



Making History

Stephen Fry

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In Making History, Stephen Fry has bitten off a rather meaty chunk by tackling an at first deceptively simple premise: What if Hitler had never been born? An unquestionable improvement, one would reason--and so an earnest history grad student and an aging German physicist idealistically undertake to bring this about by preventing Adolf's conception. And with their success is launched a brave new world that is in some ways better than ours--but in most ways even worse. Fry's experiment in history makes for his most ambitious novel yet, and his most affecting. His first book to be set mostly in America, it is a thriller with a funny streak, a futuristic fantasy based on one of mankind's darkest realities. It is, in every sense, a story of our times

Making History Details

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Author : Stephen Fry

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Steve says

When someone as talented, witty, and educated as Stephen Fry writes a book, you half-expect brilliance on every page. While his genius was clearly in evidence, it was only every other page or so where it struck me-- still a helluva good rate.

Fry did not lack for ambition. But it was always going to be difficult to display humor, humanity, romance, and imagination when the fate of the whole continent's Jewish population was at stake. The book asks whither a world without Hitler. Fry's treatment and tone in response compels me to invent a new, compound German word (if it doesn't exist already):

Unwahrscheinlicheleichternsthaftigkeit

translated roughly as "mismatched light seriousness." Despite Fry's light touch, he does hit on some thought-provoking issues. "What-if" exercises are interesting when you've got someone to give you proper context along the way. A polymath like Fry certainly knows enough European history to do that. In my mind, his knowledge of the German experience between the wars more than made up for the inherent flaws in time travel logic. (I doubt even Stephen Hawking could make the physics behind such machinery sound plausible.)

To his credit, Fry did not play up the sci-fi elements. What he did emphasize were pleasures of the intellect. Now I'm wondering: what if someone went back in time and made *Making History* disappear? I, for one, would feel less *Unwahrscheinlicheleichternsthaftigkeit*, and an even greater debt of outright fun.

Franziska says

Wow - this book was amazing!

In the beginning, the switch between past and present was a bit odd and I had a hard time to find into the book. But after several chapters, you see how all of it fits to the story and then I couldn't stop reading. So I am really happy that I had the opportunity to read it & can only recommend it!

Thomas Strömquist says

Probably my favorite fiction book by the wonderful Stephen Fry - when you have read his autobiography, my suggestion is to go for this one! The story, obviously, is about the changing of history and the consequences thereof. Wonderful, live and likeable characters (and some not likeable at all, of course) and has all the trademark Fry: English humor, wit, and beautiful language. At no point in this book this feels overdone, but I felt that he hit just the tone and pace here. The outcome of the meddling is very close to my first guess and I liked very much that he arrived there. The 'fix' is also a logical one, but does offer some surprises along the way. This was, even though it's a bit long, a smooth and not easily paused read and one that I recommend very much.

Katie Muffett says

My favourite Fry book. His jumps between narratives and playful use of various lit devices is only possible for Stephen Fry. As usual, you instantly adore the protagonist and watch his every fumbling step with the same paternal-yet-slightly-benevolently-lecherous gaze as Fry. The action in this is perfectly paced, the history glitters with colour, the humanity is raw, the politics aren't preachy or overdone, the love is true, and the voices are clear and exact. Above all of course, is the humour.

I want to make love to this book, it is so gorgeous. If I was a boy, I would freely offer myself to Mr. Fry. Seriously.

Alytha says

I think I read somewhere once that the first rule of timetravel is that you try to kill Hitler, and the second rule is that it either doesn't work, or things get even worse.

This book falls into the second category. So, in terms of concept, it's not entirely new, but the execution is really really good.

The book does an excellent job of capturing the human emotional level of the whole insane thing, and it's much funnier than you'd expect this kind of book to be.

This is not really a science-fiction book though. Apart from some techno-babble, we're never really told how the time-machine works, and that's not the point of the book either. It focusses on the consequences, which, despite the rather neat tech, are pretty horrible all around. Fortunately, a bit of human decency and compassion has survived. So this eventually turns into a bit of a romance too.

