



## Arguably: Selected Essays

*Christopher Hitchens*

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The first new book of essays by Christopher Hitchens since 2004, *Arguably* offers an indispensable key to understanding the passionate and skeptical spirit of one of our most dazzling writers, widely admired for the clarity of his style, a result of his disciplined and candid thinking.

Topics range from ruminations on why Charles Dickens was among the best of writers and the worst of men to the haunting science fiction of J.G. Ballard; from the enduring legacies of Thomas Jefferson and George Orwell to the persistent agonies of anti-Semitism and jihad. Hitchens even looks at the recent financial crisis and argues for the enduring relevance of Karl Marx.

The book forms a bridge between the two parallel enterprises of culture and politics. It reveals how politics justifies itself by culture, and how the latter prompts the former. In this fashion, *Arguably* burnishes Christopher Hitchens' credentials as (to quote Christopher Buckley) our "greatest living essayist in the English language."

## Arguably: Selected Essays Details

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## From Reader Review Arguably: Selected Essays for online ebook

### Darwin8u says

*"The people who must never have power are the humorless. To impossible certainties of rectitude they ally tedium and uniformity."*

? Christopher Hitchens, Arguably: Selected Essays

It is hard to not love Hitchens. Or hate him. God I miss him. He was one of those journalists and public intellectuals (yes, that is a tired phrase) that constantly made me feel I needed to up my game a bit. I would read a (no I will NOT use an) Hitchens article in Vanity Fair or Slate or about anywhere and realize that I hadn't read enough, thought enough, and certainly not crafted my thoughts well enough. Tail between my legs I would strive to do better. I didn't always agree with Hitchens, but reading him was like watching a master be masterly.

A lot of these essays I've read before on the internet or in some glossy magazine profile. I was always amazed at the voracity of his appetite. He consumed books. He fed on ideas. He was a humanist at the very highest level of human. I don't mean that to sound like I'm worshiping him or unglued. He had his faults. Many of them. But his biases and bigotries were informed by his love of people and ideas. Often those who thought they were on his side would find him pounding at their door asking for an explanation or exposing their hypocrisy. He would attack sacred cows (Mother Theresa ... see what I did there?), pull down idols (Bill Clinton) and defend his sacred (free speech, life, liberty) with the savagery of a wild beast. He reminded me of some weird love child of George Orwell (doesn't every English public school educated journalist want to BE George Orwell's love child?) and Graham Greene. He was Orwell in his defense of the defenseless. He was Greene in his need to get out into the mix, the mess of the word/world and figure this shit out. What does this mean? How does this work? Why is this happening? These are questions that left no one safe. Not even friends (Martin Amis). And GODS help his enemies (Insert religious dogmatist here).

Reading this selection of his later essays was like walking through a neighborhood I frequented a lot in my thirties. He was a major voice of my growing up. I would read Christopher Hitchens and Andrew Sullivan and wonder why we couldn't breed the same here in the US. I would watch him debate someone on YouTube and be amazed at how well he could do completely drunk. I miss the lush. I miss the brain. I miss Hitch.

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### Madeline says

GAH! I can't look away from this cover that Goodreads provided. My copy of *Arguably* is plain, blinding yellow, which sometimes gives me a headache but at least it doesn't stare into my soul. I feel sorry for anyone who actually owns a copy with this particular cover of doom on it.

Before his death, I had a vague awareness of Christopher Hitchens, having read some of his contributions to *Vanity Fair*, but he never struck me as someone I should be paying close attention to until after he had died and I was reading some of his most memorable quotes online. Click the link and read #11. It changed my entire perception of Hitchens and made me respect him so much more - I was raised Catholic, and you simply *do not* criticize Mother friggin' Teresa. It just does not compute for us. But the thing is, *he was*

*absolutely right.* After I read that, I decided that I had to read more of Hitchens' stuff.

The essays in this group are divided into sections: first are a series of book reviews (which are less about the books in question and more critical essays on the various dead British men who are the subjects); then a bunch of straightforward worshipful essays on mostly dead British male authors; a bit entitled "Amusements, Annoyances, and Disappointments" which, had I been in charge of this collection, would have been titled "Hitchens Bitchin'" (tip your waitresses, you've been great); foreign policy essays dealing mostly with the Middle East, "Legacies of Totalitarianism"; and finally a series of brief little essays on a wide range of subjects, including a history of the King James Bible, a discussion of the evolution of the word "like", and the joys of the phrase "fuck off."

They're not all awesome. I freely admit that I skipped the essays on Edmund Burke, Stephen Spender, and Edward Said because I don't know who those guys are/don't know enough about them to make the essays compelling. Hitchens can be unbelievably crotchety, particularly in a piece where he whines about how much he hates it when a waiter interrupts dinner (ie, interrupts Hitchens speaking) to pour wine for everyone at the table. Also he has a remarkable tone-deaf essay in which he laments that he isn't allowed to say the n-word in any context without everyone getting mad at him. And of course, his infamous "Why Women Aren't Funny" essay is here, and it's so mired in smugness and antiquated gender stereotypes that it's not even worth reading, much less taking seriously (I'll save you the time and tell you that Hitchens's argument boils down to, "women can't be funny because they're too preoccupied with having babies." No, really.) In fact, Hitchens is pretty damn insufferable whenever he has to talk about women, and he is especially irritating when he's discussing Middle Eastern women. He has a terrible essay on why it's a good idea for France to ban burquas (I personally prefer Jon Stewart's take on the issue, which is that forbidding women to dress a certain way is just as bad as forcing them to do so), and seems to be personally offended by the idea of any woman wearing a burqua, hijab, or even a headscarf. In fact, whenever a Middle Eastern woman is mentioned in the book, even if she's just been seen from a distance, Hitchens has to make sure to let us know if she's wearing a headscarf. This is weird, because although he frequently seeks out other experts to weigh in on whatever topic he's writing about (he even emailed Nora Ephron and Fran Lebowitz for their opinions on his "hurr, women can't tell jokes" bullshit, because apparently they are the funniest women Christopher Hitchens knows, which makes me sad for a lot of reasons), he never mentions asking a Muslim woman about why she does or doesn't wear a headscarf. The idea that a woman would *choose* to wear a headscarf, rather than being forced to, doesn't seem to have occurred to Hitchens.

But everything else he writes about the Middle East is very, very good, and possibly the best essays in the entire collection are when he's discussing his experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan - there's a particularly stirring essay where Hitchens willingly allows himself to be waterboarded and reports on the experience. And despite not always agreeing with it, I was in constant awe of Hitchens's voice and its intelligent, no-bullshit tone. One thing that at least can be said for Christopher Hitchens: he does not condescend to his readers. In fact, he expects you to be as smart as he is, and understand all of his references and jokes, and I'll admit that I couldn't always keep up. Also admirable is his absolute refusal to cave to any sentimentality - he calls the aftermath of the Virginia Tech shootings an "exhausting national sob fest."

