



## Teacher in America

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With his customary wit and grace, Dr. Barzun contrasts the ritual of education with the lost art of teaching. Twenty-one chapters deal with three major issues: the practice of teaching, the subject matter to be taught, and the institutional and cultural aspects of teaching. **Jacques Barzun** is a renowned scholar, teacher, and author who lectures widely since his retirement in 1993.

## Teacher in America Details

Date : Published April 1st 1981 by Liberty Fund Inc. (first published 1944)

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Author : Jacques Barzun

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## From Reader Review Teacher in America for online ebook

### Justin says

Brilliant prose, great insights, yet somewhat dated.

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### Gregory says

Good, but sometimes hard to get into--times have changed so much since the 40s, when it was first published.

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### Rosie Nguyen says

Read this book online, and a thought flashed into my mind, that when I had a library for my own, this book was going to be the first book that I put there. Yes, it's the kind of book that we want to keep on our shelves, for its righteous content, its insight into the core of education, in America and all over the world generally, because it's pretty much the same everywhere on Earth.

I made a mistake when reading the book, it was that I read it after a book about faster reading, hence I applied some techniques into reading. But this book is not for reading fast, but to be read slowly, and fathom, and cherish the work of educators, dreamers, changers, artists. Among the pages I found the answer for my problem: toil. Keep working hard toward my dream of an educator. Keep working hard.

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### Lobstergirl says

This is almost entirely about college and university teaching, not K-12. Vast swathes of it are outdated to the point of embarrassment, although his discussion of PhD degrees remains relevant (I didn't know that they were already problematic in 1944), and I pretty much agree with him that children should be allowed to read anything and everything, even trash; they'll sort out the wheat from the chaff as they grow older. (Although the popularity of paranormal erotica on Goodreads may belie this.)

The relevance to Anchor Books (a popularizer of highbrow texts) of this topic was certainly due to large numbers of male students needing college educations before they traipsed off to World War II, and enrolling afterwards with the sustenance of the GI bill. High school degrees in the early 1940s gave no guarantee that American teenagers even knew where Germany, France, and Japan were on the map.

Barzun's often confused and haphazard writing style here (oh, the paradox, as he complains about the writing of his young charges) would continue on in later works.

My main problem with the book was its misogyny. Barzun doesn't specifically get to the topic of women until late chapters, but all along the way his language indicates that education is mostly something for boys and men, and the teaching profession (at the postgraduate level at least) is for men. Men, men, men. "The well-read boy has an easier time in college..." When "twelve men in a senior colloquium in economics [meet]

for two consecutive hours" the discussion leader's "role is that of an orchestra conductor, except that neither he nor his men have a score before them." Mentions of girls and women are almost uniformly negative. "American schoolmarm..." "...reshaping of the schoolmarm's habits..." "The young lady in the shop who has inadvertently overcharged you will excuse herself by saying she hasn't a mathematical mind..." "Let Mary Jane take her time about puzzling out percentages while Tom Colin, whose father is a cashier, does them in his head and raps out the answers before the others..." A correspondent in the *Times* "complained with good reason that in twenty years of haunting public libraries he had never once been recommended a book by the damsel behind the desk..." A "sweet girl graduate" tells Barzun she didn't take any history in college, but a course called Social Maladjustment instead.

There's a chapter titled "The Human Boy" which is about boy students. This is followed by "The Subjection of Women" and "Adults, Workers, and Marriageable Girls." According to Barzun there was once a war of the sexes in education, but that is over. "Equal rights have changed all that. Women learn everything that their brothers do; they become scholars and scientists..." But for Barzun there is still a huge problem remaining, because for all the George Eliots and Marie Curies, of which the numbers are miniscule, there remain the girls who attend college and then simply marry. Post high-school education is largely wasted on them. Indeed, once they become wives and mothers "they are probably handicapped by four years of leisure and learning". "Employers dread the sudden appearance, one Monday morning, of an engagement ring or of a notice that Mrs. X is leaving to become a mother. Even if a woman intends to continue working under these conditions, she cannot be said to have a career nor to be really making use of her mind."

