



Intellectuals: From Marx and Tolstoy to Sartre and Chomsky

Paul Johnson

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Paul Johnson examines whether intellectuals are morally fit to give advice to humanity.

Do the private practices of intellectuals match the standard of their public principles?

How great is their respect for truth? What is their attitude to money? How do they treat their spouses and children - legitimate and illegitimate? How loyal are they to their friends?

Rousseau, Shelley, Marx, Ibsen, Tolstoy, Hemingway, Bertrand Russell, Brecht, Sartre, Edmund Wilson, Victor Gollancz, Lillian Hellman, Cyril Connolly, Norman Mailer, Kenneth Tynan and many others are put under the spotlight. With wit and brilliance, Paul Johnson exposes these intellectuals, and questions whether ideas should ever be valued more than individuals.

Intellectuals: From Marx and Tolstoy to Sartre and Chomsky Details

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From Reader Review Intellectuals: From Marx and Tolstoy to Sartre and Chomsky for online ebook

Riku Sayuj says

Single Quote Review:

“The famous technique of not separating the author from his work which made him* the leading critic of the nineteenth century ignores what should be obvious to anyone upon reflection, that a book is produced by a different person than the one whom we see in his daily life with his strengths and his weaknesses as a man.”

~ Marcel Proust

[*him - refers to the French critic Sainte-Beuve, who had inspired a school of critics in the nineteenth century, *l'homme et l'oeuvre*, which devoted as much study to a writer's life and letters as to his actual writing in order to form an understanding of his work.]

Realini says

Intellectuals by Paul Johnson

This is an excellent book.

It is upsetting and it might affect the reader, so a cautionary or warning sign might be in order on the cover somewhere. Like the adult or Paternal Guidance ratings for some films, one such sign would be advisable. And why is that?

After you read this book, you will not feel the same about Tolstoy, Hemingway, Shelley...a young adult might feel inclined to avoid their books altogether.

Again; this is a great book, even if it has over four hundred pages, I have read all of it, with the exception of the chapters on Marx and Sartre. I hate Marxists anyway, so what would be the point of learning what loathing characters these two had. In fact, because the book is so good and paints such an accurate picture of these intellectuals, I leafed through the pages on Marx and Sartre.

And I had the confirmation that these two were devious and monsters. In the case of Sartre, a rather short demon.

Do we need to learn about what is behind a great book? Shouldn't be satisfied with astonishing literature?

Why must we know that Hemingway was a liar, drunkard, smelled awful, was abusive to his wives and others, quarreled with other writers for no good reason- with dos Passos, Hemingway was plainly in the wrong. He diminished and insulted Scott F. Fitzgerald, by saying that he called him into the bathroom to show his penis.

Most of these Intellectuals had children that they abandoned. In the case of Jean Jacques Rousseau, we are talking about many children, basically left to die. In those days, to take a baby to the door of an orphanage and leave it there meant to sentence him to near certain death.

In fact the cruelty, meanness of most of those presented here is incredible.

You would be tempted to say that, in order to describe the complete range of human emotions, great authors

need to plunge into the abyss.

Still, it doesn't make them any less charming, if we find reasons for debauchery and the vilest behavior. In two cases, Marx and Sartre I kind of expected the worse, even if there's always room for surprises: like the fact that Sartre, even after he learned many of the real facts about his Soviet friends- maintained that "the Soviet citizens are allowed to travel, but they just do not have any desire to do so".

And then the drugs, the addictions of so many of these "role models" (?). In some cases, alcohol abuse was a way out of sickness. Hemingway suffered from depression, which probably pushed him to commit suicide, and forced him to drink often. But the scale of the excess is formidable: he drank enormous quantities of alcohol- whisky, wine, vodka...he even invented some "Papa drinks".

His relationship with his mother, most of his wives and a number of mistresses was terrible. One aspect of his life that I find repulsive was his despicable compulsion to kill any number of animals- from pigeons to lions and anything that walked the earth basically. He did have a huge number of cats, associated with a repulsive smell around the house. Stray cats from my neighborhood came to my house and I know what Hemingway's third (?) wife was complaining about.

The biggest disappointment though was Tolstoy. I had the impression, based on his masterpieces that the count was a kind of prophet. It turns out this is the way he saw himself at times, but I learned from this book that he had such a dark side that I am happy to have read twice War and Peace, Anna Karenina, The Death of Ivan Ilic and many of his stories. After reading about Tolstoy and the others presented in this fabulous book, I would have qualms about reading their (still great) creations and not think how unbearably vicious, mean, vile and contemptible they all acted, for incredibly long periods of time and with so many people.

www.realini.blogspot.ro

Dfordoom says

Paul Johnson's book *Intellectuals* is a fascinating examination of the reasons we should distrust intellectuals, especially of the left-wing variety.

