

## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

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*Magill's Literary Annual, 2019* follows a long tradition, beginning in 1954, of offering readers incisive reviews of the major literature published during the previous calendar year. The *Magill's Literary Annual* series seeks to critically evaluate 150 major examples of serious literature, both fiction and nonfiction, published in English, from writers in the United States and around the world. The philosophy behind our selection process is to cover works that are likely to be of interest to general readers that reflect publishing trends, that add to the careers of authors being taught and researched in literature programs, and that will stand the test of time. By filtering the thousands of books published every year down to notable titles, the editors have provided librarians with an excellent reader's advisory tool and patrons with fodder for book discussion groups and a guide for choosing worthwhile reading material. The essay-reviews in the *Annual* provide a more academic "reference" review of a work than is typically found in newspapers and other periodical sources.

The reviews in the two-volume *Magill's Literary Annual, 2019* are arranged alphabetically by title. At the beginning of each volume is a complete alphabetical list of all covered books that provides readers with the title and author. In addition, readers will benefit from a brief description of each work in the volume. Every essay is approximately four pages in length. Each one begins with a block of reference information in a standard order:

- Full Book Title, including any subtitle
- *Author*: Name, with birth year, and death year when applicable
- *First published*: Original foreign-language title, with year and country, when pertinent
- Original language and translator name, when pertinent
- Introduction, Foreword, etc., with writer's name, when pertinent
- *Publisher*: Company name and city, and the number of pages
- *Type of work* (chosen from standard categories):

Anthropology	Fine arts
Archaeology	History
Autobiography	History of science
Biography	Language
Current affairs	Law
Diary	Letters
Drama	Literary biography
Economics	Literary criticism
Education	Literary history
Environment	Literary theory
Essays	Media
Ethics	Medicine
Film	Memoir

MAGILL'S LITERARY ANNUAL 2019

Miscellaneous	Psychology
Music	Religion
Natural history	Science
Nature	Short fiction
Novel	Sociology
Novella	Technology
Philosophy	Travel
Poetry	Women's issues

- *Time*: Period represented, when pertinent
- *Locale*: Location represented, when pertinent
- Capsule description of the work
- *Principal characters* (for novels, short fiction) or *Principal personages* (for bibliographies, history): List of people, with brief descriptions, when pertinent

The text of each essay-review analyzes and presents the focus, intent, and relative success of the author, as well as the makeup and point of view of the work under discussion. To assist readers further, essays are supplemented by a list of additional "Review Sources" for further study in a bibliographic format. Every essay includes a sidebar offering a brief biography of the author or authors. Thumbnail photographs of book covers and authors are included as available.

Three indexes can be found at the end of volume II:

- **Category Index**: Groups all titles into subject areas such as current affairs and social issues, ethics and law, history, literary biography, philosophy and religion, psychology, and women's issues.
- **Title Index**: Lists all works reviewed in alphabetical order, with any relevant cross references.
- **Author Index**: Lists books covered in the Annual by each author's name.

A searchable cumulative index, listing all books reviewed in *Magill's Literary Annual* between 1977 and 2019, as well as in *Magill's History Annual* (1983) and *Magill's Literary Annual, History and Biography* (1984 and 1985), can be found at [online.salempress.com](http://online.salempress.com).

Our special thanks go to the outstanding writers who lend their time and knowledge to this project every year. The names of all contributing reviewers are listed in the beginning of Volume I, as well as at the end of their individual reviews.

## 21 Lessons for the 21st Century

**Author:** Yuval Noah Harari (b. 1976)

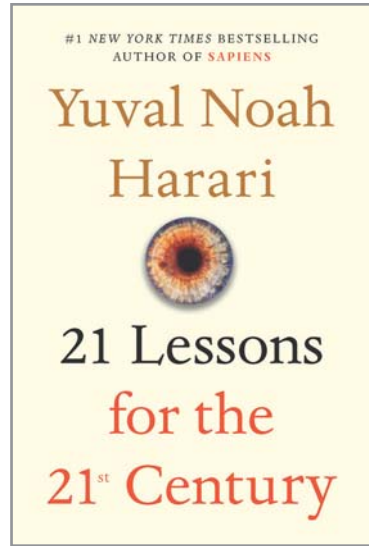
**Publisher:** Spiegel & Grau (New York). 400 pp.