Another good thing is that the German in the text is almost always correct. Thank you, Mr Fry!

Some nitpicks: some of the flashbacks are rather dull to read.(there's a bit of breaking the fourth wall about that, later, though) (view spoiler)

So, if you like history, and plots somewhere between Doctor Who and Monty Python, go for this one!

4.5 stars, really.

Jason says

Thoroughly good book. The idea this book is based on is nothing new, people have discussed this many times, but this is the first time I have seen the idea written down.

It has been very well done, the different writing styles used keep you entertained. Michael and Leo are very good characters and some of their dialogue had me in stitches.

The first book I have read by Mr Fry, I will be back to read some more.

Viir says

More like 3.5 stars but whatever.

The story follows Michael D. Young, a 24 year old guy who is supposed to turn in his thesis to achieve his doctorate. He lives with his girlfriend Jane, who is a very clever ambitious Chemist (I think, idk anymore) and both of them are so different that this relationship isn't good for any of them. The thesis Michael writes focuses on Adolf Hitler and his mother but (because he is dumb, I can't find another reason for such a bad thesis) he writes it in prose. Like it's a fucking novel and not a scientific paper. What.The.Hell.Dude.

So obviously the professor who is in charge for his thesis isn't too thrilled and wants him to rewrite his shit. And somewhere here Michael meets another professor, Leo Zuckerberg who somehow was able to build a machine that allows him to look at Auschwitz in 1944 (again I think that was the year, I really don't want to check again). At this point they just look at it...but what would happen if they could actually do something that would prevent Hitler from doing the horror we all learnt about at school?

So the story unfolds there.

The book switches between chapters focusing on the "present", 1994 with struggling Michael and his life, and the past where we get to know Adolf Hitlers mother, her abuse by Alois and so on. Then we also get chapters about how Hitler was working in the first world war, the people that served in the war etc. It switches to another character from the time, but I don't want to give anything away.

I really liked the history point in this book, I liked the time travel thing. But the writing style is sth you have to get used to, what took me like 200 pages. After that I was thrilled to continue reading. One major negative point is that after going on and on about history the story evolves to become a fucking love story that no one needs and no one (or maybe just me) asked for. But whatever. It is what it is. The love story wasn't even nicely written, just thrown out there. I'm annoyed.

STILL I recommend reading it, go ahead have fun.

Eleanor says

This was a great disappointment. The best part of the book was the alternate world that Fry imagined, with a very different outcome to the Second World War from the one we know.

I found the protagonist incredibly irritating, though I was presumably supposed to find him charming. For someone who is a PhD candidate in history at Cambridge University, his inability to see that removing Hitler from the picture would not change the disastrous situation in Germany after the First World War, and that of course some other leader would emerge, was frankly unbelievable, despite his immaturity. Had he learned nothing from several years of reading history?

Other irritations included the way the story occasionally turns into a film script, and the way that in the

sections dealing with Germans, the English text is larded with German words. This makes as much sense as the old films where Germans (or other nationalities) spoke to each other in English with heavy accents so that we would know they were really speaking in German or French or whatever.

Barely two stars, one being for the alternate outcome for Europe that Fry imagined and described well and succinctly.

Ben Babcock says

So you invent a time machine, and what's the first thing you do? You go back in time and kill Hitler, of course! Except you can't (TVTropes), because either it doesn't work or it screws up the timeline even more. Thus resolving one of the burning questions surrounding time travel: if it's possible, why do we still have Hitler? Stephen Fry tackles this in a best-of-all-possible worlds way in *Making History*, where his protagonist succeeds in averting Hitler's birth only for someone more charismatic and cunning to rise to power in his place.