He looks at a selection of intellectuals from Rousseau to Noam Chomsky and sees some disturbing common patterns. They achieve a certain eminence in a particular field (Bertrand Russell in mathematics, Chomsky in linguistics, Shelley, Tolstoy and James Baldwin in literature) and then decide they are uniquely qualified to refashion civilisation. They turn to politics but their knowledge of the real world is dangerously shallow and naïve, and they are led into a complex web of deception and self-deception.

Since their understanding of the world of politics and of the behaviours and motivations of real people are fatally inadequate they succumb to the temptation to ignore real people and the real world and to put ideas before people. When people fail to react in the desired manner the intellectuals become embittered and increasingly extreme.

Believing that they have all the answers they convince themselves that they do not need to bother with troublesome distractions like facts, and that they are justified in lying in the service of the higher truths that they have glimpsed.

Lying becomes second nature to them. An almost total disregard for truthfulness can be observed in all the intellectuals under discussion. Rousseau, Marx, the left-wing publisher Victor Gollancz, Lillian Hellman and

Bertolt Brecht are merely the most egregious examples.

Hypocrisy, selfishness and vicious behaviour towards other people is another common thread, most spectacular in the cases of Shelley, Hemingway and Norman Mailer but present in all to some extent. The intellectual seems to be a person unable to progress beyond adolescence, which explains not only their childish behaviours but also their willingness to embrace remarkable silly ideas (Marx and Tolstoy being classic examples)

Some (Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir) are so sad and pathetic one almost feels sorry for them while others (Shelley, Lillian Hellman and Brecht) are truly repellant.

Johnson also notes the increasing tendency of intellectuals to embrace violence, most notable in the cases of Mailer and James Baldwin, and associated with that a frightening willingness to make excuses for barbarism (Lillian Hellman's enthusiasm for Stalinism being a particularly shameful example).

There really is nothing more dangerous than an intellectual with a plan to remake the world.

Eric_W says

Paul Hollander, in a review of *Intellectuals* by Paul Johnson defines "intellectual" as a western concept connoting "preoccupation with and respect for ideas but not for ideas as sacred doctrines." (Society, Se/Oc 1989, p. 97)

The positive embodiment of this ideal is the "fearless social critic, inquisitive and iconoclastic interpreter of ideas, selfless promoter of the common good." To some extent, the role of intellectual is self-defined; there are no specific requirements for the job, unlike that the cleric. In *Intellectuals*, Johnson denounces the replacement of the cleric by the intellectual. According to Johnson, the cleric played the role of intellectual prior to the decline of religious institutions in the 18th century. He contends this is a "dangerous" trend. In his book he attempts to display the vast gulf between progressive ideas and personal morality.

His selection of intellectuals for study is peculiar. Hemingway, for one, may have been a genius, but he certainly was not an intellectual of the caliber of Rousseau or Marx or Tolstoy who are also included. Nor are Hellman, or Chomsky or Gollancz. Johnson obviously suffers from the delusion that those who dispense moral advice need to follow their own prescriptions. Since when have clerics been any more upright than others? I would also argue that there are many religiously trained intellectuals writing today. Johnson's selections seem to have been chosen more for their apparent antagonism to capitalistic society.

While eminently readable, if you like gossip, Johnson spends little time on the philosophies of his victims, emphasizing instead their apparent lack of personal morality (at least morality that Johnson supports).

Johnson's flaw is attributing too much power to intellectuals. For example, he writes of Rousseau's distrust of capitalism and private property, declaims Rousseau's enormous influence on society, and then warns us of his dangerous thinking. Oh really? I haven't noticed any great decline in our desire for accumulating wealth or property. Even the *National Review* decided this book was too gossipy and replete with overblown generalizations. But a little slander is fun too.

Gary says

This is not a book about what why each of the profiled intellectuals profiled are worthy of being remembered, but it's mostly how they are flawed human beings. The author would pick an intellectual, barely explain why they are important today, and then dwell on the persons foibles to a churlish degree making the listener lose sight of why the person is of interest today.

Does the author really know that Marx had "anger is heart" but didn't really act on it? Sometimes it can help to understand the artist (philosopher, writer, poet,...) as an individual and how they are different from their art but not at the expense of understanding why we should know about them today. Give me the complete package of the intellectuals but don't think you've denigrated their body of work by denigrating the person. Hemingway was a dick, but boy, could he write! We know him for his writing not for his life. Yes, we can better understand his writing by understanding the man, but his dickish behavior doesn't negate his writing.

