

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/lost-in-thought-review-the-life-of-the-mind-11590532580>

BOOKSHELF

'Lost in Thought' Review: The Life of the Mind

'The world' would have us study for some advantage or gain. The ancients, and this author, counsel learning for its own sake.



Rodin's "The Thinker."

PHOTO: FRISO GENTSCH/PICTURE-ALLIANCE/DPA/AP IMAGES

By Jonathan Marks

May 26, 2020 6:36 pm ET

Not long after the shelter-in-place orders sent us all home for a time, a story about Isaac Newton made the rounds. During the Great Plague of London, Newton invented calculus. "Quit complaining," the story seemed to say, "and better yourself in home confinement!"

Exhortations to engage in self-improvement can sound discordant in times of calamity, but we haven't done so bad. Newton produced calculus. We produce sourdough.

There is, Zena Hitz argues in "Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life," truth in the cliché that "our humanity is displayed best and enjoyed most when faced with serious limitations." Ms. Hitz, a tutor at St. John's College, didn't have a pandemic in mind when she began her inquiry into intellectual life and why we need it. But her book arrives just in time for readers recently forced to take stock of their inner resources. The question at its heart is disarmingly simple and deeply engaging: What should we do with ourselves?

She thinks, as Plato and Aristotle did, that what we should do depends on what aim human beings pursue for its own sake, not as a means to other ends. A life oriented by the "pursuit of learning" is what she means by the intellectual life. She takes a more expansive and democratic view of learning than her ancient predecessors, finding intellectual value in religious belief and disbelief, children cataloging dead bugs, aristocratic leisure-readers and working-class bookworms— the famous and the nearly invisible— stealing time for study. The Italian communist and literary theorist Antonio Gramsci, whose ideas dissolve thought into the "struggle for power," nonetheless felt the need to read for the sake of reading. In prison, he studied the playwright Pirandello as a way of feeding his "interior life."