Not that he's heartless. One of the most moving essays is about the uses of Agent Orange during the Vietnam War, and what Hitchens saw when he visited victims who were permanently disfigured because of the chemical. I'll give the last word to Hitchens and let him describe the experience himself, because there's really no better way to demonstrate what a talented, brilliant, and secretly compassionate man he was:

"At a school full of children who made sign language to one another or who couldn't sit still (or who couldn't move much at all), or who couldn't see or couldn't hear...I was then asked if I would like to say a few words,

through an interpreter, to the assembly. I quite like a captive audience, but I didn't trust myself to say a fucking thing. Several of the children in the front row were so wizened and shrunken that they looked as if they could be my seniors. I swear to you that Jim Natchway has taken photographs, as one of his few rivals, Philip Jones Griffiths, also took photographs, that simply cannot be printed in this magazine, because they would poison your sleep, as they have poisoned mine."

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### **Tom says**

"Arguably," Christopher Hitchens' last book to be published before his death from esophageal cancer in December 2011, is largely a collection of book reviews written for "Vanity Fair," "Slate," "The Atlantic," "Foreign Affairs," "The New Statesman," "The Wilson Quarterly," and sundry newspapers here and in Britain. Most were written in the preceding ten years.

In its entirety, the book is a massive tribute to Hitchens' eclectic erudition. The collection is a feast of brilliant, impassioned argument for anyone who holds views on American history, the British empire, literature, politics, the Left, the Right, famous authors, infamous dictators, religion, atheism, fascism, capitalism, journalism, Afghanistan, Iraq, torture, language, or popular culture....I may have left something out.

Whether Hitchens is criticizing the West's tolerance of North Korea's psychotic theocracy, lamenting the deterioration of political campaign slogans, or reassessing the works of Saul Bellow, Vladimir Nabokov, P.G. Wodehouse, Graham Greene, or his good friend Martin Amis, what illuminates each essay is his objectivity, honesty and critical insight. In clear, engaging prose, Hitchens comes off as if he is conversing with an intelligent friend.

You may agree or disagree with this masterful polemicist, but always you will find him adhering to a high standard of debate, basing his arguments on empiricism and laying them out with incisive wit. And I guarantee that no matter how much or how little you agree with him, you will come away from "Arguably" with a long list of books to read or reread, a few new words, and an invigorated desire to grapple with the important issues of our world.

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### **Claudia says**

Reading this book was like having a conversation with an insanely well-read, well-traveled, and well-spoken friend. Some of the essays I'd already read when they were first published, but many were new to me.

There were some definite serendipities, such as a run of essays on authors I too like very much (Waugh, Greene, Powell, Wodehouse, Nabokov), and some discussions that made me want to rush out and look again at others (I've only started the Flashman series, and he kept bringing it up). The political and historical pieces were always interesting, and as usual made me very aware of my sheltered life.

But the topics don't even matter that much (though I did sometimes find myself thinking, "I wish he'd had a chance to write about X, or I'd love to hear his opinion on Y"), it's Hitchens' style and voice that I like so much. Sure, he'd been everywhere and read tons, but he could probably have written a perfectly fascinating essay on the floorboards in his apartment, if he'd set his mind to it.

I miss him already.

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## Rick says

Hitchens, famously an atheist, famously a leftist accused of being reactionary, famously a man who writes, drank, and smoked nearly non-stop, famously a man now living on borrowed time with an incurable cancer stalking his days, is nobody's fool, except, like the rest of us, perhaps his own. This elephantine book, some 750 pages, the size of a Collected Essays, is just his most recent output. Some essays were written and first published at the very end of the 90s but the vast majority of essays are from the aughts. Frankly, I was a little stunned to discover after purchase that it wasn't a career spanning anthology and anticipated a lot of chaff in with the wheat but was delighted to find that Hitchens has a rare capacity to write a lot about a wide range of things with a keen eye and keener wit.

Most of the essays originated in *Vanity Fair*, *The Atlantic*, or *Slate*. Some from miscellaneous newspapers or books reviews. Another handful are introductions to books by others. The essays in *Arguably* cover literature, domestic politics, history, human rights, religion, international affairs, the necessary integrity of words, and social mores, including but not limited to oral sex. There are two essays back to back on Graham Greene that repeat themselves and the book would have been better served by choosing one; but overall this collection read very well, smoothly entertaining and frequently provocative in the best sense of that word. Hitchens has a reputation as a contrarian because his views can catch one off guard (he thought and still thinks that the Iraq War was a necessary, even over due, war; he thinks women in the aggregate are less funny than men in the aggregate). But in point of fact Hitchens is a stickler for two things: principles (like those that imperfectly undergird western democracy, secular humanism, and liberal political thought) and the right to express one's thoughts. He prefers unmasked stupidity to masked stupidity. He prefers an open debate to anyone's list of taboo thoughts or sacred cows. And if you are debating him with a set of arguments resting on unchallenged assumptions, beware.

Hitchens is smart, precise, knowledgeable, logical, consistent, and surgical in his assaults on the arguments of others. Unlike Gore Vidal who long ago turned his wit and raptor's sense of an opponent's vulnerability into sound bite schtick (so much so that now listening to him on any topic is like listening to a talking doll with 12 pre-programmed sarcasms and a string to pull), Hitchens, on the other hand, is engaged in any conversation in which he is taking part. He hears what others are saying, gives credit where it's due, and skewers statements that are false, naïve, hypocritical, self-serving, cowardly, bullying, or merely poorly reasoned. His prose is always readable, frequently funny, and always nimble and concise. He's convinced me to read P.G. Wodehouse, Anthony Powell, Victor Serve, and Rebecca West but not George MacDonald Fraser. He unsettled a few of my assumptions and required me to think differently about the Iraq War, the meaning of tolerance and intolerance, and Bill Clinton. He provides insightful arguments about the criminality of torture (though whether he was required to submit to waterboarding to make his points is another question), the abuse of American history on which the Far Right's views depend, and the importance of W.H. Auden's poem "September 1, 1939," a favorite poem of mine as well.

Like the best of essayists he is a very good companion, whether you are arguing with him or enjoying the benefit of his arguments for a shared view, he makes you smarter. This last point is not a small one: he makes you smarter not because he persuades you to his views, which he does sometimes, but because he compels you to think about your views. What could be better?

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### **MJ Nicholls says**

A supersize blimp of prime Hitch. All the pieces in here are charged with an intellectual and polemical heft unlike what pours from most men's brains. The opening batch 'All-American' contains the infamous 'Vidal Loco', a scathing and accurate takedown of the former master's lapse into rambling crank. The literary essays in 'Eclectic Affinities' favour the British canon for their focus, however, the superlative takes on Rebecca West and Dickens make up for this clannishness. The finest polemical and political writing is on show in the 'Offshore Accounts' and 'Amusements, Annoyances & Disappointments' sections, including the misunderstood 'Why Women Aren't Funny' that earned Hitch huffy haters. 'Legacies of Totalitarianism' explores the work of Victor Serge, Martin Amis, and W.G. Sebald in a bracing stream of seriously frightening portents. Orwell-strength writing.

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### **Ken says**

Giant collection of Hitchens essays separated by category. Originally they appeared in many places, but chiefly Slate, Vanity Fair, the Atlantic, and other high-toned, high-paying markets. This was my first exposure to Hitchens. Top-rate mind on this guy, and a loss on the contemporary scene with his recent death. Lots of repeating tropes, such as the Middle East, Islamic fundamentalism, George Orwell (and specifically 1984, mentioned umpteen times), history, nationalism, politics, etc. The man read a lot -- and I mean A LOT -- and knew a little about a lot of things (Renaissance man?). Many of these pieces are reviews of biographies and history tomes, only the essay winds up being a hybrid of review and opinion piece no matter what. Voice? In spades here. Distinctive. Aggressive. Confident. At times funny. Vocabulary? Keep your dictionary nearby. Maybe not for wall-to-wall reading like I did it, but rewarding for the thinking reader, be it as daily snack or as daily meals....