I really despised this approach to story telling. It was not about what the intellectuals thought or why they are special. It is about why they are flawed humans. (Besides is it really flawed not to believe in supernatural transcendental beings based on no real evidence? The author seemed to think most of his subjects were flawed because they saw the world in human terms. Whatever).

Using the author's modus operandi, I could explain how he would describe the great intellectual thinker Jesus. He would first say something about the sermon on the mount and the golden rule and how that revolutionized thought, and then he would say that Jesus said he came to separate families, went to a temple and kicked out money lenders and violently whipped them, and suggested people not wash their hands before eating even though germs can cause disease. Then the author would end the story by casting more doubt on Jesus' intellectual works because of his personnel behavior since when his mother and brothers ask him for help he shouted "who is my mother, who are my brothers" (Matthew 12:48). (The author really seemed to like taking things out of context and I had a feeling that he was more interested in telling his point of view if it supported his dislike for the person with the implication that the art itself is just as bad).

I did not finish the book. I finish almost all of my books, but enough was enough. I thought he would change his formula. But he did not. If I weren't so lazy I would have gotten my credit back on this anti-intellectual, anti-humanist bore of a book.

Peter N. says

A book that is devastating to many of those that modern thinkers hold in high esteem, such as Rousseau, Marx, Tolstoy, Sarte and Brecht. Johnson knows a lot, has studied a lot, and is willing to call these men (and one woman) what they were: mean, greedy for fame and often money, immoral, hateful towards women and children, and above all persistent liars. Truth for them was malleable, especially when their reputation was at stake.

One reviewer said that Johnson ignored their good contributions, which is not true. He notes that if Tolstoy has stuck to writing he would have been fine. He says that Hemingway's devotion to his craft was unsurpassed. But the point of the book is that they did not just write or speak. They thought they were

messiahs who had some special destiny to guide humanity in truth. The theme is not what they did well, but how their lives were staunchly immoral, despite their accomplishments.

As I look around our world the thoughts and ideas of these men still echo, but it has shifted to Hollywood. Today it is not philosophy professors or even playwrights who shape thinking, but actors, directors, and the movies they make. Fascination with sexual freedom, the love of money, the shading of the truth in the name of Humanity, the desire to identify with the workers, excusing violence when it accomplishes their ends, and the vicious intolerance of all opposing viewpoints was characteristic of intellectuals and is now characteristic of Hollywood and our ruling class in general.

Unfortunately, Johnson's book assumes, what can no longer be assumed, a standard of right and wrong that has long since be lost. Most who read it today will be fascinated, but ultimately will say, "So what that Hemingway was a drunk adulterer? Who cares that Marx lied? Who cares that men claimed to be pacifists, but often supported violence to accomplish their goals? What is that to me? I like their books and their ideas and their movies. And isn't my opinion and feelings what really matters?" That response goes to show that, at least in America and Europe, the intellectuals have won.

Brian Goldstein says

Magnificent, all the emeperors without clothes, about time these rascals were exposed for the frauds they were!

Frieda Vazel says

I read every word of this juicy book even though I lost trust in the author very early on. The book reads like a delicious tabloid writeup of the venerated thinkers; sex, drugs, drinking, mental illness, theft, fighting and a plethora of other personal scandal depicted with questionable reliability. If nothing else, this book feeds our personal cravings for schadenfreude. Johnson loses his credibility when the faults he finds in these thinkers - which at times seem quite human and expected - are depicted with extreme words like "preposterous, ridiculous, gruesome, promiscuous, dreadful, pathetic" and on the basis of small excerpts from their writings or a single sexual episode. He hardly tells you why these individuals are so prominent in our history, except if you believe him, by virtue of their exploitative, hypersexual, corrupt and immoral nature. If you never read the works of these Intellectuals or read a more balanced biography you may quickly be left to wonder why these intellectuals ever achieved acclaim. The positive accomplishments of the intellectuals are hardly expanded on.

Johnson explains this approach with his theory that the icon's personal life is key to understanding the public life, and there is no doubt that this is truth to his philosophy. But from that premise Johnson zooms in almost exclusively on the personal life, dishing about wives, ex-wives, mistresses, sexual exploits, fetishes, in two instances the intellectual's "obsession" with his penis. While all of these would be fascinating and an indulgent read, Johnson comes off so disingenuous that at times he seems more preposterous than the intellectual he's trying to paint as such. Every good thing that is said or done by the intellectual is hyper-analyzed to discover the evil underpinnings, while every bad thing (often related by ex wives) are taken at face value, no analysis needed.