I didn't like this novel at first. I'm a fan of Fry as a TV personality, but the opening pages of *Making History* didn't endear themselves to me. Michael Young is such an unsympathetic character. But he kind of needs to be a jerk. One requires a certain level of hubris to think that one should be responsible for changing history, and Michael certainly has that. Of course, a story where one kills Hitler with no unintended consequences would be boring. So things go wrong, and that's where it gets really interesting.

When reality adjusts to Hitler's absence, Michael finds himself not in Cambridge but Princeton, where he is supposed have an American accent. But with Hitler out of the picture, a more charismatic German rose to power. He reins in the anti-semitism, and as a result, Germany develops the atomic bomb first. World War II doesn't happen, and America exists in a tenuous state of non-aggression with a Fascist/Communist Europe. In many respects this world seems more advanced—it's 1996 and everyone has mobile phones and tablets—but culturally, civil liberties didn't happen. Racism and homophobia are normal; a climate of McCarthyism is the country's response to Germany's power. And the Jews? Well, in Europe, they got shuffled into a supposed "free state" but haven't been heard from since.

Making History is a fantastic example of alternate history. I particularly enjoyed how Fry shows the same scene, set during World War I, twice, once from the original timeline and once from the timeline after Michael erases Hitler. It's an "oh shit" moment as the reader realizes the magnitude of what Michael has done. It's a foregone conclusion that the new world is going to be somehow less preferable to the old one, but it's not immediately obvious how that's the case. Fry reveals more about the new timeline gradually, giving the reader time to acclimatize alongside Michael, who must pretend like everything is cool to throw off some suspicious G-men even while he secretly freaks out and wants to find a way to restore the original timeline.

This is a subject understandably close to Fry's heart, because he has family who died at Auschwitz. And the Holocaust in any light is a serious subject. So it seems like it would be difficult to poke fun at it ... and Fry doesn't try. The humour in *Making History* is entirely at Michael's expense (another reason he is an unlikable protagonist). On one level, the narrative just seems to take umbrage at Michael's ego and conviction that he can make history better. It mocks him for believing that merely removing Hitler from the

picture will somehow defuse the anti-semitism and fascist ideologies throughout Europe in the early twentieth century. Fry makes a serious point here, in that often the vilification of Hitler seems to eclipse the more important underlying issues. But he does it with a lighthearted, humorous tone with regards to Michael's actions and feelings.

The way that Fry balances the serious nature of the subject with his trademark wit is the most stunning aspect of *Making History*, and the most rewarding. This is far more than just another what-if story of counterfactual fiction: it moves both through pathos and humour. I wanted to strangle Michael sometimes, but by the end I was starting to sympathize with him. And while he's still a jerk at the end of the story, he has definitely changed and learned from his rather major mistakes. In this way Fry reaffirms what is most important: the close, personal relationship between two human beings, and the reminder that *we* are responsible for making a better world.

Rebecca says

You can read this review and more on my blog

In a nutshell: *Making History* is an equally fun and thought-provoking read about an alternative history where Hitler was never born.

This was not only my first Stephen Fry novel but my first read for 2015. It was a wonderful beginning on both accounts. I've wanted to read something by Fry for a while now and *Making History* was a perfect book for me to start with. I'm a history student - like the protagonist - and I'm fascinated by alternative history, especially related to the time period. In all honesty, I wasn't quite sure to expect from this book but I thoroughly enjoyed it. It accompanied me through sleepless nights, killing time at the airport and a shaky flight home. It made me laugh, smile and think. What more can I ask for from a book?

Making History answers an interesting question - what if Hitler had never been born? It's something that I have considered myself many times, and I've read and heard about a lot of different theories. In the novel, a history grad student - Michael - and an aging German physicist - Leo - are particularly concerned with it; so much that they manage to ensure that Adolf Hitler was never conceived. It's interesting to consider the implications of this. Fascism and anti-semitism would not have disappeared if Hitler had not existed - it's not like these were new concepts in the world. History instead play out differently and as a consequence, the world is changed. Aspects of the alternative society concerning technology, history and sexuality were certainly different, and I loved Fry's take on it.

