



A Great Idea at the Time: The Rise, Fall, and Curious Afterlife of the Great Books

Alex Beam

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Today the classics of the western canon, written by the proverbial “dead white men,” are cannon fodder in the culture wars. But in the 1950s and 1960s, they were a pop culture phenomenon. The Great Books of Western Civilization, fifty-four volumes chosen by intellectuals at the University of Chicago, began as an educational movement, and evolved into a successful marketing idea. Why did a million American households buy books by Hippocrates and Nicomachus from door-to-door salesmen? And how and why did the great books fall out of fashion?

In *A Great Idea at the Time* Alex Beam explores the Great Books mania, in an entertaining and strangely poignant portrait of American popular culture on the threshold of the television age. Populated with memorable characters, *A Great Idea at the Time* will leave readers asking themselves: Have I read Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* lately? If not, why not?

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