What is most troubling about this book is that it pretends to be a book about individuals. In reality, this is a book about the general Intellectual archetype as defined by Johnson: the secular leader and reformer who is the equivalent of the religious leader (priest, rabbi, imam etc) but without the religious element. Johnson's aim was not to compile a number of biographies, but to prove an overarching theme: that "intellectuals", meaning, secular moral leaders, are not trustworthy. If I had understood this thesis before I read the book perhaps I wouldn't have been so astounded by Johnson's constant tearing down of intellectual after intellectual. But the title doesn't give that away, and the book jumps right in the Rousseau and from there to Freud, Marx, Tolstoy and so on, criticizing them all in turn. In all, it was a fun read but one I would not take very seriously.

Pedro says

De leitura muito prazenteira para quem, como eu, gosta de saber pormenores biográficos sobre a vida dos grandes homens, sejam eles políticos, artistas, cientistas ou intelectuais, os quais considero indissociáveis do modo de produção das obras. Alguém que se tenha insurgido contra a devassa da privacidade dos mortos em «Eu e os Políticos», não pode lê-lo com agrado, dado que pouco se fala aqui das públicas virtudes, senão quando em conflito com os vícios privados.

Dou cinco estrelas a este livro sem qualquer hesitação, mesmo depois de ter pensado um pouco. E pensei porque, na verdade, parece-me existir aqui um fundo político que não pode ser descurado. A não ser, e não me parece, que o autor concorde com Sartre em considerar o «intelectual de esquerda» o único intelectual possível, existe uma clara denúncia de pensadores de esquerda, muitas vezes comunistas ou inspiradores de políticas liberais.

O autor dedica um capítulo próprio a Rousseau, Shelley, Marx, Ibsen, Tolstói, Hemingway, Brecht, Bertrand Russel, Sartre, Edmund Wilson, Victor Gollancz, Lillian Hellman. E fala ainda de George Orwell, Fassbinder, Norman Mailer, Chomsky, ou James Baldwin, entre outros, num único capítulo. Ao falar de Sartre aborda ainda Simone de Beauvoir, a histórica teórica feminista que, na prática, se sujeitava a Jean Paul Sartre.

Não obstante este programa claramente político, nada me leva a crer que Rousseau não tenha abandonado os filhos num orfanato, que Marx não tenha tido uma empregada a quem não pagava mais que dormida e comida, Tolstói ou Shelley não fossem promíscuos e de algum modo indiferentes às mulheres que os amaram, que Ibsen não vampirizasse as suas relações para criar grandes textos de teatro, que Brecht não se vestisse com um fato de operário feito num alfaiate e vivesse faustosamente escondendo a fortuna que granjeara para manter o renome enquanto intelectual comunista, que Russell não fosse publicamente um pacifista e em privado um belicoso. Ou seja, nada me leva a crer que estes «intelectuais» não fossem, no fundo, um tanto ou quanto oportunistas, hipócritas e, demasiadas vezes, desumanos.

As cinco estrelas são dadas à curiosidade que estas vidas suscitam e à denúncia do modo como aquilo que defenderam tão pouco se reflectiu na vida que levavam. Cinco estrelas também porque, em torno de Marx, Tolstói e Rousseau, pode ler-se a deliciosa frase «o que sempre acontece quando um intelectual tenta fazer triunfar as suas ideias às costas do povo» e, mesmo no final: «Devemos sempre - e sobretudo - lembrar-nos daquilo de que os intelectuais habitualmente se esquecem: de que as pessoas têm mais importância do que os conceitos e devem vir sempre em primeiro lugar. O pior de todos os despotismos é a desumana tirania das ideias»...

Pois.

Michelle says

I finally finished this--it took me quite a while. I found it necessary to do a few chapters at a time, broken up by something else. This book is an amazing, weighty but readable look at the "intellectuals" we've crowned as "experts" in the last few hundred years. Johnson notes the trend of intellectuals seeking to lead humanity to a better place than the priests and religious leaders of an earlier day, and asks the oddly-rarely-mentioned question "How is this working out?" Are we better off for following these intellectuals? Is the world a better place? Umm, well, not really. Why might that be? Johnson takes a magnifying glass to the lives and the writings of a number of Western "intellectuals" to answer these questions, and lays out the remarkable story of just how awful these men (and an occasional woman) have really been. No wonder the world's not a better place--the men Johnson chronicles for us are greedy, venal, vain, cruel, untruthful and untrustworthy. One thing I especially can't get over is how awfully these men treated women and their families. I've always been ambivalent about insisting that leaders be perfect in order to lead--no one is perfect--but the horrible stories laid out for us by Johnson show men who almost universally treat women with breathtaking cruelty and condescension.

