage. Mildly entertaining, but not really satisfying. So, how did this “oral history” of a fictional 1970s rock group become a New York Times Book Review bestseller, obtain nearly 1000 five-star reviews on Amazon, and earn an enthusiastic recommendation from this reviewer?

That book, *Daisy Jones & The Six*, tells the story of the fictional musical group by the same name and its principals. The novel describes how the Dunne brothers began as a small-town midwestern wedding band, struggled to find their voice and an audience, and slowly rose to prominence. One day, they are paired with Daisy Jones, a California wild child with an awesome voice, sexy body, big personality, and stage charisma. Lightning strikes, the band becomes an overnight sensation, and we follow along with the band, the musicians, and the rest of the entourage.

Other reviewers have commented on the parallels between this fictional group and the real-life music and drama surrounding “Fleetwood Mac,” and that comparison rings true. It is the character development and emotional depth which sets this book apart; the author creates several remarkable, fully-formed, and engaging characters. The focal points are band leader Billy Dunne, the creative force behind the group who struggles with his personal demons, Daisy Jones, a lost waif who evolves into a powerful musical and sexual force, and Billy’s wife Camilla, the third member of the romantic triangle and the glue which keeps this combustible assembly of characters together. The other band members each have their own story lines, especially the star-crossed lovers--keyboardist Karen Karen and lead guitarist Graham Dunne.

What will happen next? Of course, sex, drugs, and rock ‘n roll. The characters experience the trappings of fame and success, confront creative disputes, and the inevitable sexual tension. Somewhat predictable, but the story is told with remarkable nuance and attention to detail. For example, the author provides the lyrics to the group’s fictional songs to show the musical and emotional development of the various characters.

Most interesting is the story-telling device—a fictional oral history of the band told through interviews of the band members. (I have seen comparable literary devices in the non-fiction oral histories of ESPN and Saturday Night Live.) There is no omniscient narrator; individual events are simultaneously described from the perspectives of several different participants characters in short snippets from the interviews. The result is a narrative which captures the ambiguities of all human interactions; just as in real life, different actors view the same events in subtly different ways. The device adds depth to the characters and better illustrates the complexity of the human relationships better than a conventional narrative. I think the device works well and likely is the key to the overall impact of the novel. (Some reviewers have complained that the shifting narrators is sometimes confusing, but I was easily able to follow the narrative.)

Ultimately, I think that readers will enjoy this novel. It is not great literature, but it is an interesting and amusing tale told well. The reader becomes invested in the characters, wants to see what happens next, and turns the last page with a satisfied smile. A delightful page-turner, perfect for a long evening by the fire.

Taylor Jenkins Reid
Talking to Strangers: What We Should Know About People We Don’t Know.
by Malcolm Gladwell
reviewed by Jim Mills

In *Talking to Strangers*, Malcolm Gladwell has extended his record of creating fascinating interpretations of human experiences, providing a new perspective on issues that we thought had been settled. His newest work addresses the great difficulty we all experience in evaluating the motivation and veracity of individuals that we are meeting for the first time. The author shows that even those who we consider to be experts such as judges, police officers or intelligence agents do very poorly in evaluating other human beings. Much of this misinterpretation of motivations leads to many of the problems that we face in society.

The author sheds a new light on many contemporary issues that involve much publicized individuals and confrontations that make the daily headlines. Among the issues covered are the financial frauds of Bernie Madoff and his predecessor, the eponymous Charles Ponzi. Another historical event covered is the much derided attempt by the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, to understand and appease Adolf Hitler during the 1938 Czechoslovakian crisis. More recently Gladwell addresses two pedophilia cases in the stories of Penn State’s Jerry Sandusky and the Michigan State’s Larry Nassar. Other issues deal with the intelligence agencies’ problems identifying foreign agents operating in their midst. Very prominent along this line is the success of Cuba’s Fidel Castro in penetrating US intelligence agencies for decades. Other topics covered address confrontations between police officers and black suspects, problems addressing and dealing with potential suicide attempts such as those involving the poet, Sylvia Plath, and the reasons behind missteps of justice such as the Italian conviction of the American Amanda Knox for a 2007 murder.

All of these stories involve errors in evaluating the character of others. Gladwell demonstrates the very poor record that we as human beings have in even interpreting facial expression and the ability to detect the behavior of many nefarious individuals who are so able to hide their true objectives ie: the repeated success of the experienced con-man. In one example, a judge’s determination as to whether a suspect should be kept in jail or released on bail is brought into question. One study employed a computer to evaluate the suspects’ written record to make that decision and the computer did much better than the judge who had that record plus the face to face evaluation of the suspect’s character. The judge’s character judgement was an impediment in determining if the suspect was a good risk or not (flight or repeat crime) to allow out on bail. In the Hitler - Chamberlain story, the author points out that those British leaders who had personally met Hitler had a greater confidence in his truthfulness than those, such as Winston Churchill, who had not. In the espionage business specially trained intelligence agents have a very poor record discovering spies in their own midst. In the Amanda Knox case, Italian authorities misinterpreted the fact that she did not openly display emotional concern over her roommate’s death as a sign of guilt.

