



Thank God for the Atom Bomb & Other Essays

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'This is not a book to promote tranquility, and readers in quest of peace of mind should look elsewhere,' writes Paul Fussell in the foreword to this original, sharp, tart, and thoroughly engaging work. The celebrated author of 'Class' and 'Bad' focuses his lethal wit on habitual euphemizers, professional dissimulators, artistically pretentious third-rate novelists, sexual puritans, and the 'Disneyfiers of life.'

Thank God for the Atom Bomb & Other Essays Details

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Dale says

The works of a brilliant essayist are a joy to read

I admit, I was attracted to *Thank God for the Atom Bomb* because of the title. Our library had it featured on its web page with some excerpts and I was intrigued. I was not disappointed.

The title essay is simply brilliant. It is also caustic, blunt and nuanced. I'll refer to it before the next time I teach about World War II.

There are two more essays on World War II. I found the two essays on George Orwell to be most interesting. His commentary on the differences between tourism and travel reminded me of the Twain essays I've been reading lately. "Taking It All Off In The Balkans" is the account of his visit to a nudist resort in the former Yugoslavia - very funny and (I've got to say it) revealing.

Two essays were just not interesting to me, being mainly about poetry and I find myself unable to muster the interest to read poetry, let alone read extensive commentary on it. I skimmed those...

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Jinnul Mukarram Jr. says

I have a good copy of it since I was in senior high school, i grabbed a cop of it during a school tour next to our school.. i bought it from a school in a cheap price for it was been used already, but its okey the content is till intact, the essays were so incredible, and i was just like travelling through time when the writers were talking and elaborating the scenes in the content...

Nooilforpacifists says

Despite the title, this is a collection of Fussell's critical essays. He was a good critic: Some quite good; others a bit ponderous. The three that begin the volume include the title piece, justly celebrated as a vigorous and manly defense of dropping two atom bombs on Japan written by one in the liberal literary mainstream.

Two other noteworthy essays were "Writing in Wartime", about how much pap is accepted as proper because it's patriotic, and "George Orwell: The Critic as an Honest Man" (no elaboration needed). Almost as good was his analysis how the notion of "The Pastoral" in literature has altered throughout the years, but instead of disappearing, has changed with the times. The "Fate of Chivalry" was overly long, however, and "Nude beaches in Yugoslavia" absurdly outdated.

Chris says

I would give Thank God for the Atom Bomb a better review, however, the author uses a form of discrimination against other writers based on how old they were at the time of the dropping of the bombs on Japan. If the author had stuck to his primary arguments I believe the book would have been a much stronger case for his and many other peoples' opinions of the usage of atomic power. When Paul Fussell made the argument personal he essentially gave the debate to the other debators.

Kathy Piselli says

Fussell served in the infantry in WW2 and I was thinking about him while reading Fleming's mysteries of My Father in which Fleming's father, as a youth in the Great War, learns that no one will kill any Huns with their rifles and that their best weapon is the spade they use to dig their trenches. This collection of Fussell's essays includes his sobering observation about literature that has emanated from wars past, and his prediction that there will be no "weighty, sustained poems, or even short poems of distinction" to come out of the Vietnam war. Perhaps not, but there have been some significantly lasting films.

David Dixon says

Re-reread title essay, "An Exchange of Views," and "Postscript (1987) on Japanese Skulls."

Did so after watching the beginning of Ken Burns' "The War," a project for which Fussell served as an advisor. It's very strange--both are intent on "facing unpleasant facts," yet Burns is such a thoroughgoing cheeseball (pre-dawn shots of midwest homesteads in golden light, every story a gift, that goddamn licking lens), I can't imagine how Fussell could bear his company for even a minute. That's taking one for the team, that is.

Copy note: Although the foreword and the parenthetical that introduces "Exchange" say the original piece and its responses were published in 1981, Fussell mentions "writing on the forty-second anniversary of the atom-bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki," which places both, like the postscript, in 1987.

Phrodrick says

Bottom Line Thank God for the Atom Bomb is my second collection of Paul Fussell essays. The first was The Great War and Modern Memory. Of the two the first was a tighter and better book. Having read the two I count myself a fan of Paul Fussell. This book is recommend to any fan of the essay. Do not let the title or the first few selections lead you to believe that this is only about war. This is a collection, some of it published elsewhere and as it covers several topics. It can feel thrown together.

