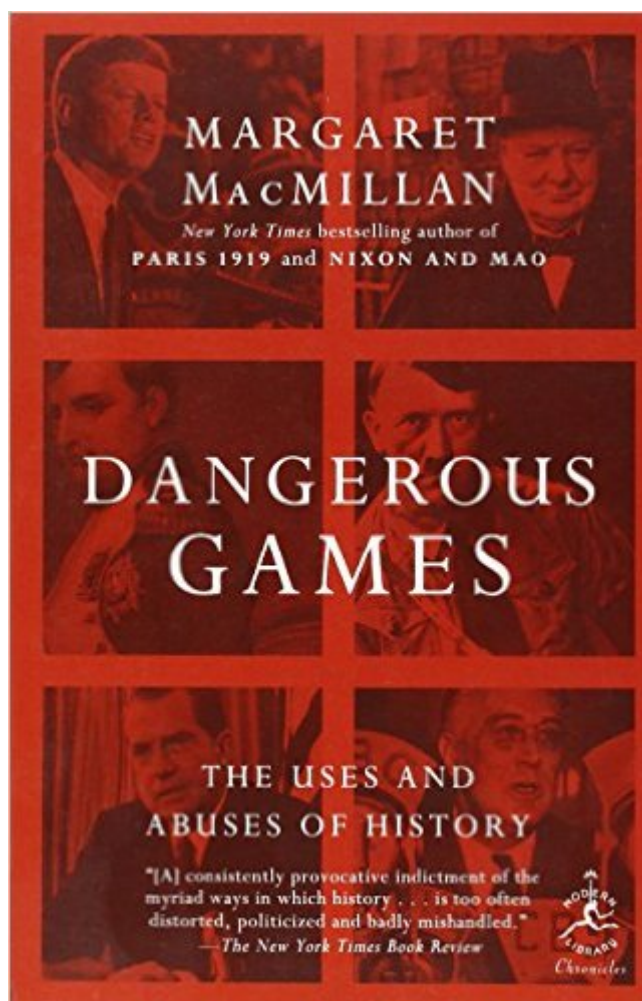


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Dangerous Games: The Uses And Abuses Of History (Modern Library Chronicles)



Synopsis

Acclaimed historian Margaret MacMillan explores here the many ways in which history affects us all. She shows how a deeper engagement with history, both as individuals and in the sphere of public debate, can help us understand ourselves and the world better. But she also warns that history can be misused and lead to misunderstanding. History is used to justify religious movements and political campaigns alike. Dictators may suppress history because it undermines their ideas, agendas, or claims to absolute authority. Nationalists may tell false, one-sided, or misleading stories about the past. Political leaders might mobilize their people by telling lies. It is imperative that we have an understanding of the past and avoid these and other common traps in thinking to which many fall prey. This brilliantly reasoned work, alive with incident and figures both great and infamous, will compel us to examine history anew and skillfully illuminates why it is important to treat the past with care.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

MacMillan is very smart. More important, she's very wise. That latter category informs all the thinking in this book and is what makes it well worth reading. (There's an oddly cranky review from earlier this month posted here. I don't understand it and can't square it with the book I read.) The book tells us why the study of history is important. Part of the answer to that question is what history is - it's not just a table of names and dates: they are necessary, but not sufficient. Part is how history

has been used and abused over time. The learning in this book can be summarized in two phrases. The first is that you can't understand the news unless you understand the history. MacMillan shows this in her treatment of The Battle of Kosovo, which was a very different thing in 1389, when it happened and in 1989, when Serbian president Milosevic gave a speech marking the battle's 600th anniversary and began the process of unleashing the forces that would turn the former Yugoslavia into a slaughterhouse. The second, which is almost a corollary of the first, is her mention of the bewildering effect of living in the Soviet Union of the 1930s and 40s, where the rewriting of recent history of the revolution and its aftermath was an ongoing industry. She notes dryly that it can be disorienting to live in a country with an unpredictable past. The book, between flanking chapters of the history craze and history as a guide, discusses the abuses of history as a source of comfort, as a property to be controlled, as a tool in shaping identity, as a catalyst of nationalism, and as a source of grievances (and we all know what kinds of actions unaddressed grievances can lead to in our modern world). She also addresses history as a battle in the culture wars going on almost everywhere.

In this slim but important volume, historian Margaret MacMillan sets out to challenge those who use or misuse history for their own purposes. Few escape her glance, from the Chinese who cultivate a sense of victimization even now that they have risen to the status of economic superpower (and whose leaders cite a sign that never existed in Shanghai, denying entrance to a park to Chinese and dogs) to both Palestinians and Israelis, quarreling over the question of "who was here first" with reference to the lands now under Israeli authority. MacMillan's two most recent works (one about the Versailles Treaty of 1919; the other about Nixon and Mao) have given her tremendous insight into the way history is used and abused in geopolitical and political conflicts around the world. Bad history, she writes, tells only parts of complex stories, is selective, misleading and can lead to the creation of national 'myths' that hold their own dangers. She uses examples to bolster every point, such as the Serbian myths surrounding the defeat of Prince Lazar, their national hero, by Ottoman Turks at the battle of Kosovo in 1389. In fact, MacMillan points out, Lazar was simply one Serb prince (not a national leader); while he was killed, the battle was widely viewed as a draw and even claimed by Serbs at the time as a victory; and far from marking the end of Serb independence, an independent Serbia remained for decades. The Orthodox church used Lazar's death to bolster the myth of a resistance to Turkish rule for centuries; in the 19th century, when that myth collided with the emergence of nationalism across Europe, the result was not only the bloody conflicts in the former Yugoslavia but also one of the triggering events of the still-bloodier World War I.

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