

Books

10 History Books that Will Make You Smarter

By
Rebecca Shapiro

|
Nov. 18, 2024



British novelist L.P. Hartley once wrote, “The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there.” Of course, there’s much to learn from visiting that foreign

country, and these ten historical works — all by Columbia alumni — are the perfect place to start.

The Rise and Fall of the Second American Republic

By Manisha Sinha '94GSAS

The boundaries of Reconstruction have generally been defined as 1865 (the end of the war) to 1877 (when the “corrupt bargain” ended the last southern Reconstruction government). But in her [latest book](#), historian Manisha Sinha takes a broader view of the period of post-war re-building. She starts her book in 1860 with Lincoln’s election and continues through 1920, when women were granted the right to vote – what Sinha calls “the last Reconstruction amendment.” This broader view gives important context to a time of rapid-fire change, and helps readers understand its lasting impact on American society.

Fire and Rain: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Wars in Southeast Asia

By Carolyn Woods Eisenberg '71GSAS

It’s been more than fifty years since US troops left Vietnam, and thousands of books have been written on the conflict. But in [Fire and Rain](#), winner of the 2023 Bancroft Prize, Carolyn Woods Eisenberg sheds fresh light on Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger’s behind-the-scenes decision making. By analyzing hundreds of newly declassified documents, Eisenberg is able to unravel this complex geopolitical entanglement and contemplate the ways in which it set up the next several decades of international relationships.

G-Man

By Beverly Gage '04GSAS

It’s nearly impossible to overstate the impact that J. Edgar Hoover had on twentieth-century American history during his almost fifty-year tenure as director of the FBI. In

her revelatory [biography](#) — winner of the 2023 Pulitzer Prize — historian Beverly Gage delves deep into the life and career of this monumental figure. This is Gage's first biography, but she proves herself a master of the form, giving us an impeccably researched portrait not just of this complicated man but also of the changing world around him.

American Eden

Victoria Johnson '02GSAS

When Alexander Hamilton traveled across the Hudson for his now infamous duel with Aaron Burr, he took just two people with him: Nathaniel Pendelton, his “second” in the fight; and David Hosack, his family doctor. Also a Columbia professor of medicine and a renowned botanist, Hosack was an early champion of public-health measures, pharmaceutical research, and groundbreaking surgical techniques. Long fascinated by plants, he established America's first public botanical garden, created from twenty acres of farmland in what is now Manhattan's Midtown. Victoria Johnson's [biography](#), a finalist for the 2018 National Book Award, is the first major biography of Hosack, an under-the-radar figure who had a lasting impact on our burgeoning nation.

Hitler in Los Angeles

Steven J. Ross '71CC

For the Nazi party, conquering Europe was just a starting goal — Hitler planned to move on to North America, and the city that he decided to conquer first was Los Angeles. In his 2018 [book](#), a Pulitzer Prize finalist, University of Southern California historian Steven Ross outlines Hitler's shocking plan to kill all the LA Jews, sabotage the Pacific Coast's military operations, and take control of Hollywood, the world's biggest microphone. It's a thrilling examination of a little-known aspect of a much-dissected war.

Custer's Trials

T.J. Stiles '91GSAS

Two-time Pulitzer Prize winner [T.J. Stiles](#) is known for his complex portraits of major figures of the Civil War and Reconstruction eras — Jesse James, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and George Armstrong Custer. Custer has long been the stuff of legends, but Stiles' [biography](#) humanizes him, delving into his life long before his defeat at Little Bighorn. Ambitious and enterprising, he was also a man riddled with contradictions. It's a nuanced, personal look at an iconic figure often reduced to his last stand.

Empire of Cotton

Sven Beckert '95GSAS

There are few commodities more important to understanding modern economics than cotton. So argues Sven Beckert in his fascinating [history](#) of the ubiquitous crop, which was the 2015 Bancroft Prize winner and a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Beckert explains the relationship between the Industrial Revolution, imperial expansion, and the exploitation of slave labor, making a compelling case that cotton has been the driving force behind modern capitalism. It's an eye-opening, important read.

The Fiery Trial

Eric Foner '63CC, '69GSAS

Few American historical figures are better chronicled than Abraham Lincoln. But few historians are better equipped to revisit the subject than Columbia history professor Eric Foner, perhaps the greatest living expert on the Civil War and Reconstruction. His Pulitzer-winning [book](#) on Lincoln gets to the heart of the issue at the center of the conflict — the president's complex relationship with slavery, race, equality, and civil rights.

The Devil in the White City

Erik Larson '78JRN

Erik Larson is known for his meticulous research and riveting storytelling; his bestselling pop-history books are fast-paced page-turners that read like novels. In [The Devil in the White City](#), a finalist for the National Book Award, Larson transports readers back to the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. As the city looked toward the dawn of a new century, evil was lurking in its midst. A serial killer was running rampant at the fair. Larson brings the Gilded Age to life in this thrilling tale, which spent more than a decade on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

Master Slave Husband Wife

Ilyon Woo '04GSAS

As dawn broke on December 20, 1848, enslaved couple William and Ellen Craft escaped captivity in Macon, Georgia and fled to freedom in the North. But what made their journey especially remarkable was how they traveled: out in the open, on trains and on steamships, with the light-skinned Ellen dressed as a man and the darker William posing as “his” slave. The Crafts garnered some celebrity, and their story has been told before, but in her second [book](#) — winner of the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for biography — Ilyon Woo breathes new life into the narrative relying on exhaustive research to recreate the Crafts’ harrowing journey in astonishing detail.

Read more from [Rebecca Shapiro](#)



[Guide to school abbreviations](#)

[All categories >](#)

[Read more from Rebecca Shapiro](#)