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### **Ned says**

This book, my first of his, will stay with me for my remaining years. Be warned, this report may be lengthy. I tend to enjoy intelligent essays on topics with which I've wrestled (with my limited knowledge and far inferior intellect), especially when they are not aligned with my own. It may be the scientist in me that seeks out alternative views from my own (hopefully at least, I'm addressing my biases) and I knew that "Hitch" held at least one for me (his support of the US war in Iraq). Of course I knew he was controversial (at least in my circles) as one of the "four horsemen of atheism" but this, his last book published just prior to his death, held very little of that – I can suspect he was exhausted from all those battles and had moved on. He died prematurely, likely a consequence of self-inflicted abuse of tobacco/alcohol, and it is surprising to me that he could write essays so clearly when nearing death (some in the same year). It is tragic that he is not around to comment on our current American political discourse, as he was a lover of truth, honesty and the preservation of truthful writing and words. His own politics are interesting; have converted from socialism – he chronicles his intellectual development well – what more can an author hope to say except to explain him or herself. He remained loyal to George Orwell, and that is probably his closest kin, sharing a hatred and fear of fascism and totalitarianism, with socialist leanings. Both men cannot be pigeonholed, and the urge to re-brand or re-cast of put these intellectuals in categories just will not do. They are their own men, true iconoclasts, and will to listen, learn and change (I note Hitch was friends at the end with the scientist and

religious man Francis Collins – I will be following up on that).

Hitch seems still very English to me, though he apparently lived most of his adult life in the US, and he writes eloquently of past epochs of British literature, and his views of 20th century authors. Often his discourse involves the paradoxes of his original country's past empires and the continued legacy. He was good buddies with Salmon Rushdie (another author who sits, unread, on my shelf) and they were of like mind on religion and hatred of radical Islam. Both men suffered directly under severe intolerance and physical violence, so their views were influential to me, as one who has been shielded and protected. But you will be hard-pressed to find a better-read human being, his consumption of deep knowledge of a vast array of subjects requires reading tenacity, acuity and capacity that few humans have. Woe to the dinner guest who pompously opines without true knowledge to back it up. But Hitch does not seem mean-spirited, or a bully, he is simply driven single-mindedly to know and communicate the true essence of things (hence the scientific bent, as the true ones are).

If there is a main theme that runs through these many essays (of which are reprinted from journal and magazine articles) it is to defend western civilization, which Hitch argues is the true form of Hellenist Greek thought and the foundation of personal liberty, the ultimate objective of the democratic style of government. He vehemently defends it throughout, even to the point of explaining (but not condoning) waterboarding torture which, bravely, he intentionally allowed himself to experience. Page 452 "...any call to indict the United States for torture is therefore a lame and diseased attempt to arrive at a moral equivalence between those who defend civilization and those who exploit its freedoms to hollow it out..." He simply detests those persons who would conflate the US excesses and errors with those of the extremists. He believes the war with Islam is not taken seriously enough by the west. Of course this aligns with his well-known disgust with theistic tyranny of all sorts (the Catholic church historically and all other institutions who have had serious influence with government, dictators and powermongers). Hitch wants to be free to think and do as he pleases, so long as it does no true harm to another. He does not take this for granted, and was a strong champion. I wish we still had him, this is sorely needed today.

He's well traveled – and not in tourist areas – as when he went to Iraqi Kurdistan over Christmas with family: p. 519 "Sure, baby, come to sunny Mesopotamia, and bring the family, and get your ass blown off while religious wack jobs ululate gleefully over your remains." He recalls a visit in 1991 after the Kurds were nearly bombed into oblivion by Saddam Hussein and (p. 520) "...to turn a spade was to risk uncovering a mass grave.... A howling emptiness of misery where I could catch, for the first time in my life, the actual scent of evil as a real force in the world." These experiences, and his later experience of the resilience of the Kurds, led to a lifetime of detestation of the tyranny of absolute rulers and their cruelties.

The state of Europe is a section (remember, this is 2005-2010), and his understanding is informed by a profound understanding of the historical context created by the events of the two world wars. Hitch is a fan of the European union in general, since in the aftermath and chaos of the second world war in (p. 566) "...the middle of the 1970s, these countries had been ruled by backward-looking dictatorships, generally religious and military in character and dependent on military aid from the more conservative circles in the United States."

Hitch does not stint on his criticism of Zionism where he thinks (p. 569) "Almost everybody also concedes that the Israeli occupation has been a moral and political catastrophe and has implicated the US in a sordid and costly morass....the role of Israel in supporting apartheid....providing arms and training for dictators in Congo and Guatemala, and ...." These types of analysis had me Googling fanatically as in "wait, what?" head scratching.... Hitch does this, he makes you look deeper and study to see if his opinions are supported (in most cases they were for me). Another little factoid he drops (p. 574) in his long treatise's on the origins

and influences of communism: “Marx and Friedrich Engels hugely admired Lincoln and felt that just as Russia was the great arsenal of backwardness, reaction, and superstition, the United States was the land of potential freedom and equality.”

Hitchen’s case for western intervention, mostly unpopular in today’s political climate (p. 580): “Afghanistan’s internal affairs are now the United States’ – in fact, they were already so before Americans understood that. A failed state may not trouble Americans’ sleep, but a rogue one can, and the transition from failed to rogue can be alarmingly abrupt.” But he is no hawkish right wing militarist (p. 618) “Under the reign of the Shah, Iran emulated almost everything Western except democracy; under the rule of the imams, it rejects almost every aspect of modernity except nuclearism”. Wow, what an exceptionally sharp and clever contrast. Hitch drips them like exhalations.

This book took me a long time to read, mostly because it is sectioned so nicely that it lends itself to brief interludes. But what I found is that it was so rich in information and idea, that it frequently drove me into my own research, aided in great part by that wonderful modern invention of electronic information searching. His account of Hitler, and how he came to and was sustained in power, was the best I’ve ever read, and saved me having to read about 50 books and sort through a morass of opinion. His writing is just incredibly clear and facts put into context that can be verified easily. I must admit, I was swayed by his eloquence by this point in the book (p. 628) – in short, he had won my trust. That is risky, I know. In the section on totalitarianism, when the stories of the Nazi actions were not fully appreciated or believed, he quotes Orwell who was “on guard against this blunting tendency. He thought it probable that given moral breakdown, the same hellish desires would replicate and repeat themselves. He also believed the worst about Stalin’s system, and much earlier than most “enlightened” people, precisely because he found its public language so crude and brutal”. At this point in my review, I seriously doubt my handful of friends, family and readers is still reading – so I will bury this comment: The destruction of language by our current leader frightens me the same way that Orwell felt many years ago. The enlightened German culture was reduced to ashes by a seemingly incompetent, infantile, populist leader. I’m far from an intellectual, and will never be as intelligent or well-read as this author, but in my dark night of the soul, I worry this could happen to my beloved America. We are so young as a country and I hope we can survive into our adolescence.

