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Book Review: *Books That Changed the World*

In his widely reprinted work *Books That Changed the World*, librarian and researcher Robert B. Downs aims to identify the most influential and pivotal books to have affected human society through the course of history. He identifies nearly thirty works which he considers as having "changed the word", from the ubiquitous Bible ("the book of books") and the greatly influential Homeric epics to the ideology-breaking publications of Copernicus' *De Revolutionibus Orbium* and Darwin's *Origin of Species*. With the listing of each book, Downs goes into detail about the history of the book's author, the context of the time and culture where the book was written, and the immediate and long-term effects the book had on humanity. In doing this, Downs not only manages to list numerous instances in which the course of human events were altered by the power of the written word, but also to summarize much of the history behind the books and many aspects of Western culture. As a result, *Books That Changed the Word* is not only an invaluable guide to the impact of literature throughout Western history, but to many of the events that are incorporated into the study of AP European History.

The author of this compilation, Robert B. Downs, is perhaps one of the most qualified men in recent history to have collected such a list. Downs, born in 1903 in Downsville, North Carolina, fostered a lifelong love for books and education through library research. He earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in Library Science at Columbia University, and subsequently became a librarian at the New York Public Library, director of the library at Colby College and the University of North Carolina, and later the Director of Libraries for the New York University

System. Finally, from 1958 up until his retirement, he was employed as Dean of Library Administration at the University of Illinois. As well as library administration, Downs became president of several library associations, was a vocal proponent for freedom of speech during the McCarthy era, and traveled the world extensively to aid in setting up libraries across the globe. He built and maintained many famed research facilities and composed nearly 350 works concerning the administration of libraries in addition to the several books on literature he authored, of which *Books That Changed the World* is one. Upon being awarded the American Library Association's Clarence Day Award in 1963, the association made of Downs the statement, "No librarian has reached such a wide audience and no librarian has made a richer contribution to an understanding of books for their enjoyment and for their significance for our time."

In *Books That Changed the World*, Downs aims to "demonstrate that books are dynamic and powerful instruments, tools, or weapons" (Downs 31) by identifying a list of some of the most influential books that have been produced since the inception of the written word. The book lists, in chronological order, nearly thirty books covering a period from ancient times to the twentieth century. Each of these, be it a single book or a group of works by one or more authors, is summarized and described in its historical context through a short biography of its author(s) and their intent by authoring the book. Afterwards, the immediate and long-term implications of the book are discussed, supporting why it is considered by Downs to be one of the most influential books in human history and whether or not the book is still relevant to us today. In addition to explaining the content and significance of the book, Downs also includes a large

amount of historical information of major events and movements throughout Western history, most of which was inspired by or affected in some way by the publication of the book itself.

Downs' compilation of books readily shows his literary and historical background, as well as his penchant for extensive research. Each of the summaries and historical contexts he provides from the books are written in a comprehensive, factual tone that expertly defends his reasons for selecting the book. The passages concisely educate about the underlying concepts and ideas concerning the book, without endlessly listing facts about it or the time period it was published. Reflecting his extensive background in research, many of the passages include quotations from the source text as well as other authoritative sources concerning the book or author, from both the time the work was published and the modern day. Not only does Downs show a perceptive look at the issues each of these authors faced and tried to address, but he does so with great understanding of the various societal, political, religious, and economic factors that affected the authors themselves. As such, beyond just the content of the work in question, the reader also learns about the belabored and innocent observations of Copernicus, the wrongfully misunderstood intent of Machiavelli and Thomas Paine, and even the debated existence of the Greek poet Homer himself.

Indeed, where Downs aims to provide an authoritative view on the major points of literary history in Western society, its true value lies in being an impressive historical resource for students of European and American history alike. As well as summarizing the whole of modern Western history in the introduction, the books and accompanying histories that Downs provides touch upon major themes such as the preeminence of the Catholic Church in medieval Europe (*City of God* and *Summa Theologica*), the Renaissance (*De Revolutionibus Orbium*, *De*

Humani Corporis Fabrica and *De Motu Cordis*, among others), the Enlightenment (*Principia Mathematica*), the American and French Revolutions (*Common Sense*, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*), the American Civil War (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*), and even World War II (*Mein Kampf*). In order to understand the impact such books had on the course of human history, it is necessary to have at least a sense of the movements that were happening during those eras. That the book offers this background in summary and the effective, comprehensive style of Downs makes the book a welcome resource to novices in the study of Western history as well as an excellent refresher to those who have experience with it.

As the book is an excellent read, both in terms of its enthralling and comprehensive coverage of literary history as well as its value in regards to the study of European history, it is hard to find many immediate weaknesses in the book. If we interpret the title of the book and the intent of the author literally, however, we find that the book does not live up to all of the claims Downs attempts to make. Despite having "books" in the title, it is often the authors of the books that are written about more than simply the contents of the book. While this may be beneficial and even logical to those who are pursuing a study of Western history, as a guide to solely the literary history of the Western world, this book loses focus. In addition, the author doesn't give equal treatment to each of the books, sometimes extolling the virtues and lives of the authors while scarcely mentioning the content of their publications, while in others extensively quoting passages from the book itself (for example, in chapter 14, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*). For many of the books, it may not be possible (or even feasible) to give them equal coverage, but it at times makes coverage of certain topics uneven. And finally, perhaps the most glaring oversight of the book itself (whether by design, accidentally, or by chance) is that it deals almost

exclusively with the history of the Western world, with virtually no mention of literature or its impact outside of Europe and America. While such study would not be applicable to AP European History, it is disappointing that the author would so easily overlook the non-Western world, in an almost shameless display of ethnocentrism.

For its comprehensive nature, however, *Books that Changed the World* makes up for its small flaws, and augmented by Downs' enthralling literary style, the book encompasses an excellent overview of Western history since the late medieval period. The author successfully defends his reasoning behind each selection, and does so with an insight the likes of which could only be garnered from the exhaustive study of a textbook, or individually compiled from the research of numerous separate authors. Presented in a single form here, the numerous topics and areas on which Downs touches are made much more effective and understandable. As such, I believe this book should remain a staple of the AP Euro course, to aid students in sharpening and refreshing their knowledge of Western history, as well as gaining insight into the power and influence of the written word.