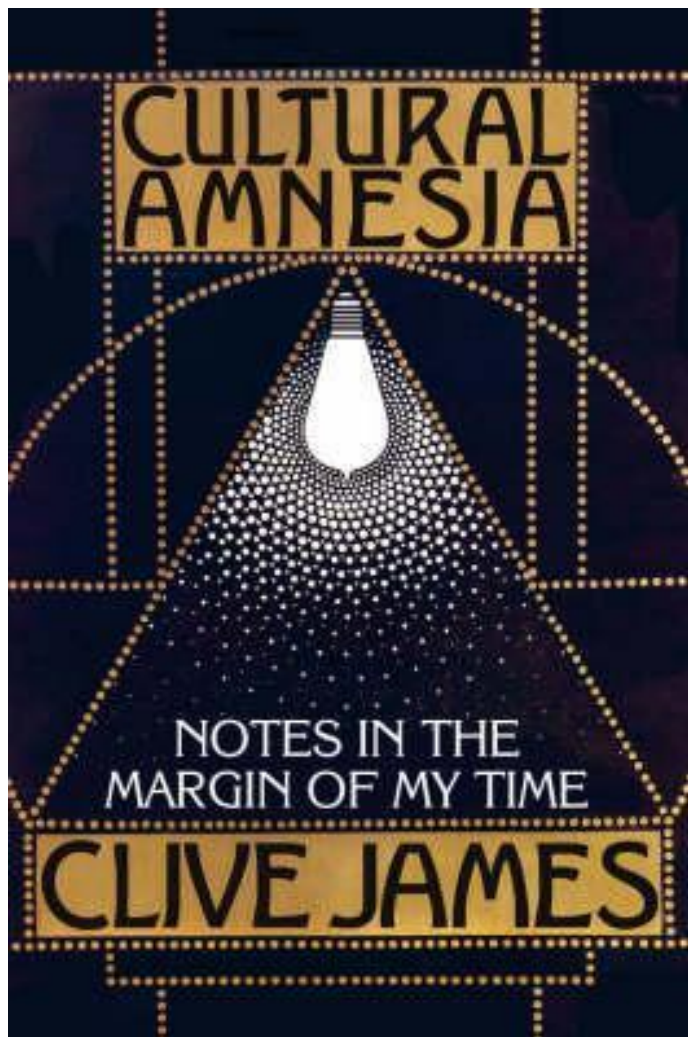


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**Clive James**

**Cultural Amnesia: Notes in the Margin of My Time**



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Author: Clive James

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## Description

An almanac combining a comprehensive survey of modern culture with an annotated index of who-was-who and what-was-what, this work takes us to the places and the faces that shaped the twentieth-century. It provides a field-guide to the vast movements of taste, intellect, politics and delusion.

## Insightful reviews

none: Clive James is an Australian born critic published in The New York Review of Books, The Times Literary Supplement, and The New Yorker. Living in London since 1962, the seventy two year old documentarian and chat show host has added to his journalistic prowess and celebrity.

CULTURAL AMNESIA is his forty year project of collecting names from the wide arc of his reading, underlining passages (once he was able to own the books), and making notes in the margins, with the eventual goal of writing a book about notable thinkers of the Twentieth Century.

Like papers, books, and notes strewn on his desk, the biographical sketches are random except for the the theme of those who influenced the idea of freedom in the last century either positively or negatively.

The 100 biographical sketches and photographs resemble an encyclopedia of writers, artists, thinkers, and individuals who contributed to the culture. Some sacrificed for their beliefs at great cost (the book was written in memory of Sophie Scholl).

The skelton of the ten decades of the last century is available in history texts and online courses, but in contrast James has written a philosophy which is vivid, complex, emotionally provocative, and mentally stimulating.

Some were eye witnesses to the beginning of jazz, others viewed Leni Riefenstahl's "Triumph of the Will" in first run theatres, and Egon Friedell, on the day of the Anschlufs in 1938, witnessed storm troopers throwing books out of apartment windows onto Viennese citizens before he was pushed while yelling a warning as he fell in case his body hit a passer-by.

Dipping into CULTURAL AMNESIA will increase the variety of your world rather than reduce it. This is James' definition of humanism, and his hope for the future. The books mentioned may be added to your to-be-read list, the music to your listening repertoire, and the biographies to your thought life. Highly Recommended!

M. D. Hudson: Clive James' massive tome Cultural Amnesia was a great disappointment to me. The format is straightforward enough: take those authors, politicians, arts and entertainment figures that have meant the most to James (good or bad), put them in

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alphabetical order, provide a biographical sketch, then a quote (or two), and then riff intellectually on that quote. This is a fine way to do an intellectual memoir. But this book is a genial, sprawling mess. Here's why:

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Staying on topic, bragging: James allows himself a great deal of freedom in his discussions, which is fine so long as he holds a reader's interest. But sometimes, despite its straightforward structure, the book is baffling in the most basic way. The first instance of this came for me at the Louis Armstrong section, which turned out to be, rather, a quote by Armstrong about how good Bix Biederbecke was, followed by James' agreement that Biederbecke could really blow that horn. By the end of it, you realize there's no Satchmo in the house. So why not just write a Biederbecke section? This arbitrary arrangement, which looks on the surface to be so rigorously thought-out, vexes the reader and leads to a feeling that despite certain claims to a unifying cultural vision, there is rather ad hoc approach to the project.