Hitchens and I share the same views on abortion and he points up the hypocrisy of certain religious persons on topics such euthanasia. He boldly (p. 719) “...had sincerely intended to be the only scribbler in America who stayed out of this most stupid and degrading argument. I ought to have left that phone call from Hardball unreturned. Not a single toe should have been dipped into the water. But, once you engage for even an instant, you are drawn into a vortex of irrationality and nastiness that generates its own energy.” This is quintessential and ferocious Hitch – he cannot resist the intellectual challenge and is passionate about drawing his truth from confusion. He goes further on the next page “My own bias is very strongly for the choose life position. I used to have horrible and exhausting arguments with supposedly pro-choice militants who only reluctantly conceded that the fetus was alive but who then demanded to know if this truly was a human life. I know casuistry when I see it, and I would respond by asking what other kind of life it could conceivably be. Down the years, there has been an unacknowledged evolution of the argument. Serious Catholics no longer insist that contraception is genocide and pro-choice advocates have become quite squeamish about late-term abortions. Sensitive about consistency in the life ethic, the church has also moved to condemn if not to anathematize the death penalty. Things were improving slowly. Until now.”

To sum up, I learned so much from this, and it has taken me to read more books, especially one that talks about the private ruminations of Hitch on his deathbed, as he manages the terror or comfort of confronting that mysterious maker that so eluded him, or the purity of that great abyss.

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## Cora Judd says

‘Arguably’ is great but it is not of the ‘god is Not Great’ genre; it’s a choice selection of Christopher Hitchens’ own essays, and of a vaster scope than the global-fallout-from-religion that the ‘god’ title focuses on. (Although, a reader hungering for a Hitchens-style treatment of atheism in essay form can be repeatedly sated by his introduction to ‘the Portable Atheist’.) It is riveting in just the same way, however, and the temptation to adopt Hitchens’ lucid opinions as my own is also similar.

“Arguably” covers a wild variety of topics. Some I may not have typically sought out but all are worth reading and for me, re-reading. It has introduced many intriguing new titles, authors and subjects for my to-read stack. I’ve kept the globe spinning and Wikipedia fired-up throughout; memorized a little of the Rubayat and seen Animal Farm acted out in many times and places. The political essays are more than a few ranks above my typical American understanding but my perceptions are a bit sharper for having read them anyway (and my position on torture is validated). His graphic, sumi-style images from his experiences in Viet Nam, Cuba, Pakistan, Iran and many more, are intense. While reading, I’ve lost my optimism for humankind a few times, and re-found it almost the same number.

If I had a complaint, it’s that, at 749 pages, it’s still too short. Thankfully, everything he’s written is archived somewhere. In all, ‘Arguably’ is brilliant and it’s the perfect book for a reader who wants to level up a few.

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## Will says

### **Brilliant, just brilliant.**

Hitchens writes with such clarity, force and humour. There are about 100 essays in this compilation, mostly from the decade just before he died, and about half are book reviews. So it didn’t take a year read, thanks to some time off in NZ, but I did have to read the essays twice at least to allow full absorption by my tiny brain.

The range of topics is simply amazing, and I can do little more than simply list some of the more memorable ones so I don’t forget. The books he reviews make me want to start on them – right now! And not just the good ones; sometimes the essays are such succinct and elegant take-downs that I want to see for myself what exercised Hitchens so much. (A review of Dallek’s apparently sycophantic biography of John F Kennedy, for example)

Some are an absolute delight – surprisingly, one of my favourites (because I’m not much interested in US history) is on Benjamin Franklin and his unacknowledged sense of humour - or propensity for taking the piss, to be precise\*\*. Others are searing in their dry précis of terrible events – I’m thinking of the series about the aftermath of dictatorships.

Some others: Karl Marx working as an underpaid journalist in New York, where H points out that Marx actually had very favourable opinions about the US; George Orwell and Animal Farm; Lolita, and Reading Lolita in Tehran; the Bader-Meinhof gang and his observation that those 60’s red rebellions occurred in Germany, Italy and Japan – the very countries where their parents had failed to rebel against fascism; Imagining Hitler, a review of Kershaw’s *Hubris*, with the best reverie I’ve read on how Hitler might have met an untimely end (pushed off a building site by fed-up co-workers, if you want to know!); and Stand up for Denmark, an impassioned and reasoned argument against accommodating Islamic extremism.

There are some slightly tedious ones of course – on Rebecca West’s *Black Lamb & Grey Falcon*; and the densest and most opaque is surely a review of a history of Orientalism. All the more surprising because it is followed by a sympathetic and perceptive review of Edward Said’s book, *Orientalism*.

*Arguably* would be a heavy tome if it was all seriousness however: but there are hilarious essays on blow-jobs; Why Women aren’t Funny, (a much-maligned article which is not politically-incorrect at all. His point is *not* that women have no sense of humour, but that men have to be funny to be attractive to women, while women don’t need to do anything to be attractive to men – they just are); a diatribe on “like”; and what the British Empire will be remembered for (soccer and the expression “fuck off”)

Even though he lays about some pretty tough criticism, Hitchens never descends to personal attacks. Though one exception is a review of his friend Martin Amis’s *Koba the Dread*. He deftly takes down some of Amis’s more pompous pronouncements, made all the more pleasurable because of the gratuitous insults directed at H in the book.

So, why only 4 stars? Well, there are more than a few unsatisfying essays from on-line sources like *Slate* – they’re good, but are simply too short. Just as his arguments get persuasive – bang, they’re over. (This difference between printed and online media hadn’t hit me before, and I wonder if we really do have such short online attention spans). If these had been scattered through the other longer ones it would have been fine, but they are predominately at the end, so the latter part of the book feels lightweight and rushed – a great pity.

**\*\* A totally irrelevant aside:** in relation to that sense of humour, Hitchens throws in a comment about his early days at the “New Statesman” – he mentions a readers’ competition to invent the most plausibly daft modern proverbs; this would have been in the late sixties. *But I remembered that exact competition!* My mother and I fell about laughing helplessly at “He digs deepest, who deepest digs” and “An owl in a sack bothers no man”. Okay, you had to be there, but it’s almost like a connection to Hitchens, the closest one I can claim, anyway.

I do wish I had read more of him while he was alive though.

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## Gregory says

A line appearing somewhere near the midpoint of this collection of essays is revealing: “Stay with me. I’ve been doing the hard thinking for you.” Christopher Hitchens does a lot of hard thinking apparently; keep up if you can. This may suggest that considerable ego is involved, and given the author’s reputation you can be sure that it is, but on display too is considerable erudition.

The book is composed of six sections roughly dividing the essays on theme. Most important for an understanding of the sources of the Hitchens worldview is the section titled *Eclectic Affinities*, a complete reading of which delineates Mr. Hitchens’ antecedents and mentors. We can find here the roots of the author’s prominent and resolute crusade against doctrinal and totalitarian cowing. We are introduced to or reacquainted with some of the most cogent and relevant literature of the last century. Karl Marx, Evelyn Waugh, P.G. Wodehouse, Graham Greene are included with a host of lesser known but equally intriguing and edifying writers. And of course there is Orwell.