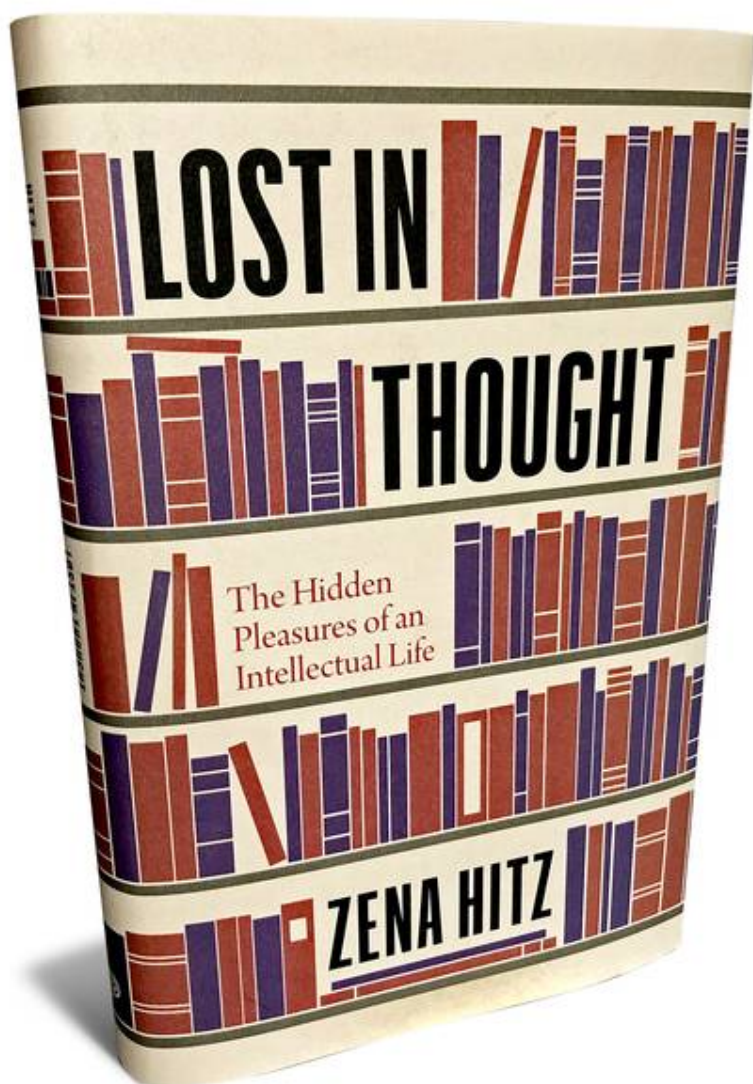


PHOTO: WSJ

LOST IN THOUGHT

By Zena Hitz

Princeton, 226 pages, \$22.95

“Lost in Thought” is packed with biographical sketches, each helping to show the broader logic of learning. Learning isn’t “simply a pleasure, like a foot massage,” or a hobby, Ms. Hitz contends. It is how finite beings reach for “the whole of everything.” We grasp, through mathematics, the properties of infinity, or, through literature and history, the minds of people we will never meet. Some of us find, in Scripture, the promise of salvation.

Ms. Hitz, a convert to Catholicism, shows us the Virgin Mary in “bookish solitude” (if early church tradition is to be believed, Mary was a reader). But she venerates the pagan authors as

well, who are united with their Christian counterparts in this: “Infused with seriousness, they seek to get to the bottom of life.” Wherever it may lead, learning for its own sake is a “natural need” and among the most magnificent of human splendors.

But our splendor is dimmed, even perverted, by what Ms. Hitz, following the Gospel-writer John, among others, calls “the world”—the “locus of competition and struggle for wealth, power, prestige, and status.” Human beings lose themselves in the restless quest for such goods, whose attainment does nothing to quell our restlessness yet requires us to trick or coerce others into serving as our instruments. We would like to find such vices as deception and cruelty only in bad regimes and other people, but they are built into social and political life because they are built into us. We have “many desires, impulses, and concerns” other than the love of learning, and, what is worse, “the less good, the selfish, the banal, the superficial, and even the cruel are the easier goals to follow.” We “drift toward them.” Consequently “the world,” a kind of madhouse, is the “human default,” and our dignity can be won only through a “sort of asceticism, a turning away from things within ourselves.”

Ms. Hitz, who abandoned academics for a time, is mindful of the difficulty of this endeavor and finds universities unmindful of it. At their best, university scholars elucidate the questions that trouble the minds of amateur lovers of learning. As teachers, they provide “person-to-person service” that addresses deep human needs. The satisfaction of doing their work well helps the scholar to resist the allure of political action, which can easily turn into mere exhibitionism.

But most university scholars, in Ms. Hitz’s view, are rarely at their best. They crave prestige and comfort, both purchased by getting as far as possible from the interests of amateurs and the challenges of the classroom. Most universities, she thinks, do little to encourage serious teaching or learning. They hawk knowledge in the manner one might use to sell a chemistry textbook to a poisoner.

For all the insights she offers, Ms. Hitz’s judgment is too harsh. Still, universities should heed her plea to treat students not as problems to be solved or customers to be soothed but as potential members of the “community of equals that human seriousness makes possible.” Her assessment of universities worries me less than her view of “the world,” which leads her to elevate prophets railing against corruption over politicians seeking to moderate it. She evidently prefers the outsider Malcolm X, who “did not speak for the sake of social results or

legislative outcomes,” to the “socially fastidious, gradualist” civil-rights movement. If Ms. Hitz doesn’t mention Henry David Thoreau and his disdain for “the cackling of political conventions,” her argument leans Thoreau’s way. For my own part, I’ll take Abraham Lincoln, who studied relentlessly, worked within the political conventions of his day, and in the end achieved some pretty important “legislative outcomes.” Lincoln cared about both learning for its own sake *and* “the world.”

But Ms. Hitz is asking the right questions. About what should human beings, and therefore also universities, be serious? If not learning for its own sake, what is the university for? As institutions across the country contemplate drastic cutbacks in a suddenly devastated economy, their leaders should ask themselves that question too.

Mr. Marks is a professor of politics at Ursinus College.

Copyright © 2020 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.