I'm not sure that the trend written about here is still in force. It seems to me we've decided to dump true "intellectuals" like playwrights, professors and artists, and decided to all follow "celebrities" like Barbara Streisand, George Clooney, Michael Moore--perhaps Johnson could take a look at this and give us "Celebrities" :-)

This book is a fantastic volume of intellectual history. I originally considered giving it to my sons to read for modern history. However, I will not be doing that. Johnson is a little too frank in covering the sexual lives of his subjects--the result is a little hair-curling. My teens won't be reading it for school.

Jason says

The three stars I gave this book may be misleading. I didn't like the book at all...but I believe it was entirely accurate.

I initially expected this book to discuss the thinking of the intellectuals therein. However, although Johnson wrote a bit about this, the bulk of the book was basically a catalogue of the vices of these influential writers. In fact, it was too much. I quickly tired of reading about the lies and womanizing. It was not edifying, to say the least. I just skimmed quite a bit.

Johnson's basic point is quite correct - there is absolutely no reason in the world to believe these men or their philosophy. And yet it is their philosophy which rules our society. Such is the descent of man when he rejects the one true God.

Kuba Zajicek says

It is a shame that writers do not get a prize for blowing ass, because Paul Johnson would win every time. Using the private life of philosophers like Marx and Sartre as a relevant factor when considering philosophers' intellectual merit is outlandish. His poor content is unfortunately complemented with mundane language that uses excessive detail whilst describing pieces of information irrelevant to the philosophical ideas it should be dissecting (or at least that is what the introduction promises). However, the existence of this book is a good news for all the historians out there who desperately want to write a book and yet do not

have a slightest bit of innovative thought on their own; even writers who were tutored by AJP Taylor during their studies at Oxford write shit books, so have at it.

Man Ching says

What a strange book. The whole point of being is to trash intellectuals who think that the pursuit of freedom (either in behavior, in intellectual pursuits, from society.) Paul Johnson admitted that it was unfair to use the private lives of individuals to judge the strength of their thoughts, but nonetheless he spent the entire book documenting the deficiencies of men who talked big and lived meanly. The quality of the men never matched the beauty of their vision, prose, or poetry.

The futility of such an exercise is noted early, in the chapter about Shelley. Johnson admits that this cad was a wastrel who had no compunction about writing mean letters detailing the failures of his parents while concurrently asking for money. Shelley used people, seeing his family as nothing but a source of income and women no more than a means for physical pleasure. Naturally, he thought himself liberal, dispensing with archaic institutions of monogamy. He expected his wife to accept his mistress to share their apartment, but he graciously extended the same privilege to his wife (whom apparently complained about this arrangement.)

Regardless, all this is peripheral: Johnson thinks Shelley wrote beautifully, and his poetry moved Johnson. Johnson writes,

The truth, however, is fundamentally different and to anyone who reveres Shelley as a poet (as I do) it is deeply disturbing. It emerges from a variety of sources, one of the most important of which is Shelley's own letters."

Great. But why should the gap between artisanal accomplishments and the empty lives of artists be so surprising, in an age when starlets, athletes, politicians, authors, musicians, and entertainers behave as if they were competing for the favor of the Borgias? Johnson already conceded the point that he can appreciate the artistry, if not the artist.

There was one high point in the book, though. Johnson destroyed Karl Marx on both a personal and professional level. In this instance, it seems that there are elements in Marx's personality that might have directly resulted in the shoddy intellectual quality of his work. Marx made a better short form than long form writer; the long form exposed Marx's deficiencies as a researcher and investigator. Das Kapital contained a number of misuse of evidence. Marx did do a spectacular job of digging up dirt on his enemies, though.

In a coda, Johnson links 20th century atrocities to both secular intellectuals ignoring atrocities committed in their name and to the social milieu they created that promoted nihilism (namely in excesses of Communist regimes.) It seems to me a simpler case that these mass murderers were ambitious, ruthless, and disposed to murder even before they encountered post-modern philosophy. As much as I detest social relativism, post-modernism, and religious dogma, I can't fault these ideas as causing mass effects. I can, however, fault the men who, upon gaining power to commit atrocities, cloak their acts in the trappings of a recognizable philosophy. To suggest that terrorists or dictators valued life until reading a book seems to be placing the cart before the horse.

In the end, I do agree with Johnson in that it is so disappointing that philosophers rarely reach the ideals they espouse. So what else is new?

