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To Know or Not to Know?

A new book leads readers on an illuminating journey of self-exploration

DAMON LINKER
JAN 17



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Ignorance and Bliss

*On Wanting
Not to Know*

Mark Lilla

[A book well worth reading.](#)

We want to know, we want not to know. We accept truth, we resist truth. Back and forth the mind shuttles, playing badminton with itself. But it doesn't feel like a game. It feels as if our lives are at stake. And they are.

That's a quote from my old teacher and dear friend Mark Lilla - found in the

That's a quote from my old teacher and dear friend Mark Lilla, found in the introduction to his latest book, *Ignorance and Bliss: On Wanting Not to Know*, which was published last month. It's also quoted in italics at the top of the front flap of the book jacket. I hope it grabs people's attention when they pick it up while browsing in bookstores. It should. If it does, it might prompt them to buy and read the book. And if they do that, they may well learn something of enduring importance about what it means to be a human being, both individually and collectively.

For that as well as other reasons, I find it hard to imagine a book more out of step with the times.

While our public life is shrill, polarized, and clamorous, with our skittering attention driven continually on from one widely proclaimed crisis or emergency to the next, Lilla's voice is calm, measured, and playfully ironic. While our public debates are fixated on the present, with little patience for the perspective gained from the careful study of the past, Lilla roams freely, with ease, and with uncommon erudition, throughout the literature of millennia, searching for insight on his theme wherever he can find it. While we crave easy solutions and pat answers, Lilla poses open-ended questions and puzzles for us to ponder.

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A Book for Today—and All Times

Yet in another sense, the book is very well suited to our moment.

A major worry on the center-left over the past decade has been “disinformation.” Liberals are haunted by a fear that the internet, and social media in particular, is spreading lies and falsehoods that fuel political extremism—and an accompanying anxiety about whether an open society with a free market of ideas is capable of combatting these lies and

with a free market of ideas is capable of combating these lies and falsehoods. (President Biden expressed a version of this lament in his farewell address on Wednesday night.)

Some liberals have responded to this problem by encouraging the building of new forms of regulation to sort truth from untruth, with “fact-checkers” empowered to do the work for us. Lilla’s book doesn’t address this directly. (He began pondering its themes long before such anxieties preoccupied us.) Yet it does speak to the topic in the profoundest of ways, asking us to reflect on the possibility that our attachment to truth is much less unambiguous than we like to believe. It’s not so much that people want to know the truth and acquire knowledge but are hoodwinked by malign actors as that our attachment to truth and knowledge is conditional—and not just among “them.” Among us, too.

If you doubt it, consider one of the dozens of rancorous debates that have been roiling our politics over the past year: Joe Biden’s ill-fated decision to run for a second term and his staff’s denial of the president’s age-related debility, despite an abundance of polling data showing American voters didn’t buy the administration’s confident assurances about the president’s mental and physical acuity. This denial became impossible to maintain after Biden’s disastrous debate with Donald Trump late last June. Yet the denials continued for weeks, until finally, with maximal reluctance, Biden relented, allowing Kamala Harris very belatedly to take over the presidential campaign for the Democrats.

Those enraged by this series of events have tended to take a rather simple line on it: Biden was lying, and his staff was lying. They knew he was incapable of leading a presidential campaign, let alone winning one and governing competently for four more years, and yet they deliberately said the opposite, intentionally spreading a falsehood.

This might be true of some, but I also think these kinds of accusations, which are heard all the time in our politics—*truth has a liberal bias*, for example, or *the right and its media enablers are inveterate, shameless liars*—are in many

cases far too simple. In the case of Biden, I think it's much more likely that the president himself and many members of his family and his closest advisers deceived themselves about his capacities. They lied, yes, but to themselves more than they did to the rest of us. Believing otherwise—that the president and his administration knew the truth and intentionally misled the country about it—is useful for the president's political enemies, because it casts Biden and his team as maximally culpable and thus the justified object of righteous rage for their acts. But the truth is more likely to involve a more complicated and mysterious psychological process—one less deserving of indignation and calls for the infliction of just punishment.

We do it to ourselves all the time: I know something to be true. But facing it would be too painful or too disadvantageous; I don't *want* it to be true. So I tell myself it isn't true and act on that self-deception. But of course, I'm the one who is both concocting the lie while at some level knowing the truth and also believing the lie I know to be untrue. How is this possible? Lilla's book is, at bottom, an extended reflection on this question. It shines a bright, revealing light on—it seeks knowledge about—our tendency to resist knowledge and deceive ourselves.