For members of my generation (boomer) and later, the most calamitous events of that era are known only

through history. It is history that we forget at our peril. Arguably, the most celebrated chronicler and critic of that tragic age is George Orwell. His most famous titles, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-four* warn of the menace of totalitarianism. *Orwellian* is a shortcut term with which to express horror at absolutist ideology. Orwell's own extensive output of essays is a model for the subject of this review. Hitchens uses the words, the imagery, the legend of his famous predecessor to develop many of his own ideas and critiques. Orwell is referenced in 25 of the essays and has the longest index entry of any writer mentioned. (He is also the subject of another Hitchens title.) As this book's overarching themes unfold it becomes evident that George Orwell begat Christopher Hitchens.

The point about forgetting is not that episodes of oppression and brutality mustn't be allowed to repeat but that they happen still. In large swaths of the Middle East and South Asia, in North Korea, in parts of Africa, (to name *only* the most obvious) and elsewhere despotism persists even now. Patronizing acquiescence, political expedience, lack of vigilance, the turned back; this attitude the world cannot afford. The U.S. has been at times complicit with villains, at times neutral, at times a highly committed foe of oppression.

‘American exceptionalism’ is a phrase bandied about by right wing isolationists or stuffed shirt apologists or most often by influence hawking politicians. The gist is that the United States has a special destiny that is somehow impossible to duplicate elsewhere, that is unavailable to the citizens of other lands because of a certain lack of aspiration or right ideology. In the essay *The Case for Humanitarian Intervention* Hitchens defines what may be a truer measure of American exceptionalism:

“Now that all other examples of political revolution have become obsolete or have been discredited, the issue is whether the United States is indeed a different sort of country or nation, one that has a creed or an ethic that imposes special duties on it. . . . The original principles of the [United Nations] had to do almost entirely with war and peace, law and . . . finance. But all its new members also found themselves invited to sign the Universal Declaration of Human Rights . . . and there is no question that U.S. influence lay behind this suggestion. By means of this and a number of other incremental steps, the United States has found itself becoming inexorably committed to upholding a certain standard of what its critics would call idealism.”

Anyone taking the time to read—and making the effort to understand—the Declaration of Independence and The Constitution should not question the role of idealism in the American experiment. It is this idealism that may be the last best hope for humanity (at home and abroad) and which the U.S. has an obligation to espouse. Upholding that view is the *raison d'être* for much of Christopher Hitchens' work.

Lest I give the impression that the book is all depression inducing or eye glazing polemic Hitchens does have his lighter side. The citation with which I began this review is from the essay *As American as Apple Pie*, a chronicle of the American ascendancy of fellatio. And another, *Why Women Aren't Funny*, well, you get the idea. His irreverent and somewhat naughty sense of humor sits perfectly within the Hitchens oeuvre. This collection covers a broad range of topics reflecting the author's encyclopedic interests.

Mason Crumpacker is an eight-year-old girl who braved the microphone recently at a Hitchens event in Houston to ask the author what books she should read. Mr. Hitchens took time after his talk to meet personally with Mason and help her put together a reading list. He understands, as did Thomas Jefferson, of whom Hitchens is a student, that “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.” Nearly every essay in this book offers at least one title with which the topic at hand may be explored further. The benefit of this for the reader is an introduction to a canon of historical, political, and philosophical ideas that explain our history and define our civilization, a reading list for our time.

Yes, Christopher Hitchens does a lot of hard thinking and these essays invite his readers to do some hard

thinking of our own.

*Note: As I was writing this review I learned that Christopher Hitchens had lost his fight with cancer. Of all his famous battles this was one that could not be won with argument and chutzpah. In a world of vacuous punditry and unchecked credulity his was a voice of unequivocal reason and studied skepticism. He will be missed.*

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## **Ted says**

*Barbarism is not the inheritance of our prehistory. It is the companion that dogs our every step.*  
(Alain Finkielkraut, quoted in Hitchens' Introduction)

### **Christopher Hitchens in 2007**

**4 1/2 stars**

#### **Background**

Christopher Hitchens doesn't need much of an introduction. Just a few words here, condensed from the following Wiki articles: Hitchens, Political views and New Atheism.

He was born in England in 1949, died in the U.S. in 2011. Educated at Oxford, he moved to the United States in 1981, as part of an “editor exchange program” between The New Statesman and The Nation. Twenty-six years later he became a U.S. citizen. Hitchens had a very successful career as an author and journalist. He was also well known as a polemicist and debater, and for his criticisms (through three books) of Mother Teresa, Bill Clinton, and Henry Kissinger.

#### **Political views**

(view spoiler)

#### **Religious Views**

(view spoiler)

## What's in the book

The 107 “essays” in this book can be better described by being a bit more specific.

### Book reviews

Almost half (48) are actually book reviews, of which about two-thirds originally appeared in The Atlantic. The rest appeared in a variety of publications – the NYTBR, the Times Literary Supplement, and eight others. The reviews average about eight pages in length, though half a dozen or so are from 10-15 pages.

I found the reviews to be generally the most interesting of the pieces. Eighteen of these are of various non-fiction books, including *Due Considerations* (essays and criticism) by John Updike; Philip Larkin’s *Letters to Monica*; Edward Said’s *Orientalism*; W.G. Sebald’s *The Natural History of Destruction; Dispatches from the New York Tribune: Selected Journalism of Karl Marx*; and Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

Another nineteen reviews are of biographies: John Brown, Mark Twain, Samuel Johnson, Ezra Pound, Somerset Maugham, P.G. Wodehouse, John Buchan, Graham Greene, Stephen Spender, C.L.R. James, Andre Malraux, Arthur Koestler, Lincoln, JFK, Dickens, Saki, Hitler, Anthony Powell (memoirs) and Victor Klemperer (diaries). (view spoiler)

The other eleven reviews are of fictional works: *The Jungle* (Sinclair), *Lolita & The Annotated Lolita*, *Terrorist* (Updike), *Wolf Hall* (Mantel), *Bouvard and Pecuchet* (Flaubert), *The Complete Stories* (J.G. Ballard), *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* (Victor Serge) (also of his *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*), *Strange Times My Dear: The PEN Anthology to Contemporary Iranian Literature*, *Koba the Dread* (Martin Amis) and a review of several of Saul Bellow’s novels.

### Book introductions

Four pieces are introductions that Hitchens was asked to write to the following books: *Animal Farm*, *The House of the Spirits* (Isabel Allende), *Our Man in Havana* (Greene) and *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* by Rebecca West, at 30 pages the longest entry in the book.

### Essays

The rest could be termed “essays”, or perhaps “occasional pieces” would be just as good. The vast majority of these appeared in either Slate or Vanity Fair in the years 2005 - 2010. They average about five pages, some as short as 2-3, a few over 10.

Many of these essays are informative, and many of them are amusing; some are both. But for me, as a group they simply weren’t the match of the reviews. Many were mildly interesting, or mildly humorous, puff-pieces. Some were even irritating, but more on that later.

## Sections of the book

Hitchens’ writings are tossed into six sections in the book.

(1) ALL AMERICAN (15 reviews, 5 essays) addresses books and topics linked closely to America. Bios of

such as Lincoln, John Brown, Mark Twain, and articles such as “America the Banana Republic” and “In Search of the Washington Novel.”