**Type of work:** Current affairs

**Time:** Present and near future

**Locale:** Global

*After examining humanity's distant past in Sapiens (2014) and its long-distance future in Homo Deus (2016), Israeli historian and scholar Yuval Noah Harari focuses his attention upon problems and solutions for the human species in the present and near future in 21 Lessons for the 21st Century (2018).*



In his third book, 2018's *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, Yuval Noah Harari interprets the current social, political, and technological landscape to predict the significant, perhaps existential, challenges humanity will face in the next several decades. In many cases, his outlook is quite bleak: as technology advances inexorably, and swift communication pushes apart or pulls together groups of people with conflicting views, the pressure on individuals will grow. Some will not survive the resulting chaos. Others will be forced to subsist in reduced circumstances. However, Harari is not wholly negative. He suggests that those capable of adapting in a thoughtful, timely fashion will form the vanguard of a changed but resilient species. And, as his title suggests, he presents a variety of considerations he believes will help individuals and societies prepare for the serious changes ahead.

*21 Lessons* is, in many ways, a follow-up to Harari's books *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (2014) and *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (2016), which explore humanity's past and potential future, respectively. Both proved highly successful and propelled the author to acclaim as a popular guru of both history and futurism for general audiences. Harari then turned his attention to the trends of the mid-to-late 2010s and their impact on the near future. Sections of *21 Lessons* previously appeared as articles in various periodicals, examining particular aspects of modern society that contribute directly or indirectly to human welfare. Gathered into a collection, amended as necessary, given structure, and tied thematically, Harari's writing forewarns of an era fraught with uncertainty and filled with potential global upheaval. While the book discusses little that others have not already thought or expressed before, Harari's clear and engaging style draws in readers regardless of familiarity with the subjects at hand. He provides concrete examples to illustrate concepts and uses pithy sentences that drive home points, such as this telling observation: "Humans were always far better at inventing tools than using them wisely."

As the author reminds readers, doomsayers have been proclaiming about impending disaster since the dawn of time. Turns of the millennia, plagues of disease, history-changing inventions like gunpowder or steam engines, worldview-altering atomic bombs, and other natural or human-made phenomena have all engendered feelings of foreboding as possible harbingers of the end of the world. The difference now, Harari suggests, is the rapid pace of events unfolding in the twenty-first century compared to all the centuries of civilization that came before, as well as the sheer mass of humanity potentially affected by changes soon to materialize. The world has shrunk. Journeys that not long ago took days or weeks can now be accomplished in hours. People anywhere on the globe can connect with one another instantly at the touch of a button. Ideas, good or bad, can be exchanged at the speed of light.

A consequence of this modern way of life—and a major problem, Harari argues—is information overload. Humans have become obsessed with data-gathering, lately through sophisticated portable internet-capable devices, as a means of keeping in constant touch with the world and bringing relevance into their otherwise humdrum lives. And as individuals collect information, other entities with different motives (such as governments and corporations) are collecting information about them: personal history, health issues, food preferences, political affiliation, sexual proclivities, and much more, all conveniently broken down into demographic categories. The trouble is, humans are not necessarily equipped evolutionarily or emotionally to live in such mentally overwhelming conditions. The proto-humans who emerged as hunter-gatherers long ago developed brains structured to handle simple binary choices (e.g., kill or be killed). Though *Homo sapiens* has learned much and progressed far over time, the species remains biologically limited, wired for the analog rather than the digital age, and as such has difficulties processing and analyzing complicated data. Humans faced with a bewildering plethora of modern considerations linked to behavior, or reactions to sensual stimuli—Is something morally right? Is it socially acceptable? Is there profit to be made?—impulsively make decisions based on ancient intuitions and are prone to error. Individually and socially, these errors can have sweeping consequences.

*21 Lessons* is Harari's attempt to show ways in which even primitive, flawed brains can be applied to contemporary issues. The work is split into five main parts: the technological challenge, the political challenge, despair and hope, truth, and resilience. These parts are divided into a total of twenty-one chapters—the “lessons” of the title—that each examine a contemporary issue such as equality, war, or education. However, as many reviewers noted, the work is ultimately structured less like a series of prescriptive lessons than as general points to ponder and reflect on. While some might be disappointed in the lack of recommended actions with proven results, awareness and consideration of the issues Harari outlines is surely beneficial, even if one disagrees with some of his ideas.

Part 1, titled “The Technological Challenge,” the longest section in the book, focuses mainly on the anticipated effects of biotech and infotech on humanity in the near future. Harari begins, however, with “Disillusionment: The End of History Has Been Postponed,” a far-ranging chapter about how humans tend to think: in stories, tales, and myths, rather than in facts. He argues that this is a relic from when information could

only be passed along from generation to generation orally, among members of separate tribes. All tribes had their own stories and like-minded groups banded together, united by common beliefs and ideals, a custom that held true from antiquity until modern times. For example, Harari maintains, the twentieth century was dominated by three major and largely incompatible movements that coalesced out of tribalism: fascism, communism, and liberalism.