The novel is told from multiple perspectives and some chapters are written in a script format. The switch could be disconcerting initially, but overall I appreciated the writing style. The implications of what Michael and Leo did were effectively demonstrated with a scene told once with Hitler and again without him.

I liked the characters, despite their flaws, though I didn't necessarily form a strong connection with them. Leo was an especially interesting character, considering the moral dilemma that drove him to change history. If I had to pick a favourite character, I'd go with Steve. (view spoiler)

Fry is a wonderful story teller and I was engaged throughout the book, even during its build-up to the actual

history "making". This book was a pleasure to read and I'm already looking forward to re-reading it. I especially liked that it was at the same time fun and playful, and thought-provoking and interesting. I'd highly recommend Making History to fans of alternative history novels or simply anyone after a great read.

S.J. Higbee says

This is the first time I've picked up a Stephen Fry novel, and it was an enjoyable, if slightly uneven, experience. Thumbing through the opening pages, I noticed that this book was first published in 1996, which begins to make sense when considering some of the faultlines running through this alternate history offering.

The book is an intriguing premise – two men decide, for very different reasons, to tamper with history by ensuring the one man responsible for the rise of Nazi Germany is never born. However, the result isn't what they bargained for... As a former history student, I thoroughly enjoyed Fry's thorough approach to the historical content and had no problem with the leisurely start. And the conclusion that Fry comes to is certainly thought provoking – I've been thinking a lot about the book since I put it down.

Fry successfully establishes Michael's character as a wunderkind bedevilled with increasing insecurities as his peers are rapidly catching up, if not overhauling his precocious giftedness. Inevitably, given the sub-genre, the narrative timeline is speckled with flashbacks which are ably handled. And it goes without saying that the writing is excellent – actually, that shouldn't go without saying. Excellent writing should always be acknowledged and I'd be selling Fry short if I just gave a nod in that direction because we all know that the man has an intellect the size of Greece's overdraft.

So far, so good. The protagonist has been well established, with plenty of depth. We have met with Leo and there's been a couple of interesting plot twists – and then the novel prose comes to abrupt end and I was confronted with a film script. The action immediately speeded up as I witnessed a major emotional confrontation spool through in this script mode – feeling completely unconnected to the characters. Later in the novel, there is another, longer film script interlude, which also had the effect of alienating me from the action – a real shame as I'd really enjoyed the book up to this point.

I am aware that my extreme aversion to this literary device is subjective – probably connected to the fact that books are my first and major love, while films are okay, I suppose.... However, I did find the film script sections really spoilt the book for me. Having said that, up to the point it all went Courier I found the depiction of the alternate world engrossing and chilling in equal measure. Fry is good at writing minor characters memorably and the flashes of humour helped alleviate what could have been a grim read, given the subject matter.

All in all, it's an interesting book with an interesting premise and if you enjoy alternate histories, I highly recommend it. Who knows - you may even enjoy the scripted sections...

8/10

Heather(Gibby) says

This was the first book by Stephen Fry that I have read. It is an enjoyable easy read, dealing with one of my

favorite genres, time travel.

I found the chapters that were written to mimic a movie scripts were very distracting, and don't really understand its use as a literary style. does Fry do this often?

The storyline is a fairly classic one, What would happen if you travelled back in time and prevented Hitler from being born?

The clever consequences of this action make this a very interesting read.

The main protagonist is a flawed individual who steals your heart anyway.

I was also quite amused by the comparisons between "American" and English" expressions in the book, as a Canadian, is was 50/50 as to which one was more familiar to me.

Marc says

This was clearly not a success for me. Especially the literary level was very low: weakly portraited, one-dimensional characters, an occasional exciting moment but a lot of very boring moments, especially in the passages that have been written as a film script, and a really really dull final. The only interesting approach is that Fry tries to imagine what the consequences would be of attempts to change history, but even that is poorly executed. As a novel this does not exceed the level of cheap science fiction, suitable to read on the beach.

