



The Seekers: The Story of Man's Continuing Quest to Understand His World

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From the time of Socrates to today, humans have sought the answers to fundamental questions: Who are we? Why are we here? Previous bestsellers, *The Discoverers* & *The Creators*, told how we discovered the reality of our world, then celebrated artistic achievements. Boorstin now turns to the great figures in history who sought meaning & purpose in existence. He says Western culture has seen three grand epics of Seeking. There was 1st the heroic way of prophets & philosophers--men like Moses, Job, Socrates, Plato & Aristotle, as well as those in the communities of the early church & the Protestant Reformation--seeking salvation or truth from the god above or the reason within everyone. Then came an age of communal seeking, with people like Thucydides & Thomas More, Machiavelli & Voltaire pursuing civilization & the liberal spirit. Finally, there was an age of the social sciences, when man seemed ruled by the forces of history. Here are the stories of exceptional men such as Marx, Spengler, Toynbee, Carlyle, Emerson, Malraux, Bergson & Einstein. These thinkers still have the power to speak to us, not always so much for their answers as for their way of asking the questions that intrigue or obsess. This climax to his trilogy again shows Boorstin's ability to present challenging ideas coupled with sharp portraits of great writers & thinkers.

The Seekers: The Story of Man's Continuing Quest to Understand His World Details

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Dora says

Once again, Boorstin has lived up to my expectations. Although "Creators" remains my favorite book in the trilogy, "Seekers" comes in second. The biographical elements seem to dominate in the final chapters (as was the case in "Discoverers"), but a larger portion of the book was just what I expected - full of useful information, presented in clear, fluid, easily-digestible language. The biographical elements themselves did not bother me. However, as the chapters progressed (maybe this purely subjective), more and more biographical details were introduced which weren't always relevant to the chapter's main topic. Nevertheless, Boorstin's trilogy is one of the most useful and knowledge-packed series of books I have had the pleasure of reading.

Godlarvae says

This was a truly magnificent effort for Boorstin. I love the "new"ish way history is presented within it's historical, geographical, cultural milieu . . . not just as if it happened in a vacuum. Boorstin seems to be a genius in this form of writing . . . giving the subject a sense of time and place. I tend to approach many of my readings as textural projects . . . reading, re-reading, and underlining . . . and for that reason, it usually takes me two to three times to "finish" a book than usual. But, well worth it. I may not remember all of what I read but kernels and bits remain and I know where to go to refresh. . . an absolutely terrific historical overview, chronologically presented, with concepts distilled to their gist. Only reason I didn't give it a "five" is because my poor little brain had to work! Thank you Daniel.

srhnhm says

hmm, a disappointment given how amazing I found The Discoverers and The Seekers. seemed like the main weakness was a lack of precision about what made one a seeker. the fuzziness of that definition made it hard to judge the significance of a seeker's impact, to connect each seeker to the rest that followed -- which is the whole magic of Boorstin's style in his other works.

Sean says

If you picked just one author to get your World History from, you could do much worse than reading Daniel Boorstin. "The Seekers" is the third in Boorstin's trio of books that nicely encapsulate the history of the world by looking at a series of accomplishments.

"The Discoverers" detailed every major scientific and geographical discovery throughout history, everything somehow shoe-horned into a mere 768 pages. "The Creators" came next, a bit longer than the earlier book and outlining every important artistic achievement.

"The Seekers" rounds out Boorstin's trio by talking about historical figures who searched "for an understand of human existence". This covers philosophers, religious figures and social scientists.

Boorstin's third book is nearly as good as the earlier two and only suffers because of its brevity. At around half the length of the earlier two books, Boorstin appears to be rushing a bit to fit everything in. Still, his writing style is as relaxed and informal as in the other two books and the result is a very approachable summary of the man's search for meaning.

Jimmy Ele says

A great historical reference book that introduces the reader to many of humanity's seeking minds and the meaning behind their seeking. The book is told from a European Christian perspective and so lacks the Seekers from the Golden Age of Islam between 600 AD to about 1500 AD, as well as the Seekers of the East, MesoAmerica, Russia and other places around the world. Then again since most of the books from MesoAmerica have not survived then one can not really blame Daniel J. Boorstin for his lack of coverage. This book is going in my foundation shelf because it introduced me to many a mind whose works I must now read. Daniel J. Boorstin does a great job at condensing the life and main ideas of many seekers that go all the way back to Moses (Peace Be Upon Him) and the Ancient Greeks (May God be pleased with them). I loved the book for the unity that Daniel J. Boorstin sees in the seeking of many of mankind's searching minds.