Szplug says

As other reviews have pointed out, Johnson has selected a mitt-full of left-wing/atheist writers, thinkers, and philosophers and attempted to sully their names and reputations with copious slinging of mud. Each *intellectual* - and there are some curious inclusions under this rubric - has their (personal) life strained for gossip and innuendo: the resulting sexual shenanigans, neurotic peccadillos, rampant paranoia, unpleasant interactions and general grade-A assholery apparently should serve as a caution against people taking any of these crumblebums and/or their self-proclaimed ideologies seriously. It's trial by smearing, eighties style.

It's all a rather loathsome business, but Johnson, despite clearly having axes to grind with these roseate bedfellows, has churned the milk of scandal into a deliciously entertaining butter. He's a fantastic writer - his *History of the American People*, though again marred by the rigor of his dogmatic filter (slavery gently deplored but explainable, the New Deal a diabolic scheme to enslave), is an exercise in sheer reading pleasure - and well able to maximize both the outrage and the amusement quotient in the dross engendered from such larger-than-life personalities. Quite titillating by any measure, but a little *does* go a long way.

Greg says

Back in 2001 I had an internship at Verso. They are the publishers of some left-wing books. When I worked there I would come in for a few hours a day. I'd get paid twenty five dollars and I'd be given lunch. I was also allowed to take home copies of any books that I wanted. It was a pleasant arrangement while I was taking classes.

One day, probably a couple of months after I started I showed up at the office and one of the real employees pulled me aside and told me that Alexander Cockburn was in the office today, and warned me not to give him any of my money. I remember thinking the warning a little weird, why would a fairly well-known author come after me for my money, of which I had almost none? But sure enough, when he came storming out of the editor's office, with his shirt half-unbuttoned like he was about to go storm some barricades he charged up to me and tried hitting me up for money. I think the way he asked it was, "Do you have any money, I need to have some money." I told him no. He started fuming about the unfairness about how he got paid. He asked me again for money later on, and left the office after raiding the petty cash, which was the money that was used to buy me my daily lunch. A few days later, a week maybe? I got asked if I wanted to sell his books at a reading he was doing at ABC No Rio. I said sure, and with a backpack full of books I went, met up with Cockburn, set up a little display and sat my ass down while a bunch of punk types milled about, looked at the books, grumbled about the prices and waited for the lecture. When I was setting up the books, Cockburn grumbled about the price that I was going to charge for the books. He wanted to charge more, I think we were selling them for half the cover price. After the lecture and when the punk kids were milling about the table again and complaining about the price, Cockburn tried to throw me under the bus by saying how he wanted to charge less for the book but it wasn't up to him. I fielded some accusations from the grumbling punks and I think in the end we sold a couple of books.

This is a fairly banal example, but having someone trying to bully my lunch money out of me who is a supposed defender of the working class and enemy of greedy corporations struck me as kind of ridiculous. But, I've also realized that it's not all that uncommon, if you spend much time finding out about writers you admire you are probably going to come across some disappointments in their character. If you've ever had the fortune of going to school and being taught by 'rock-star' academics, maybe you've even discovered that you are basically in the company of a whole group of people with all sorts of anti-social behaviors that wouldn't fly in the real world.

This book is sort of like an *In Touch* magazine for a certain type of book nerd. It's almost all dirt. The gossip about famous intellectuals, all with the question behind the stories of, why do these people think they have the right to tell everyone else how they should act?

The book has a conservative bias. The people being skewered all are of the left-ist persuasion, but it is still a juicy and fun read, because who doesn't like see the ugly side of famous people, especially famous people who might have a tendency to be holier-than-thou, condemn others and feel that they have some big insight into the world that has given them all the answers.

The book was written in the waning days of the Cold War, right as the thaw was about to set in, and it's difficult at times to keep that fact in mind as reading some of the things here. Some of the book has aged a little poorly, for example Lillian Hellman had just recently died and Johnson predicted that her cult would live on. I don't think anyone these days gives two shits about Hellman's politics, and she might have ruled over the New York intellectual scene at one point, but now she's just that woman who has one copy of a couple of her plays carried in Barnes and Noble and is remembered for her legendary spat with Mary McCarthy.

The overarching criticism leveled at most of the people featured in this book is that they profess a great love for humanity, they are self-described as being filled with love and compassion, a sense of justice, an outrage at exploitation, etc; but in their personal lives they show very little compassion, they treat other people like garbage, they have a tendency to almost pathologically lie, and (this isn't surprising) they have that parental problem of basically saying, do as I say not as I do.

The writers who get their lives scrutinized here? This is a rough list: Rousseau, Shelly, Marx, Ibsen, Tolstoy, Hemingway, Bertrand Russell, Brecht, Sartre, Edmund Wilson, Victor Gollancz (yeah I didn't know who he was either), Lillian Hellman, Cyril Connolly, George Orwell (sort of), Norman Mailer, Rainer Fassbinder (yeah, not a writer), James Baldwin, Kenneth Tynan and Noam Chomsky.