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Or put in slight different terms, Lilla's book is about "the power of ignorance." Just as the desire to know how the world works or why the world is the way it is can be powerful, so can its opposite—the desire to remain in the dark, as it were, for fear of what the light would reveal. Lilla explores this impulse in a multitude of times, places, and works of art—"ancient myths, religious scriptures, epic poetry, plays, and modern novels." Though he spends time looking at the explicit case for ignorance as a human good, Lilla is less

interested in those rare people who are driven entirely by the will not to know than in the subtle and complex interplay within most of us between the desires to know and not to know.

He describes the resulting book as “an intellectual travelogue retracing my own circuitous and somewhat episodic excursions in reading and thinking about the will not to know.” The form of the book is unusual: Clustered into five thematic chapters, with each broken into titled aphoristic passages of a few pages or paragraphs each, with those, in turn, interspersed with epigraphs—quotes from other authors that illuminate the ongoing discussion in unpredictable ways, “sometimes supporting, sometimes contradicting, sometimes mocking” Lilla’s own thoughts.

There’s so much intelligence, good judgment, and humor in this book that I almost don’t know what to highlight. Lilla quotes and delves (with a light touch) into passages from Sophocles, Plato, Freud, Virgil, Augustine, Cervantes, the Books of *Genesis* and *Job*, Aeschylus, Elias Canetti, Saint Paul, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Graham Greene, Dostoevsky, Homer, and many other thinkers, writers, scriptural texts, and myths.

The Example of Nostalgia

I especially appreciated the final chapter, on nostalgia—the intense longing for a lost world, one we imagine to be simpler and happier than our own. This seeking flight from the present in favor of a future modeled on a vanished past is also, at bottom, a longing to escape from the knowledge that there is no going back in life, only forward. It would be hard for me to think of a more fitting and illuminating topic in our moment, awash as it is in this peculiar and perennial human pining for an innocence, strength, and greatness we feel we once possessed but that we have foolishly allowed to slip through our fingers.

Instead of trying, somehow, to convey the whole of this richly textured chapter, let alone the whole of this fertile book, I’ll simply quote a single paragraph that gestures toward an explanation for why our contemporary world seems to be skidding sideways into the ditch of a thoroughly nostalgia-infused politics.

One of the ironies of modern living is that the ideal of a *better future* can induce an ache for the past in anyone. The creative destruction that brings us ever flatter liquid-crystal television screens flattens and liquifies everything else in its path. The Maoist dream of permanent revolution is finally being realized—in politics, economics, technology, science, medicine, culture, family life, intimate relations, and personal identity. There is nothing new about passing through a historical period, even a very long one, of great disruption. What is new in the last half century is the nagging sense that accelerating disruption has become a permanent condition of human life—that to be human is no longer to plant oneself in the earth as Odysseus did, but to surf on a choppy sea and struggle desperately to stay upright. The shock of the new has been replaced by the shock of the ephemeral. Even if material and social conditions of life improve over time, those improvements cannot but seem just as improvised and tentative as what preceded them. All this can leave us feeling like exiles without our having crossed a single border, without even walking out the front door. But how to adjust? We know that a failure to mourn a single loss can wreak havoc on an individual's psyche. We have no idea what it means to mourn when we wake up every morning in a different Potemkin village. That reactionary politics are flourishing in our liquid world should surprise no one.

A few short pages later, readers encounter one of the many enigmatic epigraphs Lilla sprinkles throughout the book. This one, from Miguel de Unamuno, is worth quoting along with the passage above:

'Light, light, more light!' they tell us that the dying Goethe cried. No, warmth, warmth, more warmth!—for we die of cold and not darkness. It is not night that kills, but the frost.

I hope these two passages manage to convey a bit of what this wonderful book, animated throughout by humanistic empathy, is like—and also give an inkling of all you can acquire from it.

Know thyself proclaimed the Delphic Oracle. In helping us to confront our own deep-seated ambivalence about knowledge, [Mark Lilla's richly philosophical book](#) helps us (somewhat paradoxically) to achieve greater self-awareness and self-understanding. I now know more about myself—including how conflicted I am about the effort to achieve knowledge—than I did before reading. Which means the book has helped me become wiser.

Read it yourself and come to know the delights of making progress in wisdom.

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