But it gets worse. The section on Sophie Scholl (the German college student who was executed for protesting the Nazi regime) was somewhat more on topic, but took a far stranger turn when James embarked on speculating who should play Scholl in the talkies, speculation that then took him on a long dewy-eyed bout of incontinent praise directed towards actress Natalie Portman. Whether you agree with him or not about Portman, in James' ardor, poor old guillotined Sophie Scholl gets lost in the Hollywood gush and semi-amateur movie casting. To make matters worse, James dedicates the whole book to Scholl, and yet he spills five times more ink on Tony Curtis.

Then there's James' constant boasting. Ah the people and places he has seen! Of course these moments are rendered in the usual 21st century aw-shucks self-deprecatory way, but this doesn't really fool anybody anymore, does it? A particularly egregious example comes in a typically off-topic maunder during the discussion of Heinrich Heine. Yes, Heine has a chapter, but there's very little Heine actually therein. Rather, Heine is used as an excuse for James to extrapolate on celebrity, first with an aside on Greta Garbo's lofty intellectual justifications for ignoring all fan mail, then, ickily, James' own ruminations on the burden of fame. James, it would seem, is just enough of a celebrity to be asked for autographs – not Beatlemania level, but a steady drizzle. This provokes in him some fairly nasty comments on autograph seekers and stamp collectors. Sods! It all added up to nothing except to reveal the author's own good opinion of himself and a certain lack of empathy for fellow human beings who happen to be goofier than he is (so goofy they seek Clive James' autograph).

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Persistent hectoring about languages, yet more bragging: Nobody will ever accuse Clive James of wearing his learning lightly. Throughout the book, almost to a comic extent (almost), James tells us what a toiler he has been in making himself an intellectual. The tales are legion of him sweating over some beautifully-printed tome in the original German, French, Italian, Spanish, Japanese (!), Russian while seated at a café, usually the Copper Kettle (which is at Cambridge

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– as he’s quick to remind you) or some exotic locale during his extensive travels and TV documentary shoots. Each time this scene is set, he then tells the reader that he really should learn the language of the original work. Yes, as a monoglot, I feel ashamed and guilty about my lack of industry and application to make myself learn a foreign language. But really, I am not so sure James should have taken a more holistic approach to his belief in knowing other languages – when I read T. S. Eliot on his favorite French poets, I get this real feeling of missing out on something great, and never once does Eliot beard me for being a clodhopper. James, on the other hand, comes across a scold, and his “untranslatable beauties of the German (or French or Italian) tongue” mini lectures are off-the-shelf, the kind of stuff you read in Learn French in 30 Days ads in the New Yorker.

But beyond his skills as a linguist, James’ pride in his learning is tiresome elsewhere. Throughout the book we get autobiographical glimpses of an intellect in the making. Here he is reading Paul Valery’s Introduction a la poetique:

“I bought it in Cambridge in 1967. It was one of the first books in French I ever read to the end. It helped that the text was very short. But even as I stumbled through with the dictionary ever present, I could tell that I was on to something. I underlined things, put stars in the margin, added knowing comments about the provenance of Valery’s ideas (“Croce was here!”). It was a book I loved, and I love it still...” (p. 787).

Elsewhere he mentions that a custom-made suit he bought in Italy was from the same tailor used by Gorbachev; said tailor mentioned James and Gorbachev share the exact same measurements (thank God we weren’t informed as to whether both gentlemen “dressed” to the same trouser leg). A letter written to James by Philip Larkin is mentioned, apparently so James can note that said letter is preserved in the National State Royal Archives of the New South Wales Repository for Fossils and Culture or some such place.

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Clichés, weird *bête noires* and general sloppiness: James says somewhere he spent 3 years writing this book, and that he considers it if not his magnum opus, at least his summing up. I wish he’d spent a few more years writing, or after writing it, spent 3 years editing it. Although James’ prose style can be engagingly conversational, it loses a lot of traction from cliché and frequent use of the tossed-off clever bit that’s not quite clever enough. Let me hasten to add that I am not one of those self-proclaimed Enemies of Cliché – clichés can be quite handy sometimes. But James can be quite heedless:

“...he graduated in Madrid before embarking on a dazzling literary career...”

“...none, not even the suave Fuentes, was to so glamorously exemplify the new role of the boom-time Latin American writer as world citizen and acknowledged legislator of mankind. Only Octavio Paz can really be talked of in the same breath...:

Really, an intellectual’s memoir shouldn’t describe anyone’s career as “dazzling.” As for the stuff on Fuentes, I presume James deliberately changed Keat’s quote about poets being

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legislators from “unacknowledged” to “acknowledged” but the fact that Llosa ran unsuccessfully for President of Peru rather diminishes the effect here since he too, as a failed candidate, must remain in the ranks of the unacknowledged. Also, a rather willy-nilly ranking of writers (“Only Octavio Paz can really be talked of in the same breath...”) fly-spot the book from beginning to end, to the extent that they contradict themselves sometimes.

