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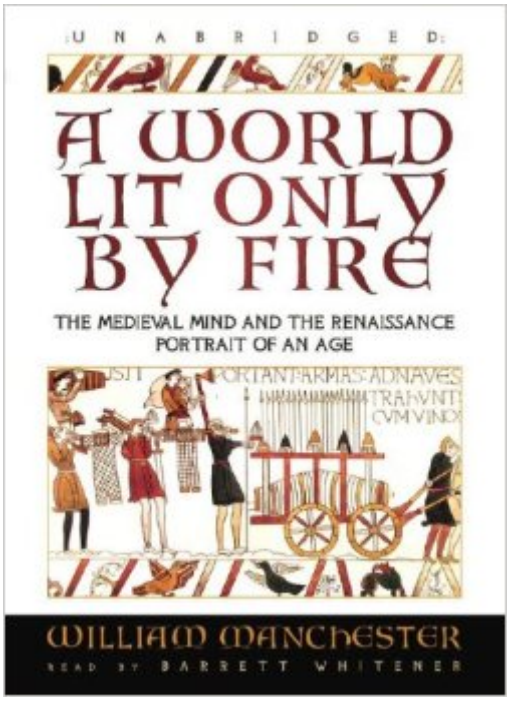
A World Lit Only By Fire: The Medieval Mind And The Renaissance; Portrait Of An Age



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Synopsis

[Read by Barrett Whitener] The preeminent popular history of civilization’s rebirth after the Dark Ages From tales of chivalrous knights to the barbarity of trial by ordeal, no era has been a greater source of awe, horror, and wonder than the Middle Ages. In handsomely crafted prose and with the grace and authority of his extraordinary gift for narrative history, William Manchester leads us from a civilization tottering on the brink of collapse to the grandeur of its rebirth, the Renaissance, a dense explosion of energy that spawned some of history’s greatest poets, philosophers, and painters, as well as some of its most spectacular villains. One of the most volatile periods of western history witnessed the passing of the Dark Ages and the dawning of the Renaissance, illuminated by magnificent scientific and artistic achievements and spectacular leaps of thought and imagination. Manchester’s narrative weaves together extraordinary figures, varied elements, and accomplishments of the period.

Book Information

Audio CD

Publisher: Blackstone Audio; Unabridged edition (March 1, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0786160446

ISBN-13: 978-0786160440

Product Dimensions: 5.3 x 1.4 x 5.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 8.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

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Customer Reviews

I read this book when it first appeared, and have since carried pleasant if rather vague memories of it. Rereading it some 16 years later, I’m horrified by how bad it is in places, and wonder what in the world I saw in it the first time around.The opening section entitled "The Medieval Mind" is especially, embarrassingly, bad. In it, Manchester reduces an entire millennium to a quick and spotty sketch (this must account in part for the vagueness of my memories) which is full of over-generalizations (the medieval world wasn’t a bona fide "civilization"), simplifications ("there was no room in the medieval mind for doubt; the possibility of skepticism simply did not exist"), and absolute howlers

(medieval peasants went naked in the summer; the medieval mind had no spatial and temporal awareness or self-consciousness).Less bad--but still bad--are the succeeding two sections, both much longer than the opening one on the medieval period (this, despite the book's subtitle). One of the sections is on the Renaissance and Reformation, the other focuses on Magellan and the European "discovery" of the New World (which Manchester tells us was the germ from which the entire book grew). There are some interesting biographical vignettes in the Renaissance section that probably account for my pleasant memories--Savonarola, da Vinci, and Erasmus in particular--but there's no real effort on Manchester's part to wrestle with the meaning of the new humanism that fueled the Renaissance or to explore the intricacies of the Reform revolt against Rome. Instead, he falls back on tired stereotypes; his long account of Martin Luther is especially hackneyed.

Is this some kind of joke?As a young man, William Manchester served in WWII. He then pursued a career in journalism, spending time overseas. At some point he shifted to an academic career and compiled, probably in part from experience, biographies of Churchill, McArthur, and J. F. Kennedy -- safe territory for a journalist. His list of works include some fiction and essays; we can surmise that first and foremost, he is a writer, not an analyst, and certainly not a researcher.As his "Author's Note" reveals, at the age of 70 during a convalesence, he decided to write a "portrait" of the 16th Century as a backdrop to a study of Magellan. In roughly two years he churned out "AWLOBF," notwithstanding the fact that his background in the 16th Century was no more than "the general familiarity of an educated man." As a result, his efforts to deposit ink on paper yielded a work that has an uncanny resemblance to recently used toilet paper.Anyone should be suspicious of a book that provides firm dates for the death of Arthur and Robin Hood. (Chronology, p. X). Carless mistakes such as misidentifying Grand Duke Ivan III as the first Tsar of Russia (p. 35; Ivan IV (1533-1584) = first Tsar) serve only to shred its credibility.As Manchester himself states, the book is "a slight work with no scholarly pretensions. All the sources are secondary, few are new. I have not mastered recent scholarship on the early sixteenth century." In fact, turning to his "Acknowledgements and Sources," we find that he gives credit above all to the Will Durant's "Story of Civilization" (ca. 1954) and the Encylopaedia Brittanica. In other words, we are blessed with a careless synthesis of dated general compilations, themselves compiled from dated secondary sources.

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