Hugh Malcolm says

The book started well enough, young chap at Cambridge (Fry's alma mater) immersed in the history of Hitler, working towards spending his life at Cambridge in a paid capacity, is having a tough time with his hard-nosed scientist girlfriend who finally leaves him (I found her more interesting than our hero, stronger, and more capable of carrying a story, and was sorry to see her go). Young man makes a hash of his thesis, dissertation, whatever, by being way too inventive for historical research, but bumps (literally) into a physics prof. who catches sight of his subject matter, becomes very excited, and shows our young hero why. For his own reasons, he too is obsessed with Hitler and is working on a way to change the course of history, basically to assuage his own familial guilt. With the young man's detailed knowledge of Hitler's early life, the physics professor's project becomes much easier. And so these two set about making sure Hitler is never born. Fry's idea is that mass events will happen no matter who, or who is not, there...they will simply be somewhat different. Therefore, even without Hitler, the basic impulse of the time is achieved through a different cast of characters. Only worse. That was interesting, interesting enough to keep going with the story. The writing was a bit clever-clever, but not too clever, actually I expected more from such a celebrated wit (no Oscar Wilde here)...and towards the end became rather sophomoric, as did Fry's completely unnecessary descent into an alternative love story way out of character for our young hero, even understanding that he too changed when the world changed. It wasn't necessary for the story, just seemed sort of stuck on as an amusement/fantasy for Fry. In fact, the last fifty pages were juvenile and rushed. In the hands of deeper thinker and a better sci-fi writer, this might have been very good. But it petered out along the way as Fry's grasp of his material also petered out. He really didn't know what to do with everyone when they'd achieved their goal, so thrashed his way out in a very unlikely comic book fashion.

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?????, “to make the world a better place by ensuring that Adolf Hitler lived and prospered”...

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Laura says

Amazing. My absolute favorite of Fry's excellent works, and one of my favorite books, period. Hilarious, it goes without saying. Intelligent, playful, silly/serious. Romantic. No one but Fry could write a book about Hitler that can make you cry with laughter.

"Sodding *pants*."

BrokenTune says

Can you have a mid-life crisis at twenty-four? Or is it just the usual crisis of adulthood, something I was going to have to get used to until I doddered into oblivion? For the past year, I realised, I had been suffering from this pain, this leaking of hot lead in my stomach. Every morning when I awoke and stared at the ceiling and listened to Jane's gentle snoring it flooded my gut, a dark swell of recognition that here was another pissing day to be got through as me. How can you tell if that's freakish or usual? No one ever says. The ceaselessly expanding Christian Societies in the university would tell you that it was a sign that you needed room for Christ in your life. That your ache was a vacuum in the soul. Yeah, right. Sure. It was the same void that drugs filled, I supposed. I had thought too that maybe this was what Jane was for. No, not what Jane was for, what Love was for. Then either I didn't love Jane as I should or this was another blown theory. The longings of a creative spirit then? Maybe my soul craved expression in Art? But: can't draw, can't write, can't sing, can't play. Great. Where does that leave me? A kind of Salieri deal perhaps. Cursed with enough of divine fire to recognise it in others, but not enough to create anything myself. Aw, rats . . .

Even tho I love Stephen Fry's books (and pretty much everything else he shares with the world), Making History has been lingering on my kindle without even tempting me to start this. Why is that?

Well, I unfortunately was put of by the premise that promised time travel that would culminate in the prevention of Hitler, two subjects that really don't intrigue me at all.

When I started the book, the misgivings I had with the premise continued: I liked Fry's writing but I still couldn't get to grips with reading what was in part a biography of Hitler, which, well, I had not planned on ever reading. I even found myself skimming some of those parts. It was written really well, but not something I would have engaged with if it had been by any other author.

