

Books That Have Made History: Books That Can Change Your Life

(36 lectures, 30 minutes/lecture)

Course No. 4600

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What makes a written work eternal—its message still so fundamental to the way we live that it continues to speak to us, hundreds or thousands of years distant from the lifetime of its author?

Why do we still respond to an ancient Greek playwright's tale of the Titan so committed to humanity's survival that he is willing to endure eternal torture in his defiance of the gods? To the cold advice of a 16th-century Florentine exiled from the corridors of power? To the words of a World War I German veteran writing of the horrors of endless trench warfare?

Most important of all, what do such works—"Great Books" in every sense—mean to us? Can they deepen our self-knowledge and wisdom? Are our lives changed in any meaningful way by the experience of reading them?

In this course, Professor J. Rufus Fears presents his choices of some of the most essential writings in history. These are books that have shaped the minds of great individuals, who in turn have shaped events of historic magnitude.

This course does not analyze the literature or discuss it in detail; rather, it focuses on intellectual history and ethics. What Professor Fears does is to take the underlying ideas of each great work and show how these ideas can be put to use in a moral and ethical life.

Beginning with his definition of a great book as one that possesses a great theme of enduring importance, noble language that "elevates the soul and ennobles the mind," and a universality that enables it to "speak across the ages," Professor Fears examines a body of work that offers an extraordinary gift of wisdom to those willing to receive it.

From the *Aeneid* and the Book of Job to *Othello* and *1984*, the selections range in time from the 3rd millennium B.C. to the 20th century, and in locale from Mesopotamia and China to Europe and America.

A Chronology of Fundamental Choices

And though every thoughtful reader's list of historically important books will likely differ, few would argue against the profound importance of any of these selections. Together, they show how humankind has dealt with the choices revolving around the three themes of God, Fate, and Good-and-Evil—and how those choices shape our morality and direct our lives as we answer the question in the fourth main theme of this course: How should we live?

This course by the University of Oklahoma's three-time "Professor of the Year" is a vital intellectual and moral journey that remains constantly invigorating because of a teaching style that keeps even the most abstract concepts readily accessible.

Professor Fears is especially diligent about referring back to the main themes identified at the beginning of the course and comparing the position taken by each new author to what previously discussed authors have said. As a result, you'll find that each new lecture is smoothly layered into an ever-growing accumulation of knowledge. Each work comes alive, its ideas rich in consequence.

Even if you're already familiar with these works from a literary standpoint, this is a course well worth your attention; Professor Fears approaches each of these works from an entirely different direction, considering philosophical and moral perspectives that superbly complement a purely literary understanding.

Ideas Crucial To Every Thoughtful Person

And as Professor Fears is eager to point out, a grasp of those perspectives is crucial to the education of every thoughtful person.

"History is our sense of the past," he notes. "And these great books are our links to the great ideas of the past. This course is built upon the belief that great books, great ideas and great individuals make history.

"That's not a popular notion today, and certainly not in the academic world. In the academic world, we like to think that it is anonymous social and economic forces that make history. Slavery, for example, is the great object of study for those who ponder the lessons of the ancient world. Well à they're wrong. Karl Marx, who is the intellectual father of this notion that social and economic forces make great ideas, was wrong.

"It is the great ideas that propel men and women to become great in themselves. It was the great idea of truth that made Dietrich Bonhoeffer [the Lutheran pastor who defied Hitler and was hanged as a traitor] into a great man. It was a great idea of truth—and the great idea of God and of conscience—that made Socrates into a great man and left those Sophists, those academics, those professors of his day, trailing in the dust bin of history.

"History will say how well we have learned these values from the great books... all come together to educate us. For that is the ultimate goal of a course on the great books: wisdom."

What Can We Learn From The Great Books?

The point, of course, is that it is not the Great Books themselves that are important, but the values we learn from absorbing them. Professor Fears offers dramatic illustrations of choices taken and values chosen, and of the lives lived as a result.

He speaks, for example, of how Mohandas Gandhi relates the impact on his life of the time he spent each day reading the *Bhagavad Gita's* "Song of God" as he brushed his teeth.

A willingness to gain wisdom was also a characteristic of Gandhi's great antagonist, Winston Churchill, as Professor Fears shows us when the course turns to three of the works authored by the British statesman.

Fundamental ideas about right and wrong reverberate through these lectures, as history's most profound thinkers ponder questions about life, death, God, and morality:

- In the *Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, you'll see how words written as a means of self-education by a man who knew how ephemeral Rome's empire really was became an enduring guidepost on the path to wisdom.
- In comparing the funeral orations given by Pericles in Athens and Lincoln at Gettysburg, you'll experience two of the most profound statements ever made about the necessity for just wars, as two great leaders grapple with the same questions addressed by Vergil in the *Aeneid*.
- In *Gilgamesh*, you'll see how a search for eternal life and an understanding of why we must die teaches a questing ruler the greater importance of how we should live.
- In the three plays of the *Oresteia*, you'll see how murder, revenge, duty, and divine intervention are used to show how the power of choice given us by free will is not, by itself, enough, and that disaster can ensue when choice is not guided by wisdom.

A Blueprint for "The Good Life"

This course encompasses Professor Fears's blueprint for "the good life," from the point of view of a historian who has ventured into philosophy and ethics, stemming from his own interest in great historic statesmen and from his interest in the history of freedom.

Course Lecture Titles

Part 1

1. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison*
2. Homer, *Iliad*
3. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*
4. *Bhagavad Gita*
5. Book of Exodus
6. Gospel of Mark
7. Koran
8. *Gilgamesh*
9. *Beowulf*
10. Book of Job
11. Aeschylus, *Oresteia*
12. Euripides, *Bacchae*

Part 2

13. Plato, *Phaedo*
14. Dante, *The Divine Comedy*
15. Shakespeare, *Othello, the Moor of Venice*
16. Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*
17. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*
18. Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*
19. George Orwell, *1984*
20. Vergil, *Aeneid*
21. Pericles, *Oration*; Lincoln, *Gettysburg Address*
22. Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*
23. Confucius, *The Analects*
24. Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Part 3

25. Plato, *Republic*
26. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*
27. Sir Thomas Malory, *Morte d'Arthur*
28. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, Part 1
29. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, Part 2
30. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*
31. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*
32. Lord Acton, *The History of Freedom*
33. Cicero, *On Moral Duties (De Officiis)*
34. Gandhi, *An Autobiography*
35. Churchill, *My Early Life; Painting as a Pastime; WWII*
36. Lessons from the Great Books