Before I get into some of the dirt, I should make a few comments on some of these selections. One, a few of them probably shouldn't have been included. I think it's a real stretch of the imagination to call Hemingway an 'intellectual'. He dabbled in being committed to the CP in the 1930's, but he wasn't really out there creating over-arching ideas about how society should be run. Johnson seems to feel the discomfort of including him, and seems to rationalize his inclusion because of Hemingway's 'pagan' life-style. Atheism is something that Johnson isn't too fond of. I already mentioned Hellman. Chomsky is also a curious inclusion, he seems to be included mainly for his political stance but there is little 'dirt' given, except for an example of some questionable justifications he gave and revised over genocide in Cambodia (It's not happening, It's not as bad as they say, It did happen but it's Americas fault). Edmund Wilson is at best a fellow traveller of the CP, and even during his infatuation with Communism he stands apart from most of the other people featured in this book by staying intellectually honest. Bunny falls into the same problem that is easily leveled at a lot of left-wing people in the 30's, they choose to support Communism without an awareness of what Stalin was doing to his own people at the time. Many would have serious misgivings about Stalin as it became difficult

to ignore the facts of his brutality. Except in the case of someone like Sartre who went against the stream and didn't give a shit about the CP when it was fashionable, but threw his hat in to support Stalin as everyone else was backing away and feeling slightly ashamed of themselves.

My two favorite chapters were probably the ones attacking Rousseau and Tolstoy. Maybe it's because they are probably two of the most inflated examples of moral self-righteousness presented in the book. It's not really surprising to hear how say, Brecht was an asshole, or that Hemingway was a drunk. It was curious to hear that Marx had probably never stepped foot in a factory in his whole life, and that much of the facts he used in *Capital* were from decades old government reports that didn't reflect on what present working conditions were like, and that maybe the only exploited laborer he knew personally was his maid who he impregnated, forced the child into an orphanage and oh yeah, who was never paid a cent for the work she did in the Marx home. Opps.

I thought maybe I'd relate a bunch of episodes from various lives but now I'm having some trouble deciding what to pick. There is so much slanderous gossip here, much of it taken from letters and journals of the authors.

You do get quite a bit of strange dishonesty from the authors portrayed here. For example, there is Bertrand Russell angrily denying that he ever advocated using nuclear weapons to destroy the Soviet Union in the days before they developed their own atomic weapons, even in the face of being shown that he had written articles and essays advocating this (at least one of them he even published in his collection, *Unpopular Essays*). Another common theme is bizarre sexually open relationships with spouses, it's not necessarily bizarre that someone would want to sleep with people other than their spouse, but the number of the intellectuals in the book who followed this practice and didn't just cheat, but did it with an 'openness' policy that results in probably more hurtfulness than if the infidelity had been carried out in a more traditional bourgeois manner.

Maybe someday soon I'll return to this review. It's fun reading though for people who want to have a dosage of some gossip but can't read the weekly Hollywood gossip magazines because they are too culturally stupid to know who half of the people on the covers of them are.

Douglas Wilson says

Excellent.

Jan says

A disappointing book. Paul Johnson, a Conservative writer for the Spectator, presents a very one-sided picture of Rousseau, Shelley, Marx, Ibsen, Tolstoy, Hemmingway, Brecht, Russell, Sartre, Wilson, Gollancz, Hellman, Mailer, Baldwin, Chomsky and others.

Very condescending and even disdainful with little effort at balance by ignoring their many positive contributions. Johnson is given to sweeping statements; one example: '... a disregard for the truth ... marks the true secular intellectual.' What?

Johnson examines the sex lives and the hygiene habits of a select group of people, relying almost entirely on secondary sources – that is, what others have said about them. Much of this, even if true, (dirt under finger nails, etc.) is unbelievable banal. And, his selected group of ‘intellectuals’ are all liberal leaning – where is the mention of a Heidegger or a Pound or other conservative leaning thinkers?

But what should we have expected? As a staunch conservative, Johnson opposed Nixon’s impeachment yet supported Clinton’s while he was himself involved in an eleven-year affair during his marriage. (We know this is true because his mistress, Gloria Stewart, said she finally she had to go public because she was so offended by Johnson’s moral hypocrisy. Johnson was then forced to admit the affair.) More recently, as a strong Catholic, in an interview he questioned the veracity of complaints about pedophilic priests.

And where does Johnson lead us in his book? He concludes that we must look at the moral credentials of intellectuals before accepting any advice on how to lead our lives. I don’t know how to address this point – should we really ignore the writings of individuals who had flaws in their lives? How much of their insights may come from their own life experience? Or should we listen to Lawrence when he said trust the tale, not the teller?

