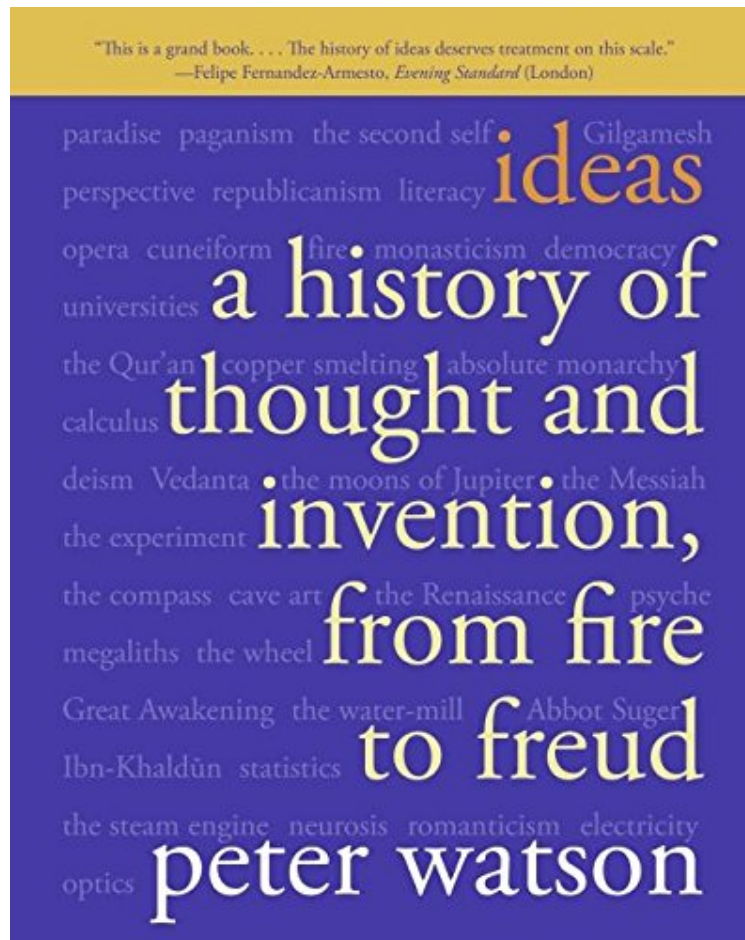


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Ideas: A History of Thought and Invention, from Fire to Freud

Peter Watson

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Peter Watson : Ideas: A History of Thought and Invention, from Fire to Freud before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Ideas: A History of Thought and Invention, from Fire to Freud:

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. An excellent tome, a worthy accomplishment By D. Lawrence It is quite impossible for any one person to say with absolute authority exactly what are all the ideas, concepts, innovations and insights that lead the human forward in the advancement of civilization through the activities of harnessing nature, establishing just laws, instituting the best educational curriculum for social progress, and understanding what psyche is; but the author has taken up the challenge and done exceptionally well. This book is not really a story that starts at some beginning of time and then brings the reader up to a conclusion at our own contemporary time, but instead, is a referential body of the episodes in human history that allowed successive generations of man to build the next future upon and from which then brought forth the steady rise of human betterment. Mr. Watson begins with the

civilization of Sumer and proceeds to the last pages with the great scientific breakthroughs of modern physics and American law at the beginning of the 20th century. This is history told in a different light and is one worth reading. One can pick any chapter or any paragraph at random if so desired and find themselves enriched. Or, one can read from beginning to end without interruption. When it is customary for historical work to usually highlight the actions of presidents, titans of commerce, military generals and admirals, campaigns of conquests and the corresponding rise and fall of political systems and their empires, Mr. Watson traces a very different path here and the reader is well rewarded. Does he include all the important philosophers and scientists, engineers and artists and men of medicine? No. But that is not really a shortcoming. He does an adroit job of showing how the rise of man's intellect and improvement in living has been a steady progression of brilliant steps which subtly reveals just what a marvel is the human mind, just what an amazing species are we humans, able to look at the world and pluck out of the imaginative well that is the mind some element that when utilized changes the whole of our world, usually for the good. This book is easy to read, made for any age and lays forth an encouragement that the reader will continue to delve deeper into human history and to pay more attention to those who are often forgotten or ignored in the usual quest of national pride to place triumphant heroes on pedestals to be deified by the common person or to be idolized by some future grandiose politician. I cannot possibly think that any one can truly find fault with the scope and perspective and general aim of this book and what it strives to accomplish.