Once a wife and mother, "with a duty towards everybody but herself, her mind necessarily reverts to the feral state."

"Robinson Crusoe would have a better chance of remaining cultivated alone on his island than a young married woman of modest income in a three room flat within a stone's throw of museums, concerts, and public libraries."

Barzun isn't against girls going to college; he simply thinks the curriculum should be adapted for them. Postsecondary education for women necessitates "the abandonment of scholar-making, and the awareness that women are not men in skirts..."

"Precisely because most young women are likely to lose touch with books, ideas, and current events on the far side of the altar, they must in the four years of college obtain such a view of the past and present that its outline will remain indelible once the details are gone."

"It is true that as a general rule, girls are less interested than boys in theory, in ideas, in the logic of things and events. That is why their minds must not be cluttered up with details which they instinctively prefer - and make no use of. Girls are more conscientious and hardworking, they want to please their teachers more, and they do not want to be bothered by implications. ...one constantly meets women of fine intelligence who use their brains exclusively about concrete things such as clothes, food, and the persons whom they know. Their imagination about the distant or the abstract is completely atrophied; they are at the mercy of words, and their vehement opinions about war or strikes or politics are little short of brutish. Though it may be hard work, the minds of women students can be forced out of their grooves of conventionality and made to cope even with abstractions..."

The purpose of college for girls should be to educate them just enough that they can have conversations with their husbands which go beyond groceries and clothes. The work they are given should be "close to that of men in scope and substance" yet must have "separate and different instructions." "If her husband is to continue to speak his thoughts freely to her, he must find her responsive and *au courant*. There is nothing that discourages a man's talk so much as a staring countenance and the words "I wouldn't know anything about that"... A college semi-education will also help out at parties. "Going to college...should produce

companionable, even talkative adults of the female sex, whose arrival does not immediately make the host reach for a deck of cards."

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### **Sue Giaimo says**

This is an old book. It's content is still relevant since it discusses the role of schools and teachers in a child's growth.

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### **max says**

Dated, which is sad, because a good book on teaching should never be dated. The tone is weirdly off-putting. Sometimes Barzun makes excellent points -- he is at his best when he calls out professional educators on their phony jargon and sappy, often horribly bad ideas. And those kinds of points are made frequently enough here. But there isn't a whole lot more he has to offer after that. Breezy and anecdotal, fine -- but these kinds of books are a dime a dozen.

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### **Bill says**

Perhaps this is not Barzun's greatest or most famous, but if you are a teacher in America, you will not care that it is also a bit dated. I draw inspiration from this book in my role as a high school teacher.

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### **Brian Keenan says**

For those of us who were first introduced to Jacques Barzun between the front and back covers of *From Dawn to Decadence*, there is a temptation to compare all other work of his to that singular piece. *Teacher in America* is not *From Dawn to Decadence*, nor does Barzun want it to be. *Teacher in America* was written over the course of 5 weeks while on sabbatical from Columbia in 1945. Professor Barzun, however, was no less brilliant in 1945 than he was in 2001 when *From Dawn to Decadence* hit shelves. In *Teacher in America*, his aim is to articulate the little-remembered craft (or art) of teaching, to distinguish it from all other impostors of that craft (which indeed there are many), and situate that craft within the profession of teaching as it is done in America, both in K-12 and in higher institutions. He has no interest in the political or social agendas of those who would wield our educational institutions in order to solve or correct every problem in the world. That is what he calls "Education," and he dispenses with it immediately upon begin his essay. The business of parents and teachers is not Education, but teaching; and the aim of his book is not Education, but proper schooling. With this posture, pragmatic and insightful anecdotes and observations are numerous on every page. Schools are institutions that teach the requisite intellectual skills that then allow for the learning of all other crafts. This should stay in the forefront of the minds of those in leadership in schools of any kind.