In fairness and in an effort to have balance, Mr. Johnson is a learned man, a journalist who writes well. Before he was a conservative, he was a liberal and wrote for the New Statesman. Wherever he wrote, he appeared to have had an active filter to interpret what he saw in the world to agree with his strongly held positions. Other writers may have struggled harder to be objective.

If you have an interest in the personal lives of some of the more notable modern philosophers, I would suggest Nigel Rodgers and Mel Thompson’s *Philosophers Behaving Badly* for a more even handed presentation.

Ensiform says

The purpose of this book is to question the moral right of intellectuals over the ages to counsel people on how to behave; to this end Johnson examines several so-called “intellectuals” from Rousseau to Norman Mailer: their private lives, their regard for truth, and their skill in public affairs. It is a fascinating and at times irritating book, made all the more amazing by the fact (never mentioned here) that Johnson, although a profoundly conservative thinker, was a socialist for a part of his life. Thus his attacks on intellectuals’ credulity in dealing with the Communist Party is somewhat ironic. Leaving that aside, when he exposes the blatant hypocrisy and even cruelty of some supposed champions of the people and self-proclaimed moral paragons (Marx and Rousseau, especially), he is admirable. It is also perfectly legitimate to expose the lying of a Hemingway or a Lillian Hellman.

But I have several objections to the book as well. First, there is no separate intro or conclusion, no preparatory definition-setting. So what is an intellectual, exactly? It seems to be a thinker who believes that intellect alone can change the world, rather than time-honored traditions. Well, maybe, but then it seems Edmund Wilson is a “man of letters,” then an intellectual, then a man of letters again. An intellectual actually seems to be a bright left-winger. Second, who ever said Hemingway or Shelley or Sartre, for example, were paragons of virtue? They might well be exposed as awful people, but their excoriation does not make as much sense as Marx’s. Johnson seems to simply hate creativity, bitterly resenting the fact that 50,000 mostly young people attended Sartre’s funeral (and dwelling rather unnecessarily on his ugliness). Third, his attacks

are inconsistent: he berates most of his victims for their adulterous affairs, but also attacks Ibsen for his platonic relations with girls, accusing him of using people as archetypes rather than individuals. Would he rather Ibsen slept with them? Or he will imply that an intellectual's change of allegiance is a flaw, but also deplores Brecht for remaining loyal to the CP. In any case, this is obviously an utterly absorbing series of essays, thought-provoking and lucid.

WB1 says

Paul Johnson, the British historian, once heard James Baldwin complain about discrimination. His response: "I said, 'look here, Baldwin. If, like me, you've been born-left-handed, red-haired and an English Catholic, there's nothing you don't know about prejudice.'"

Johnson wasn't joking. A former editor of the leftish "New Statesman," Johnson turned conservative in the 1970s and served as one of Margaret Thatcher's speechwriters. But unlike the neocons in the U.S., who were angry, humorless and lousy writers, Johnson was often witty and thoughtful and not entirely predictable. And his essays were filled with juicy gossip.

The thesis of this book is that liberal/lefty intellectuals and icons, while professing love for humanity, were often vile people. (Johnson avoids, of course, conservative thinkers who were probably just as vile).

Johnson singles out Rousseau, Karl Marx, Tolstoy and, of all people, Ibsen. All are lying, abusive, cruel to their families and morally bankrupt. There are easy targets like Lillian Hellman. (Johnson even raises the question that her lover, Dashell Hammett, wrote a lot of her plays). And strange targets like Hemingway, who seemed to have exaggerated some of his heroic exploits and slept with a lot of women. Johnson has a special animus towards Jean-Paul Sartre, who defended Stalin even as the bodies piled up and whose earlier behavior towards the German occupiers of Paris was detestable.

The left despises Johnson. Christopher Hitchens wrote in *The Nation*, "On every page there is something low, sniggering, mean and eavesdropped from third hand." Hitchens was exactly the kind of trendy and glib writer that Johnson demolishes.

Erik Graff says

Paul Johnson is a deeply conservative historian who crafts opinionated, but well-written and accessible books. I find much of what he opines, particularly when he approaches the contemporary world, offensive, but that's almost certainly good for me as I'm rather opinionated myself and he often knows more about the particular topic under review than I do. This book tends towards the modern, being a series of ad hominem critiques of intellectuals usually identified as progressive or "Left". The perspective is slanted in that little is said of their peers on the right, but the stories are certainly entertaining even if of questionable relevance to the ideas associated with these individuals.