Leif says

Ever wonder who made us Westerners think the way we do? I didn't, but this book answered my unasked question.

The incomparable Mr. Boorstin does another great job with this book on philosophy and seeking understanding. Mostly capsule biographies and succinct explanations on famous thinkers, from Socrates to Einstein, it is a relatively quick read with an amazing amount of information.

Will Waller says

The Seekers is a fascinating intellectual history of seekers throughout time. I read the book because my sister gave it to me several years ago as I was entering seminary as a way to supplement what I was learning there with philosophical thinkers from ancient history to mid-20th century.

Some of the learnings that I found in this book include:

Aristotle's paean to friendship in his Ethics: "Without friends no one would choose to go on living, though he possessed every other good thing."

The heart of Aristotle's seeking is the way of common sense - this is how it starts and how he executes it.

Aristotle's God was the unmoved mover. "The immortal neverfailing property of things that are, a sort of life as it were to all naturally constituted things." This may have been a deference to common senses - logic and

evidence. And the unmoved mover was the most divine being accessible to man.

God is an eternal being, according to Aristotle, whose beset activity is his life, the best life and eternal life. That is God.

The ascetics in Christianity focused on the "steep and thorny path of eternal happiness." They devised obstacles to angelic paths. Specifically, soem like Saint Simeon Stylites sat on a pole for 39 years throughout all sorts of weather.

Thomas Aquinas argued that "in arguing with nonbelievers about faith, you should not try to reason because reason would degrade faith.

Rousseau argued that education would have to be a way of not istilling ideals of civilization but of liberating the young frmo civilization and its evils.

Kant's philopsophical system argued that every man must be treated as an end in himself and not as a menas. The doctrine of the rights of man. Every man must legislate for himself.

Hegel believed that the separateness of items in the system was illusory. That it was all connected. And hegel used the history of mankind to be a universal history. NO part of the human experience on this planet is omitted, however little may be known of the facts. Reason controls the history of the unvierser, and it is the infinite neergy of the universe.

To experience freedom for Hegel is to expereince the right to obey.

Hegel operates under the belief that history is about thesis, antithesis, synthesis.

Comte argued that monotheism (in the 19th century) was dead adn that the notion of Providence detracted men from forming a true conception of the Law. Christianity makes us pilgrims and not connected to the world.

Absurdism is summed up in Waiting for Godot and Samuel Beckett. "Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit. Breathing is habit. Life is habit."

Acton: he said that Catholic persecution was about moral piety. Protestant persecution was about the pure inhibition of freedom of religious thought. It is about soul-corrupting persecution. Liberalism is what wishes something to be, irrespective of what is. It is essentially revolutoary. Facts must yield to ideas. Peacebaly and patiently if possible. Violently if not. He said that liberty is so holy a thing, that God was forced to permit Evil, that it might exist.

Science in the 20th century: never before had Western man known so much abotu the world or understood so little of his purpose.

Einstein: individual experience impresses him as a sort of prison and he wants to experience the universe as a single significant whole." He searched for that whole.

Peter McLoughlin says

Intellectual history with a capital I. It covers various philosophers and thinkers of the western tradition up through the twentieth century and starts with the bible. It gets more idiosyncratic in choices of subjects as it gets closer to the present but what is the saying "things like the French revolution are too close to us to really assess." I find many of the standard great thinkers appear in the earlier parts of the book and people Boorstin chooses for the latter part are just too close hence there might be some odd choices seen through own eyes twenty-five years after the author's writing. Fairly nice thing for people who want the cliff notes on western thinkers.

Holly Lindquist says

The first two books in Daniel Boorstin's Knowledge Trilogy, *The Discoverers* (about science) and *The Creators* (about art), are both outstanding examples of comprehensive history done well. They're weighty books, but the fascinating information and engaging writing do much to offset their intimidating girth.

This third volume and final volume, *The Seekers*, is half their size and unfortunately about half as interesting. (Granted, Boorstin's a very interesting writer, so half as interesting in a Boorstin book is still more than interesting than most). Never-the-less *The Seekers* reads more like an afterthought.

The first part of the book covers the Hebrew prophets, Greek philosophy, and Christianity. The second part is mainly about politics and the dynamic thinkers in that area, and the last bit leans more toward sociology. Most of the individual chapters are engrossing, though there are a few sections that lose momentum. In addition, transitions between different subjects are not as smooth as in the other books. The religious portions don't quite glide smoothly into the philosophical portions, and the general theme of the book seems slightly ambiguous.