Paul Fussell served his nation as a combat officer on the ground in the European theater during WWII. Had the Japanese not been speed to the surrender tables, he would have been among those sent fight them on the Japanese home Islands. Some would say that this fact is all he has to offer when in the opening essay he is certain that dropping those nuclear bombs was correct. Further, those who think otherwise lack the war time experience to have credibility. His argument is far more than selfish. In pointing out the average number of

people who were dying every day in the Pacific, and counting out how many would have died had the war continued for even a few days more it is clear that waiting would not have saved lives. Ours or theirs.

It is to his credit that the next essay is a scholarly disagreement to his case and ending this section is a discussion of American actions that a more peaceful world would consider atrocities. His point was that the War in the Pacific included in its costs, American soldiers who felt it ok to participate in collecting, even gifting the skulls of Japanese dead. Humans in any war do terrible things, this is almost without parallel in American history.

After this much intensity it is almost jarring as Fussell writes about topics like George Orwell, nudist beaches in the Balkans, several more discussions of the impact of modern war on modern literature, ultimately ending with another near non sequitur, the Indianapolis 500.

All of these essays are intelligent and insightful. I will be reading more Gorge Orwell because of Paul Fussell. Also in this book is a passage that has changed my outlook on many issues.

It is the habit of many to believe that their side of any topic is where virtue is to be found. That especially in wartime, but just as passionately in politics the choices are only between the good and the bad. Fussell, quoting others argues that in most cases the choice is between the bad and the worse. There are essays, or themes included in this book that are too close to ones included in *The Great War and Modern Memory*. These essays tended to feel like fillers and should have been excluded or placed earlier in this collection following his thoughts on WWII.

I will be reading more books by Paul Fussell. His opinions on matters cultural or more practical are the opinions of a writer with important experience and an insightful command of his topics. I want his opinion on topics about warriors and warriors who are also writers.

Erik Graff says

Having finished my in-flight book, I depended upon my hosts, Walter and Karen, to recommend books from their library when I arrived for a one week visit to their home in Springfield, Vermont. One, Rick's Fiasco, took up most of the serious reading time. This collection of essays, many of them amusing, served for light bedtime reading.

Patrick McCoy says

The author Paul Fussell recently died and while reading one of the obituary pieces I noticed that he wrote an acclaimed essay called "Thank God For The Atomic Bomb," which sounded intriguing to me. About a year ago I was taking a history correspondence course to renew my teaching license in America I wrote a research paper on the reasons the US bombed Japan. So I was interested in hearing Fussell's perspective, since he served as a soldier in the European theater in WWII. It turns out that I had to hunt it down since the book is no longer in print. But it seems that his main reason was to save American soldier's lives and it follows Japanese civilian lives that would have been lost had the US been forced to invade Japan. This book of essays, from 1988, also has several other war related pieces: "An Exchange Of Views" with a historian who challenges Fussell's assumptions about the war, "Postscript (1987) on Japanese Skulls" points out that Americans did take grotesque wartime souvenirs such as skulls home as war trophies, and "Writing in Wartime: The Uses of Innocence" about a wartime memoir that was a fake and used for the propagandistic

purpose of bringing the US into war with Germany. Being a George Orwell fan I also found his essay "George Orwell: The Critic as Honest Man" interesting and informative. Orwell was also inspiration for his essay "A Power of Facing Unpleasant Facts" about the need for intellectual honesty in the world despite the unpleasantness that this often produces. I found his opinions concerning the 2nd Amendment provocative and timely given the several mass killings in the US recently in his essay "A Well-Regulated Militia." He makes some interesting points about the distinction between travelers and tourists in "Travel, Tourism, and 'International Understanding.'" Surprisingly, he is an advocate of "naturist" or more commonly known as "nudism" as "Taking It All Off in the Balkans" attests. However, there were a couple of essays that I couldn't finish due to lack of interest in the subjects: the pastoral poetry in "On the Persistence of Pastoral," chivalry in "The Fate of Chivalry and the Assault upon Mother," and car racing in "Indy." All in all, it is a provocative collection of essays.