Gladwell is a great interpreter of human events and provides an entertaining and insightful observations of our imperfections. In many instances he provides historical statistics in evaluating the frequency and locations of crimes and suicides. For example after the mid-1960s Britain made the conversion from Town Gas, which contains lethal Carbon Monoxide, to Natural Gas for heating and cooking. This transformation was accompanied by a sharp drop in suicides in Britain. A convenient method of committing suicide (lethal gas) was apparently not replaced by a less convenient method. Sylvia Plath in 1962 committed suicide using Town Gas. In the US the method of choice for suicides is a readily available option, firearms, accounting for over 50% of the total. The inference is that if these weapons were not so available the number of suicides would also drop here. Many other topics are covered by Gladwell including the role of excessive alcohol consumption in many venues, such as college frat parties, in sexual assault cases. The excessive alcohol use by both genders contribute to the frequency of these assaults.

Gladwell has the ability to maintain interest in his topics while informing the reader. His take on various issues is sometimes at variance with commonly accepted viewpoints. But that situation has been the case in many of his earlier works. Other works by Gladwell that you might enjoy include: *David and Goliath, What the Dog Saw, Outliers, Blink, and The Tipping Point.*
The Tangled Tree: A Radical New History of Life
by David Quammen
reviewed by Jim Mills

As new scientific information has become available in recent decades the views of evolutionary history have continued to evolve. The so called “tree of life” has been created to represent the best determined evolutionary pathway that have led to existing and known extinct creatures. This evolutionary pathway has also evolved as new knowledge has been added.

The Tangled Tree features two recent (last few decades) discoveries that strongly influence our views of evolution on Earth. The highest level split on the evolutionary pathway was the divide between organisms with Prokaryote and Eukaryote type cells. The first category includes only single celled organisms, essentially bacteria, with cells that do not contain a nucleus. The second, cells with a nucleus, includes single celled organisms such as an amoeba, and all of the multi-celled creatures including fungi, plants and animals. There was a class of creatures know as extremophiles such as single celled organisms that inhabited very hot pools such as those that are found at Yellowstone and others that could tolerate extremes of pressure, chemical imbalances and cold. For many years those that could tolerate these extremes were assumed to be Prokaryotes but advances in DNA analysis determined that this was not the case. An entirely separate group, what came to be called a domain, of life existed that has been named Archaea. Thus life starts with a three way split with the Archaea thought to be the earliest form. The extreme rarity of single celled fossils makes the determination of early evolutionary trends very difficult. The relatively new science of DNA analysis, however, is helping to fill in some of these early linkages.

The second major discovery discussed in The Tangled Tree has to do with the very nature of inheritance. A basic aspect of evolutionary theory is the theory of inherited traits. Essentially each generation inherits a mix of genes provided by each parent. Single celled creatures split providing each offspring with the genetic mix of the single parent. A few multi-celled creatures also pass on genes from a single parent. This pattern of inheritance had long been assumed to be the only mechanism available. For years the behavior of many bacteria, such as the rapid acquisition of immunity to antibiotics, puzzled scientists. As the years went by a new mechanism for passing evolutionary characteristics was discovered known as Horizontal Gene Transfer (HGT). This capability has been verified using the new techniques of DNA analysis. By this mechanism a packet of genes could travel from one bacteria to another and be incorporated in the genetic mix of the recipient. Should this change in genes be beneficial, these traits would rapidly proliferate. Hence the adoption of immunity by one or a few bacteria could rapidly move into the general population. Evidence accumulated that some simple multi-celled creatures also made use of HGT. The determination of the extent of the employment of HGT is an on-going investigation.

Other recent analyses indicate that the various elements found in the Eukaryote cells involved the inclusion of bacteria and genetic elements over eons, resulting in the basis for the proliferation of plant, fungal and animal life that occurred about 600 million years ago. This process was extremely slow since, evidence of single celled life on Earth goes back almost 4 billion years. A key advance was the incorporation of chloroplasts in a cell allowing for the conversion of solar energy into additional plant cells providing the basis for animal and fungal life on our planet. This process of photosynthesis also provided the oxygen in the atmosphere that we all animals use in addition to plant foods to exist here.

Many technical terms must necessarily be used to relate the various biological processes discussed in this book. David Quammen is expert in telling this story in an understandable way. Generally when he uses a term that was introduced many pages back he will refresh the reader’s memory as to the meaning of the word. The Tangled Tree is a very important book that discusses recent advances in biological and evolutionary science and does so in a very understandable way for the general reader.