2 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Great reading if you like broad brush history of ideas

By Jackal This is the stuff our universities should teach, but sadly is seen as too traditional by many of them. Contrary to some recent reviewers I find this to be a non-academic, journalistic account of important ideas in human history (as opposed to a deep-thinking academic account). An author of such a book will have some choice of what to include and not to include. I might not agree with all the author's choices, but that is actually a good thing. In other words, the book surprised me on a number of occasions. Since the author is not an academic he is not mentally bound with a specific way of presenting the ideas. On a slightly negative note, it is clear that the author in many cases is just adding material from other sources that he is not familiar with. This is not good, but it would be inhuman to expect the author to be familiar with all the material between the fire and psychoanalysis. Also contrary to some recent reviews, the book spends time talking about Arabic, Indian and Chinese contributions. Having said that, the book is written from the Western tradition. Since the Western culture that has managed to stay on top for 2,000 years, I find this a perfectly fine choice: Give credit where credit is due, but stick with a Western perspective. Readers with some knowledge of history (and geography) will find this book more valuable. If you for instance are not already familiar with the Muslim rule in Spain, that chapter will be less pleasant to read. So you need some good high school education. If you want a good education, irrespective of your age, you should read this book with a pencil in hand. In fact if you only want to read one book on the topic, this is probably the best choice too. Much more readable than a textbook. The book ends with Freud, because the author has another book on the 20th century.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Great read

By Kneeps Excellent book on intellectual history. Watson writes in an engaging style and the breadth of his scholarship is impressive. Seemed a little speculative in the prehistory component but, in fairness, this information does need some interpretation and interpolation to be meaningful. I haven't completed the book yet but I feel that it's well worth the time it takes.

Peter Watson's hugely ambitious and stimulating history of ideas from deep antiquity to the present day offers an illuminated path to a greater understanding of our world and ourselves.

From Publishers Weekly Watson's (The Modern Mind) hefty tome distills history's greatest ideas and inventions into an impressive discourse on history's driving forces, enlivened by anecdotes and made approachable by Watson's casual, nearly conspiratorial, tone. Watson presents a vast amount of information, but his greatest strength lies in his ability to make an immensely varied body of material coherent and digestible. The author asks the reader to approach his history "as an alternative to more conventional history--as history with the kings and emperors and dynasties and generals left out," and assumes "readers will know the bare bones of historical chronology." Central to Watson's approach is his belief that the scientific experiment, as it took root in medieval Europe, forever changed history's intellectual landscape. (Watson goes as far as labeling the scientific method "the purest form of democracy there is.") Whereas the non-Western world once dominated intellectual spheres (The author notes that the Hindu mathematician Aryabhata calculated the value of pi and the solar year's length, determined that the earth revolved around the sun and discovered the cause of eclipses nearly a thousand years before Copernicus), Watson points to a grand-and specific-shift that changed that dynamic: "The eleventh and twelfth centuries were a hinge period, when the great European acceleration began. From then on, the history of new ideas happened mainly in what we now call the West." This analysis is indicative of Watson's scholarship, and the result is a rich tapestry of intellectual and cultural life through the ages.

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From Booklist Pegging his narrative to three ideas--the soul, Europe, and experiment--Watson surveys intellectual history for a popular audience. Departing from the earliest indications of abstract thought--tools fashioned by ancestral human

species--Watson highlights the crucial efflorescence of artwork 30,000 years ago, followed by the agriculture revolution. Watson then assesses classical Greece as the crucial incubator of ideas, incomparable to any other situation in history. This is the origin of his inclusion of "Europe" as one of his three organizers of a massive sweep of material: while Watson covers the important intellectual influences emanating from Islam, India, and China, he maintains Europe is where the cogitational action has been. Eurocentrism has been a field of fierce academic contests, traces of which bubble up in Watson's consideration of the main phases of Western thought. Judaism, Christianity, the Renaissance and Reformation, the scientific revolution, and the Enlightenment--Watson enfolds changing conceptions of the objective, material world, and of the subjective world of the human psyche in a confident, accessible presentation. Gilbert Taylor Copyright American Library Association. All rights reserved This is a grand book...The history of ideas deserves treatment on this scale. (Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, Evening Standard (London))A superior specimen, with numerous interesting factoids...thought-provoking short essays. (John Derbyshire, New York Sun)A masterpiece of historical writing. (John Gray, Professor of European Thought, London School of Economics, New Statesman)[An] extraordinary new book....This is the history of ideas as it has never been presented before. (Noel Malcolm, Sunday Telegraph (London))