Adrian says

Acerbic essayist Fussell, who died a few weeks ago, deals with topics as diverse as the atom bomb and Indy 500 here. He excels in parsing war literature and many of the essays touch on this genre. May Sarton gets her knuckles rapped in a piece on authors complaining about bad reviews, tourism and naturism are investigated and I've got two new sources of good writing to try out; George Orwell's reviews and Edmund Blunden's WWI memoir "Undertones of War".

J.B. says

A collection of essays of historical significance.

Jesse says

As always, Fussell provides a deep, nuanced contemplation of serious issues, ranging from the truly horrible to the mundane. Obviously most responses to this book will be to title essay itself, which is much more than an apology for the horror of Hiroshima, but rather a demand that readers understand the complexity and awful brutality of the war in the Pacific. I don't know if Fussell's right in his figures, but if he is, he's expanded the very personal and selfish argument of being grateful for the atom bomb (one he shared with my grandparents, since those two bombings prevented my grandfather's deployment to the pacific) to the mathematical likelihood that continued fighting would almost certainly have led to far more dead on both sides, including civilians.

But it being Fussell, what's important about this argument is that he underlines how truly horrible it is--how racist the US military was, and how unspeakable the violence of the two atomic bombings was. There's no easy solution in any of Fussell's work that I've seen so far. In this book, more than in his others, he seems to be demanding readers come to terms with realizing that gratitude can't outweigh the horror of atrocities that may in some cases have saved their own lives. It's a complicated point, and one that leaves me uncomfortable and puzzled.

As well, in true Fussell style, it begins with a long contemplation of some of the most serious subjects within human grasp, and ends with pieces about nudism in Soviet Yugoslavia, and a day at the Indy 500.

James says

The title essay is not only the best in the collection but pretty much the last word on the bomb, as far as I'm concerned. Other highlights include a really sharp appreciation of Orwell, a look at "naturalist" beaches, and a critical but not condescending appraisal of the Indy 500. If you don't get the book, at least read the title essay online. It's incredibly well done.

Eric_W says

A very good friend of mine, a history teacher, and I used to have a running battle over Truman's use of the atomic bomb. I argued that given the time and the context of the decision, Truman had no choice. Ken argued that the sole purpose was a political decision to scare the Russians. Both views are not necessarily contradictory. The reading I've done about both Japanese and American views indicates a certain ambivalence, but clearly the average GI was scared shitless of a proposed invasion of the Japanese homeland given the fierce defense of Iwo Jima, Tarawa, and Okinawa, not to mention Kamikaze attacks.

One has only to read the comments of Admiral Halsey et al to understand the depth of racial hatred of the Japanese and the fear-mongering that had been engendered (often deliberately) but also the result of evidence of barbaric practices, to sympathize with the political pressure and debacle that would have resulted if the US had invaded Japan at the loss of even a few lives had he not used a weapon of this magnitude. (At the time they weren't even sure it would work.)

It must be acknowledged that I think the use of the bombs was horrific and hard to justify, but trying to put myself in Truman's shoes and with the information he had at that time, it's hard to see how he could have made any other decision. General LeMay's (who really should have been charged with being a war criminal) deliberate fire bombing attacks on Japanese cities had been horribly effective at leveling Japanese cities which were constructed of very flammable materials. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were virtually the only cities left.

This book is actually a collection of essays on a variety of topics, but the one about the atomic bomb was the most controversial. It had appears in the *The New Republic* (August 26 and 29, 1981), pp. 28-30.] This title essay is as much a critique of books like Gray's *The Warriors*, which Fussell argues "[H:]is meditation on modern soldiering, gives every sign of remoteness from experience. Division headquarters is miles behind the places where the soldiers experience terror and madness and relieve these pressures by sadism."

There is a nice collection of essays critiquing Fussell's position at <http://www.uncp.edu/home/berrys/cours...>

It's a discussion that should continue to haunt us.

Fussell has written a great deal about our mythic view of war *The Great War and Modern Memory* and *Wartime Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*.

Patrick B says

Fussell is fussy, cranky, inconsistent, and entertaining.