Still, the Knowledge Trilogy is like a trip through a sumptuous library with the benefit of a savvy, witty tour guide who knows all the books by heart. *The Seekers* is the weakest entry, but would still brighten anyone's bookcase. (I just can't help but wish there were more historians with the ambition and the voluminous erudition to write stuff like this.)

ActionScientist says

Starting out with ancient prophets and telling the evolutionary story of seekers of meaning all the way through to Einstein, this book is one of the few special histories that I've diligently read from cover to cover, knowing that I was listening to the perspective a wise and highly erudite mind.

I consider myself to be an amateur seeker, a wandering wonderer.

-uht! says

A truly amazing journey. I loved the idea that seekers were always prepared by the context in which they lived, but it took *that* specific person with *that* specific background in *that* specific climate to make the next jump.

It's interesting to think about human thought in a group-conscious sort of way.

Someday I'll eventually put some quotes down before I forget them. Fuck, I already forgot them.

linhtalinhtinh says

This is like a crash introduction to "influential philosophers." Boorstin is widely read and he is able to condense so much knowledge in a very short book.

At the same time, this is not exactly a fascinating read. Too short, and the author is trying to be too objective. I miss the opinionated voice of the historian like Barzun instead, for who in this world is without bias? Boorstin steers clear from making personal comments, but it doesn't mean that the book is unbiased. It is, after all, his book, his interpretation of one aspect of mankind as "Seekers," his selection of philosophers, his understanding of their works.

Another note, "Man's continuing quest to understand his world knowledge" should be "Western Man." Boorstin wasn't able to cover the magnificent world outside Europe and North America, except for a few prophets so early in history or few saints from North Africa. Why, Confucius or Lao Tzu definitely deserve space as much as Aristotle.

David Withun says

What makes this book unique (and an uniquely excellent read) from among the many intellectual histories out there is the perspective from which Boorstin approaches his subjects and the aspect of his various subjects which he focuses on. Rather than looking, as most intellectual histories do, at what the conclusions, ideas, and dogmas of their various subjects are, Boorstin instead examines the act of seeking itself. In the process, he introduces us to the means of seeking answers to life's greatest questions as they have been applied by some of the greatest seekers of history, from biblical figures like Job to Greek philosophers like Plato to modern day scientists like Albert Einstein. Boorstin's work is a masterpiece of appreciation for the amazing capacities of the human mind and the restless nature of the human spirit. His book is a paean to humanity.

Glenn Schmelzle says

Major task to take on - but Boorstin (mostly) pulls off this census of the Western thinkers.

Matthew says

The Seekers is a completely readable journey through Western thought. As the last volume of Boorstein's trilogy which also includes The Creators A History of Heroes of the Imagination and The Discoverers, the Seekers is by the far the weakest (and shortest) of the three. Starting with the Hebrew prophets and going through Greek thought up to and including the modern day, Boorstein's theme is "seeking." That is, the continuing effort of human beings to understand their world.

At first, he picks familiar and interesting targets: the prophet Isaiah, Plato and Aristotle, Aquinas, etc. By the time, he reaches modern day, however, the choices become somewhat more eclectic. One chapter puts together Oliver Wendell Holmes and E.O. Wilson in a seemingly arbitrary way. And even then, the book focuses on Wilson's work in biodiversity, but not, for example, his work in On Human Nature where he tries to unify social and biological fields. Others choices may leave the reader wondering: numerous pages given to Lord Acton? There is also a rather strong emphasis on historians towards the end; it feels as though author is naming personal sources of inspiration rather than more recognized or influential ones.

Hence, in the later chapters, it feels as though the theme of seeking turns into "some interesting things that a couple of recent thinkers have advocated." It is not always clear how each of these chapters relates to overall idea of "seeking" nor it is clear exactly what the author means to convey by his chosen emphasis. I did not come away with deeper insights into the human tendency to seek: I learned a collection of interesting facts about a number of significant thinkers, some of whom are not usually treated in these kinds of works.

This may be seen as a strength or a weakness. It is good, of course, to see some attention draw towards more obscure figures. But it makes The Seekers difficult to place. It is a bit too breezy and arbitrary to serve as an introduction to Western history; it tends to require some background knowledge to make sense of things as numerous figures are mentioned only in passing. It may serve as an interesting read for those who think they know the story of Western thought to broaden their knowledge and flesh out some of the more recent developments.