However, I knew enough about Stephen Fry to be intrigued as to how he would handle the subject and how he would tie up the various parallel story lines.

And of course the second story line about a history student who has just submitted his PhD thesis, was quirky enough and contained all the good parts, the parts where Fry questions things like the relationship between science and art, and how society attributes more importance to one rather than the other.

But then, at about the half-way point, two things happened:

For one, I realised how unusual it is to read a WWI account (even tho fiction) from a German perspective.

What is more, Fry did this rather well and without resorting to a lot of stereotyping or using clichés.

The second change was that the story suddenly changed a gear when the two plots crossed, and when we get to read Fry's conjectured alternate reality, which is not as, erm, peachy as the simple solution erasing Hitler's existence from the 20th century may seem.

The second half of the book had me gripped. If I had not arranged to meet with a friend for lunch, I would have read this book straight through all morning.

What I loved about Fry's story is that he did not rely on a naive plot, but actually put a lot of thought into his conjectures, where one change effects so many things that outcomes are not predictable. And, yet, despite the sensitive subjects that Fry brought up, there is an overarching tone of hope for humankind, even if the book focuses on the balance between the good and the bad that comes with every action.

I absolutely loved it.

Unfortunately, this is the last of Fry's novels that I hadn't read, yet, so I can only hope that he will at some point write another one. I love his other books (the non-fiction ones), but his fiction work is rather special to me.

Marina says

This is such an unusual book for me, mainly in a sense that I don't tend to read SciFi and time travel and the like.

But I knew that anything written by Stephen Fry would be funny and witty, and the description sounded very intriguing.

Well then, imagine my shock when I read the first couple of chapters and discovered that not only is it funny but also very approachable and human and real, and that the description doesn't do the plot justice, in the sense that we are not only being told about the past but actually living through it, with the people of the times.

I loved the characters, Michael and Leo, they were very human and relatable, especially Michael, who was very recognisable to me, personality-wise.

And as for the plot, well, it is a personal story, but I suppose the message, if there's any, would be about the person being responsible only for his own destiny, and that the fate of the world isn't determined by a single person, that if evil has a face, it's the face of millions, not individuals.

But this book feels like it transcends plots and SciFi and even characters - its biggest achievement, to me, is how deeply personal it feels. The writing style helps - the text is written the way it'd be spoken, the way it'd be felt and experienced.

"Write what you know" is a terrible advice. And yet...

I've no idea if Fry is Jewish. I've no idea if he's gay. I've no idea if he speaks German. But, reading this book, I could bet he is/does all that.

Wendy says

This amazing novel is a blend of science fiction, history, and time travel, and I thought it brilliant. If you're over the age of sixteen, chances are that you have spent a minute or two - in school or outside of it - pondering what our world would be like if the Germans had won World War II, or if Adolf Hitler had never been born, and that's exactly what this novel is about. Fry explores a spectrum of potential realities: historical, political, scientific, cultural, and sexual, and his speculations smack of realism and often of frightening *possibleness*.

Michael D. Young and Leo Zuckerman - the young British historian and the elderly German physicist at the centre of the story - are engaging, believable, and well-rounded characters, and the situations into which they are thrown are, as I said, thrilling and involving and page-turning stuff.

I also learned a few things about history - I can't believe I never knew that "Nazi" was merely the first four letters of the full name of the political party that Hitler helped to found, for instance.

I think I paid a dollar for this book, at a recent book sale at work. That was money well-spent.

Shelley says

Slow to get started, but once the set up ended (around page 150), it got completely awesome and very interesting. Michael and Leo try to fix the world by making it so that Hitler was never born, except the world that results is even worse.

I loved the glimpses of the technology in the alternate world. I think the premise that the world ends up in a perpetual state of the 1950s is fascinating. I liked how Michael and Steve's relationship evolved, although I'd have liked to see a bit more of it. It was really just all around cool and fun and interesting. Well worth the \$5 I paid for it on Amazon marketplace. *g*