Barzun begins with craft. The craft of teaching is something that is done either poorly or excellently, and it can be taught much like any other trade. By its very nature, teaching is not done in isolation. To be a teacher, one must have a pupil. Every teacher must start with the student and then strive to understand what he does and does not know, and then begin the task of teaching by filling in the gaps of ignorance or correcting

falsehood. Pupils however are often only partially aware of their need for teaching, let alone where their deficiencies lie, and a large part of being a good teacher is pointing out these shortcomings to the students without turning them off to learning.

Teacher in America is important in my mind for two reasons. First, its lack of any lofty all-encompassing goals of Education, and therefore its undistracted attention to tradecraft. Everything from the proper importance of standardized tests, to the structure of higher educational institutions as the models of intellectual orderliness, are given attention. He wisely however avoids unreasonable goals for schools, like claiming that schooling or teaching can avoid the rising wave of communism, or that it can instill the cosmopolitan disposition to uphold and defend human rights worldwide. In short, for Barzun, schooling, and by extension teaching, cannot and should not attempt to civilize. This is a breath of fresh air for anyone in the field of education who feels nearly suffocated by these widely held and unrealistic ambitions.

Second, Teacher in America now reminds us that our present frustrations about the profession of teaching are not novel. It is not a recent problem that teachers feel grossly over-worked, poorly paid, and vastly under-appreciated. It is not new that much of the time spent in a classroom is simply avoiding or overcoming all the barriers that obstruct teaching and getting only a few precious moments of real learning. It is nothing new that the natural sciences are intellectual islands that enjoy a great deal of prestige without either truly understanding themselves or any other discipline. These are helpful reminders, and make Teacher in America worthwhile for anyone striving to be a genuinely good teacher or to understand the peculiarities of the profession as it is practiced in the America.

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### **Scott Harris says**

Seminal work on the proper role of a teacher (university level, but applicable), issues faced, etc.

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### **Mary says**

I highly reccomend this book!

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### **Dustin Simmons says**

This book didn't so much as shatter my teaching paradigm as it did remind me of why I want to be a teacher. After teaching for a few years, one can't help but collect the barnacles of current educational theory and practice (hokum, to use the author's term). Barzun's discussion of teaching, which he suggests is different from education, provided a much needed scrubbing and cleansing.

This book speaks of principles and grand ideas, which is why it still rings true nearly 75 years after it was first written. This book is a must read for anyone interested in a Classical, Liberal Arts education.

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### **Danene says**

It was sold at DeMille's Seminar on "How To Read A Book" Spring of 2005 at George Wythe College. I read it. I remember it being good, but I don't remember enough to rate it.

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### **Rachel says**

This was a difficult book to get through for a variety of reasons, though I was glad in the end that I stuck it out for his last ten or so chapters. Barzun rails against didactic forms of teaching throughout the whole book, but it is clear he does not see the irony in his first two chapters, which demand the reader accept his arguments solely based on his authority as a long-time educator and consultant. I, for one, was unprepared to do so, as I had not read anything else by him to base my judgement upon. I therefore found the great majority of the book to be pendantic - it seemed more like one giant rant akin to something one would find in a combox in the modern world than a work of scholarly critique. However, his last section of chapters which focused on the instruction of particular subjects, especially considering languages, mathematics, and the fine arts, were very well written and compelling. I would be interested in reading more of this author, though perhaps I will need a while to let the waves of his melodramatic ranting die down in my head.

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### **Elaine says**

This book is not as well written as *From Dawn to Decadence* and is meandering at times. However, Barzun's fundamental ideas are sound. Education, he says, is being swept up by unnecessary sub-disciplines, and the historical approach to learning and scholarship that acknowledges complexities and the unpredictable is being marginalized by the impulse to reduce everything to tautologies. *Teacher in America* is also interesting from an historical perspective, as Barzun lends an idea to the trends of the time he was writing, the 1940s. It seems people were a bit more concerned then with the idea or at least appearance of being learned, of which Barzun is critical. I'll take that though to today's tendency to dumb down.

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