(2) ECLECTIC AFFINITIES (19 reviews, 5 essays, 3 book introductions) was replete with interesting articles, but the section title means little to me – “diverse resemblances”? I’m sure Hitchens, with his keen intellect and prodigious vocabulary, could scribble down a ten word synopsis of each piece and then point out how they all fit into this linguistic puzzle. I’m declining to play the game, it was difficult enough to just put a few words to describing it.

(3) AMUSEMENTS, ANNOYANCES, AND DISAPPOINTMENTS (8 essays) is simply MISCELLANEOUS by another name. Several are humorous pieces – the ones that aren’t require the remaining words in the section title.

(4) OFFSHORE ACCOUNTS (4 reviews, 21 essays) are pieces devoted to foreign topics. Other than that there’s no unifying topic here, everything from “Is the Euro Doomed?” to Edward Said to Vietnam to waterboarding. A lot of interesting stuff though.

(5) LEGACIES OF TOTALITARIANISM (10 reviews, and the introduction to Allende’s *House of the Spirits*). These eleven swing wildly from the iridescent to the irritating.

(6) WORDS’ WORTH (16 essays) are all about various language, speaking, or word topics which caught Hitchens’ critical eye in the last decade of his life. Again, I felt there were keen observations mixed in with page fillers, though I didn’t mind reading even the latter. But some were silly and *irritating* (that word again!).

## On Irritation

I’ve mentioned a couple times above that I found some of Hitchens’ pieces “irritating”. Here’s why.

After 9/11, Hitchens became increasingly insistent that radical Islam posed an existential threat to the United States (and Western interests in general). I’m not about to attempt a rebuttal of that position, but what I want to speak of is his overboard support for the wars that the U.S. instituted in the mid-east, particularly in Iraq.

It’s pretty well-recognized now that there were some extremely mendacious reasons given by the Bush administration for invading Iraq. Many people now believe that it was really all about oil, with “weapons of mass destruction” thrown in as a scare tactic, utterly false accusations (that flew right in the face of political realities) about Saddam Hussein having supported the terrorists, etc. etc. It would seem that this run-up to the war must have been an exciting opportunity, in Hitchens’ view, for the U.S. to deploy its military might in the mid-east, *against extremist religious elements* in Iraq. Of course that was perfectly untrue, the extreme religious elements in the Mideast (although admittedly entrenched in many areas of Afghanistan) had nothing to do with Iraq, and were much more closely associated with *our ally* (? or maybe that should just be *our oil supplier?*) *Saudi Arabia*. And indeed, if Hitchens truly supported a war against state religion, why pick on Iraq? Why not go after Iraq’s enemy Iran? (Not that I’m advocating such a thing.)

Well, however these things played out for Hitchens, this seems to have become an absolute blind spot in his mental outlook. Long after it became clear that the U.S. invasion of Iraq had likely caused hundreds of thousands of deaths, and ignited a bitter sectarian struggle in the country that continues to this day, Hitchens continued to grasp at straws, finding support for his views on the war in the most absurd trivia. It seems that

he was simply not capable of admitting that *at least this particular instance* of fighting against a *monotheistic religion* had surely been a bad idea.

One wonders if even today, with the continued sectarian struggles in Iraq, to say nothing of the rise of ISIS in the area, if Hitchens would be willing to admit that the war had been a colossal mistake (in hindsight at least) and that after all, the horrible tyrant Hussein (who was indeed that) would have likely been able to keep that country in a better state of affairs than any that has pertained since.

So – the irritation comes when some of these articles espouse the support that Hitchens had for this twenty-first century crusade (as he saw it).

## Summary

I'm not going to recommend any of the individual articles in this book, or go into details about any of them. I'm sure I've lost most readers by now. If you're still here, you can scan my status updates above (or below - wherever they are) to see indications of some essays I found particularly good.

The book is a great source of interesting, short reads. Unfortunately it's not at all well-suited for short reads on a bus or subway, reading in a doctor's waiting room, or carrying in a backpack. It's too damn big. A full sized hardbound book, it's over two inches thick, and weighs 2 1/2 pounds.

Better suited for a bed stand, or somewhere within reach of your favorite reading spot in your abode.

It has a serviceable index.

**dumb me!** I'm not used to reading ebooks, hence it occurred to me only yesterday that an e-version of this book (it is available) is the ideal solution to its size. I almost wish I had that instead of the bulky thing I've got. My problem is I've never got the hang of making highlights and writing notes in e-books.

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## Perry says

### A Provocative Chest of Treasures

*What Is As American as Apple Pie? [answer is be-low]*

[updd 5/4/17]

This is the cynosure of all essay collections. It's too bad that most of my goodreads friends will likely skip this review in its entirety (basing this guess on 17 likes in a couple of years and two improvements/updates).

In any case, I cannot find the right words to describe how much I **love** this book. I go back to it often to sharpen my thinking and writing and arguing skills. His wit was nearly as brilliantly mordant as Oscar Wilde's.

No book has challenged and amused me on such a variety of intriguing topics as this collection of Christopher Hitchens' best essays. Before reading it, I was not a fan of Hitchens. Regrettably, I now realize I just wasn't paying attention all those years he was around.

Along with his most brilliant, mordant wit, he had a textbook knowledge of a vast array of topics [see below]. While his lexicon was wide and deep, he always wrote in risible, rhythmic sentences that ebbed and flowed whilst he whaled on hypocrisy or satirized politicians or essayed on annoyances, affinities and amusements.

To give just one straightforward example, in his essay "As American as Apple Pie," published in the July 2006 Vanity Fair, he noted of a certain American affinity:

*"The crucial word [...] doesn't come into the American idiom until the 1940s, when it was (a) a part of the gay underworld and (b) possibly derived from the jazz scene and its oral instrumentation. But it has never lost its supposed Victorian origin, which was "below-job" (cognate, if you like, with the now archaic "going down"). This term from London's whoredom still has a faint whiff of contempt.*

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*... Stay with me. I've been doing the hard thinking for you. The three-letter "job," with its can-do implications, also makes the term especially American.... Certainly by the time of the war in Vietnam, the war-correspondent David Leitch recorded reporters swapping notes: "When you get to Da Nang ask for Mickey Mouth..."*

### *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*

This book contains numerous fascinating pieces he wrote about the big names in literature. As examples, Harry Potter: The Boy Who Lived; Mark Twain: American Radical; Vladimir Nabokov: Hurricane Lolita; Upton Sinclair: A Capitalist Primer; Gustave Flaubert: I'm with Stupide; The Dark Side of Dickens; W. Somerset Maugham: Poor Old Willie; Graham Greene: I'll Be Damned; Ezra Pound: A Revolutionary Simpleton; Evelyn Waugh: The Permanent Adolescent; P.G. Wodehouse: The Honorable Schoolboy; Anthony Powell: An Omnivorous Curiosity; Fraser's Flashman: Scoundrel Time; Saki: Where the Wild Things Are; Isabel Allende: Chile Redux; Martin Amis: Lightness at Midnight; and, Stieg Larsson: The Author Who Played with Fire.

After buying the hardcover, I was so fascinated, so amused and intellectually stimulated that I immediately bought the e-book as well. I can read these essays over and over, and laugh at something anew on each revisit.