Harari largely sympathizes with liberalism, which he identifies as the dominant remaining ideology in the early twenty-first century and defines most broadly as a belief in the value of liberty. Liberalism faced a major challenge from fascism—characterized by rabid nationalism under the leadership of dictators who ruthlessly suppress dissenting voices and ideas and rigidly control all aspects of society—but seemingly overcame it in World War II. Communism, which advocates a publicly owned society, then became the main threat to the liberal order, but this threat faded following reforms in China and the breakup of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. With liberalism apparently victorious, Harari notes flaws in the system, such as the fact that ongoing economic liberalization and globalization have failed to ensure peace and alleviate poverty. Indeed, the “disillusionment” the author discusses is with the very liberal principles many take for granted, as demonstrated by widespread backlash apparent in the mid-2010s.

Encapsulating this backlash for Harari are the US presidency of Donald Trump and Great Britain’s vote to leave the European Union. Yet he is clear that these are just two pertinent examples of a general trend, one in which liberalism is being fractured to the point that it can no longer be considered a coherent driving story of humanity. He suggests that the concepts of liberty and equality are increasingly given to individual interpretation, with leaders such as Trump and proponents of Brexit mixing in illiberal ideas. The qualities of certain liberal principles—democracy, civil rights, religious freedom—have seemingly become arguable. This shift is aided by disruptive technological development, including channels that exacerbate confusion between opinion and fact, as well as by societal apprehension caused by events such as the global financial crisis, massive population movement, and devastating natural disasters. The result is a widespread resurgence of nationalism, an earlier and more localized guiding story than liberalism, communism, or fascism (though it played into all three). And while nationalism can take many forms, Harari warns against the apparent rise of inequality



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*Yuval Noah Harari is an Israeli historian affiliated with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His books *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (first published in Hebrew in 2011 and translated into English in 2014), and *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (2016) became international best sellers.*

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and prejudices based on factors including skin tone, national origin, mental or physical handicaps, gender identity, and religion.

After establishing many of the broad themes and concerns in the introduction and first chapter, Harari subsequently tackles narrower subjects, though all are complex and intertwined. In general, the author lays out his view of the current state of each issue, forecasts the challenges and choices ahead, and then discusses potential ways to prepare for and cope with what the future holds. Lesson number two, for instance—titled “Work: When You Grow Up, You Might Not Have a Job”—examines the impact of increasing automation on the job market. As proves typical throughout the book, the warnings are nothing new: the rise of robotics will eventually supplant humans in the performance of repetitive labor, while the advantages of artificial intelligence (AI) in storing and comparing data will make inroads into human cognitive superiority. It is highly possible that soon millions of human employees will become obsolete. Harari’s discussion of solutions for the problem are also not particularly groundbreaking: individuals must become more creative in finding niches and concentrate on supplemental roles related to the advanced technologies, while governments should be prepared and consider legislative measures such as a universal basic income (UBI) that might help ease the transition to a heavily automated economy. Instead, it is the author’s coherent and thought-provoking presentation of the issues at play, especially for general audiences, that is the real strength of the book.

Parts 2 through 5 continue to build upon the premises established in the first part. Harari touches upon dozens of tangential facets of the human experience that may or may not be relevant for individual readers, but it is probable that everyone will find something to latch onto. There are discussions of community and personal identity, religion versus science, and the ownership of data as the new standard of wealth. The author ventures far and wide in his arguments, drawing upon diverse resources—from Confucius and Buddha to Mark Zuckerberg and Joseph Goebbels—in an effort to give shape to abstract ideas. Fittingly, his final lesson comes the closest to truly imparting a teaching, as he advocates for meditation and mindfulness as a way to approach any situation or eventuality. Though this practice may not help all readers achieve peace of mind, it is arguably the clearest step any individual can take to face the many challenges of the present and future.

The tone of *21 Lessons* varies from pedantic to philosophical to jocular; in his passion to bring understanding to his theses, Harari sometimes explains too much. Other times, his thoughts turn generic or simplistic, giving the reader nothing to grasp. These flaws were noted in many reviews, which also tended to note the overlap between the book and Harari’s previous works. Gavin Jacobson, in a review for *New Statesman*, even considered *21 Lessons* a failure on the whole. Yet though the book is inconsistent, it is seldom completely uninteresting, as indicated by the overall largely positive critical reception. Harari has an ability to startle with a well-expressed truth or controversial opinion. And most reviewers agreed that his skillful writing outweighs any missteps, especially as a primer for general readers rather than an academic-focused work.

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