I would go on raving about this book but nothing comes to mind wielding enough wittiness to be worthy or any higher a compliment or recommendation.

It's broken into sections:

All American (20 essays on things like Jefferson versus the Muslim Pirates; Benjamin Franklin: Free and Easy; and, Abraham Lincoln: Misery's Child)

Eclectic Affinities (27 essays on topics including many listed above and The Men Who Made England: Hilary Mantel's Wolf Hall; Samuel Johnson: Demons and Dictionaries; and, On Animal Farm)

Amusements, Annoyances and Disappointments (8 essays such as As American as Apple Pie; Charles, Prince of Piffle; and So Many Men's Rooms, So Little Time (see Sen. Larry Craig))

Offshore Accounts (25 with titles including North Korea: A Nation of Racist Dwarves; and Worse than Nineteen Eighty-Four)

Legacies of Totalitarianism (11 essays from Imagining Hitler; Arthur Koestler: The Zealot; and, W.G. Sebald: Requiem for Germany)

and,

Words' Worth (16 essays, such as When the King Saved God (on King James I's translation of the Bible); The You Decade; and, A Very, Very Dirty Word).

I could go on and on and on about how much I love this book, but then I'd be a boor.

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## David says

OK, so if (like me) you start this collection with the notion that there was something iffy about this Hitchens bloke -- I mean how can one dude's stuff be everywhere you look, Vanity Fair, Esquire, The Atlantic, all over the damned internet -- and he had that whole British obnoxiousness down to a T, and if you're predisposed to find a reason to dislike him, let me point you to the one demonstrably brain-dead essay of the hundred or so in this collection. It's on page 389, it's called "Why Women Aren't Funny", it's as stupid as it sounds, and it makes Hitchens seem like a complete tool. Upon reading it, you may be tempted to engage in a little confirmation bias, remembering a certain perceived shrillness in his contribution to the whole God debate thing. And wasn't he the guy who trashed Mother Theresa?

Slow down there. Time for a reality check. A few salient facts:

- 1) Mother Theresa undoubtedly had it coming (just ask Sinead O' Connor).
- 2) That dumb "Why Women Aren't Funny" is the **ONLY DUD ESSAY IN THIS BOOK**. Which means that Hitchens is batting over 99% here. Think about that for a while. When was the last time you came across a nonfiction collection with those kinds of numbers?
- 3) Yes, he can be scathing. But, to an impressive degree, it's only when provoked.
- 4) A defining feature of these essays, particularly those dealing with other authors, is their generosity of spirit. Frankly, this surprised me a good deal, because it didn't square with my preconceived notion of Hitchens as a kind of super-erudite arrogant asshole. He is indeed super-erudite. He can be a contrarian - it's a position he obviously enjoys. But he is not a jerk; quite the opposite, on the basis of these essays, at any rate.
- 5) A major part of the considerable appeal of this collection is just the fun in seeing such an intelligent mind at work. I recycled that sentence from my review of Zadie Smith's essay collection, but it's true *a fortiori* in Hitchens's case.

Among these essays, my clear favorites are those in which Hitchens discusses the work of other writers. There are about 30 of these, focusing primarily on English authors (though Flaubert, Marx, and Stieg

Larsson make an appearance, as do Updike, Nabokov, Bellow, Twain, and Upton Sinclair). These essays benefit not only from Hitchens's apparently boundless erudition (lightly worn), but from his obvious desire always to educate the reader about the best qualities of the work under discussion. His introduction to Rebecca West's "Black Lamb and Grey Falcon" is simply astonishing. I cannot imagine a better introduction being written. To anything. Ever. Unless there's divine or demonic intervention. Maybe not even then.

At the time, I didn't pay all that much attention to Hitchens's death. Reading these essays has made me understand that it is a considerable loss. He will be greatly missed.

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### **Tristan says**

Ever the contrarian, the late Hitchens was a member of that rare, dying breed of journalists/public intellectuals that managed to elicit some very strong reactions from all sides of the political spectrum. Especially in the later phases of his career, he regularly sought out - and indeed, relished - battle with whichever group that displeased him, liberals and conservatives alike. Everyone, or so it seemed, was at risk of being subjected to his savage criticisms at some point. Indeed many did, even esteemed friends, like Martin Amis.

His trademark combative style earned him the reputation as a fierce debater and brought with it an admiring, seemingly undying, fanbase (greatly expanded through his ubiquity on YouTube). Sadly, that public perception of Hitchens as the strident atheist brings with it the risk that his other abilities and broad field of interests fade into the background.

This is an absolute shame, for in his essays Hitchens the man comes out in full force. His commendable humanism, his fondness of -and eclectic taste in- literature, his passion for historicity, and of course that ever present biting wit. Indeed, while sifting through this collection, one regularly asks oneself "how did he manage to read and write about all this?". Dedication is all I can think of. That certain spark inside, which few have. Hitchens had it, took responsibility and cultivated the hell out of it. We should all be grateful that he did, warts and all.

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### **Melanie says**

Let me begin my saying that I'm in love with Christopher Hitchens' brain, and have been so since reading 'Hitch-22' and 'God is not great.' So when I was in Bolen Books yesterday evening, perusing the new books that appear on the Man Booker Prize short list and the Giller Prize long list (plenty of tasty reading to come, there, as well), and I was arrested by Mr. Hitchens' stern demeanor. Needless to say, \$40 disappeared from my bank account then and there for the work of this logophilic writer.

I dove into the middle of this tome and pulled out a plum: 'Why women aren't funny.' Who else in this time of rude idiots permanently affixed to their smart phones and ipads, spelling 'words' with their thumbs like lol

and brb and whatnot, could think up a wonderfully illustrative and double-entendred sentence like: "If you can stimulate her to laughter - I am talking about that real, out-loud, head-back, mouth-open-to-expose-the-full-horseshoe-of-lovely-teeth, involuntary, full, and deep-throated mirth; the kind that is accompanied by a shocked surprise and a slight (no, make that a loud) peal of delight - well, then, you have at least caused her to loosen up and to change her expression." (pp.389-390)

He recalls Nietzsche, quotes Kipling, and speaks in such a way ("Please do not pretend not to know what I am talking about.") that I feel like I'm at a cocktail party, facing Mr. Hitchens with a large glass of red in his hand, listening to his devastating intellegence, evident even on the edge of intoxication. (A caveat: I am not saying that Mr. Hitchens struggles with alcohol, only that I picture it this way.) And I feel myself seduced by his wordplay, with the effortless and beguiling and utterly sexy way that his language tumbles about in multiple layers, making me smile and delight.

This is only the first of the essays in the book I've read so far, but I am looking forward to slipping between the sheets tonight and indulging in more.

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### **Cheryl says**

Mark Twain, Benjamin Franklin, Upton Sinclair, Vladimir Nabokov, John Updike, Hilary Mantel, Charles Dickens, Edmund Burke, Rebecca West, George Orwell, Jessica Mitford, Evelyn Waugh, Isabel Allende, Anthony Powell, Stieg Larsson--just to name a few of the authors whose work Hitchens reviews and discusses in this collection (Like Larsson, Hitchens is a feminist. *Who would've thunk it?* He doesn't say so, but it is all there, between the lines).

Boy was this man well-read. As you can probably tell from my status updates, his essays kept challenging me every step of the way. And I enjoyed every moment.

Provocative and machiavellian in nature, the book is a collection of essays that are separated into six thematic sections. My favorite sections were: the first two sections, "**All American**," which consisted mostly of literary criticism (from the likes of Twain and Lincoln), "**Eclectic Affinities**," (where he discusses Hilary Mantel, Dickens, and West) and the fourth section, "**Offshore Accounts**:" Hitchens' opinionated pieces on the state of Afghan women; child soldiering in Africa (he takes on Joseph Kony and the L.R.A.); Salman Rushdie and Pakistan; the "Case of Orientalism," in which he challenged the professor who dared attack Nafisi personally for her work:Reading Lolita in Tehran, when he said that Nafisi, as Hitchens puts it, resembled the "moral equivalent of a sadistic torturer at Abu Ghraib" (must say, I had to clap for Hitchens defense of the author here).

The essay that got the standing ovation from me was, "She's No Fundamentalist," when Hitchens--yet again--stands up to critics who had nasty things to say about Ayaan Hirsi Ali, instead of simply critiquing her as it related to her work of art, Infidel--another great memoir by the way.

This is a collection that is as flippant as it is didactic, which made it a really interesting read.

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### **Edward says**

## *Introduction*

### **All American**

- Gods of Our Fathers: The United States of Enlightenment
- The Private Jefferson
- Jefferson Versus the Muslim Pirates
- Benjamin Franklin: Free and Easy
- John Brown: The Man Who Ended Slavery
- Abraham Lincoln: Misery's Child
- Mark Twain: American Radical
- Upton Sinclair: A Capitalist Primer
- JFK: In Sickness and by Stealth
- Saul Bellow: The Great Assimilator
- Vladimir Nabokov: Hurricane Lolita
- John Updike, Part One: No Way
- John Updike, Part Two: Mr. Geniality
- Vidal Loco
- America the Banana Republic
- An Anglosphere Future
- Political Animals
- Old Enough to Die
- In Defense of Foxhole Atheists
- In Search of the Washington Novel

### **Eclectic Affinities**

- Isaac Newton: Flaws of Gravity
- The Men Who Made England: Hilary Mantel's 'Wolf Hall'
- Edmund Burke: Reactionary Prophet
- Samuel Johnson: Demons and Dictionaries
- Gustave Flaubert: I'm with *Stupide*
- The Dark Side of Dickens
- Marx's Journalism: The Grub Street Years
- Rebecca West: Things Worth Fighting For
- Ezra Pound: A Revolutionary Simpleton
- On 'Animal Farm'
- Jessica Mitford's Poison Pen
- W. Somerset Maugham: Poor Old Willie
- Evelyn Waugh: The Permanent Adolescent
- P. G. Wodehouse: The Honorable Schoolboy
- Anthony Powell: An Omnivorous Curiosity
- John Buchan: Spy Thriller's Father
- Graham Greene: I'll Be Damned
- Death from a Salesman: Graham Greene's Bottled Ontology
- Loving Philip Larkin
- Stephen Spender: A Nice Bloody Fool
- Edward Upward: The Captive Mind
- C. L. R. James: Mid Off, Not Right On
- J. G. Ballard: The Catastrophist
- Fraser's Flashman: Scoundrel Time

--Fleet Street's Finest: From Waugh to Frayn  
--Saki: Where the Wild Things Are  
--Harry Potter: The Boy Who Lived

### **Amusements, Annoyances, and Disappointments**

--Why Women Aren't Funny  
--Stieg Larsson: The Author Who Played with Fire  
--As American as Apple Pie  
--So Many Men's Rooms, So Little Time  
--The New Commandments  
--In Your Face  
--Wine Drinkers of the World, Unite  
--Charles, Prince of Piffle

### **Offshore Accounts**

--Afghanistan's Dangerous Bet  
--First, Silence the Whistle-Blower  
--Believe Me, It's Torture  
--Iran's Waiting Game  
--Long Live Democratic Seismology  
--Benazir Bhutto: Daughter of Destiny  
--From Abbottabad to Worse  
--The Perils of Partition  
--Algeria: A French Quarrel  
--The Case of Orientalism  
--Edward Said: Where the Twain Should Have Met  
--The Swastika and the Cedar  
--Holiday in Iraq  
--Tunisia: At the Desert's Edge  
--What Happened to the Suicide Bombers of Jerusalem?  
--Childhood's End: An African Nightmare  
--The Vietnam Syndrome  
--Once Upon a Time in Germany  
--Worse Than 'Nineteen Eighty-Four'  
--North Korea: A Nation of Racist Dwarves  
--The Eighteenth Brumaire of the Castro Dynasty  
--Hugo Boss  
--Is the Euro Doomed?  
--Overstating Jewish Power  
--The Case for Humanitarian Intervention

### **Legacies of Totalitarianism**

--Victor Serge: Pictures from an Inquisition  
--André Malraux: One Man's Fate  
--Arthur Koestler: The Zealot  
--Isabel Allende: Chile Redux  
--The Persian Version  
--Martin Amis: Lightness at Midnight  
--Imagining Hitler

--Victor Klemperer: Survivor  
--A War Worth Fighting  
--Just Give Peace A Chance?  
--W. G. Sebald: Requiem for Germany

## Words' Worth

--When the King Saved God  
--Let Them Eat Pork Rinds  
--Stand Up for Denmark!  
--Eschew the Taboo  
--She's No Fundamentalist  
--Burned Out  
--Easter Charade  
--Don't Mince Words  
--History and Mystery  
--Words Matter  
--This Was Not Looting  
--The *Other* L-Word  
--The You Decade  
--Suck It Up  
--A Very, Very Dirty Word  
--Prisoner of Shelves

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## Antonomasia says

From deadly serious discussion of political martyrdom and suicide bombers ... to blowjobs: I honestly cannot think of another single non-fiction book I've encountered in all my days that contains such a range of sacred and profane, triviality and gravity as one human mind often does.

The full-scale electronic edition is almost as infuriating as Hitchens' views on Iraq; it's 750 pages of unindexed text, and the table of contents is impossible to scroll. (Or *that* might just be my [Kindle] Touch.)

Whilst a reasonably-priced - or indeed any - paperback is not yet available, plenty of these articles are to be found online.

Hitchens' article entitled 'Why Women Aren't Funny' actually concedes that plenty of them are, although the funniest ones may be fat, Jewish or lesbian. (I hope we're far enough along to consider that this sort of daft statement isn't worth the effort of getting riled about.) His premise that women don't need to be funny because men will be attracted to them anyway doesn't really work if applied to men under about 50. Younger than that - or so I get the impression after a decade and a half of adulthood - funny people pretty much consistently want funny partners, if it's anything more than a one night stand.

A great chunk of *Arguably* is about the USA. I've not read many of those pieces yet, but having noticed his refrains harking back to Jefferson et al, I get the feeling that Hitchens' love for America is based on its past

and its original theoretical concepts - not the present reality. Very much like some of the Labour members I know who are in near-permanent disagreement with the parliamentary party, yet remain stubbornly, perplexingly loyal retainers.

For some reasons - wit and style and fervour and how damn good they are when I agree on the topic, I think - I still want to read more despite the above silliness.

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### **Petra X says**

Best, best, best book of the year.  
A review to follow, probably next year!

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