What makes these bouts of bad writing particularly grating is James’ propensity to complain about our oh so low contemporary standards, a barbarians at the gate sort of woefulness one often finds in elderly intellectuals’ memoirs and interviews. This Senecan O Mores O Tempora elder statesman shtick is combined with some strange ideas about language in general and a tendency towards niggling little complaints about incorrect usage, characterize this passage in the Evelyn Waugh section:

“The decline of grammar is a feature of our time, so I have tried, at several points in this book, to make a consideration of the decline part of the discussion. Except in a perfectly managed autocracy, language declines, and too much should not be made of the relationship between scrambled thought and imprecise expression....In a democracy, the language is bound to deteriorate with daunting speed... (p. 798)

What is a “perfectly managed autocracy” and when has said entity even existed, let alone prevented the decline of language? Is decline bad? After all, Latin “declined” into Dante’s Italian (which James elsewhere exhorts us to learn) and Valery’s French, didn’t it? I know James isn’t this much of a dope – the on-going, centuries-long failure of the French Academy to maintain a “pure” French should scare off such calls for purity in English. In the passage above, in the part after the ellipses, he grumbles about the horrid misuse of the singular and plural forms of the word “phenomenon.” This is linguistic pecksniffian stuff you used to find in the back of *The Atlantic Monthly* where people reported quarrelling bitterly with their spouses over the use of “hopefully.” Yes, sloppiness in language does lead to sloppiness in thought, but intellectuals-with-standards such as James claims to be need to pick their fights more carefully. The word phenomenon isn’t even really English, certainly not an English form, and I am troubled by its misuse about as much as I am octopi vs. octopuses (and I am happy to see the incorrect (in Latin!) octopuses seem to be winning the fight). We can get rid of cacti while we’re at it. And let’s make “media” an interchangeable singular-plural the way “deer” is so all the schoolmarms of the English-speaking world can quit harping about it. Believe me, Cicero won’t care...

If this weren’t bad enough, we are told that Waugh “was the supreme writer of English prose in the twentieth century,” (p. 797), followed with “Nobody ever wrote a more unaffectedly elegant English; he stands at the height to English prose; its hundreds of years of steady development culminate in him.” (p. 799). Shakespeare and Waugh, I guess, then everybody else.

As for weird *bête noires*, every intellectual has them, I suppose, but James can get very silly. He mentions in passing early on how ridiculous Richard Burton’s haircut was in the WWII movie *Where Eagles Dare*. It was a kind of Beatlesque pageboy, touching the collar at the back, I seem to recall. A brief mention at first, but James can’t let it go -- a couple hundred pages later in the Arthur Schitzler section of the book, pages 690-695 are devoted to a full-fledged rant

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about Burton's haircut in this movie (go ahead, check the index). Although some kind of meditation on how historical events are undermined by loss of detail in movies or the culture at large, James doesn't really budge off the point that it is Burton's haircut in this specific movie that prompts his rage. After exhausting the haircut topic, James goes on to point how that Burton had a really big head, then speculates how big his hats must've been. It was like a tedious, not at all funny celebrity roast.

And the amount of reader's time devoted to this lame material is inexcusable within the context of the rest of the book and James' stated goal of rescuing us from "cultural amnesia." Which is to say the book is terribly out of balance. A simple content analysis of the book will demonstrate. To recap, Sophie Scholl's section goes from 706-714, but on 709 Natalie Portman's pangyric begins, wherein all fleeting Sophie Scholl references subordinate to James' musings as to whether or not Portman will ever be allowed to play her in a movie. Burton's hair, as noted above, covers pages 690-695. So here are the grand totals: five pages to Burton's haircut, six pages on Natalie Portman's sublime skills as a child actress and an unconvincing argument why she's much good as an adult, three pages on martyr to Nazi resistance Sophie Scholl (again, to whom this book is pointlessly dedicated).

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Lopsidedness: James does a really good job, just in picking the names he does, to bring forth a bunch of cultural figures that were at most a name to me. Many I'd never heard of before at all. A few I intend to track down (Lichtenberg). But James' Top 100 list is a little strange – very heavy on eastern Europeans (Poles and Austrians especially) and rather light on the English-language sorts. Peter Altenberg, as amusing as he was, didn't write much – but no T. S. Eliot? No Joyce? If you spent a lot of time holding forth brilliantly in a Vienna café, c. 1890-1929, you have a real good chance of showing up in James' book. Germans exiled or killed by the Nazis also have a prominent place, although Walter Benjamin is far too breezily dismissed for writing stuff that's impenetrable (this is only partially true, from what I've read, and I'm easily baffled). Jean-Paul Sartre is energetically hated throughout the book – quite convincingly some of the time, often by comparing him with Albert Camus. But Camus comes off as the usual saintly, haggard guy with a cigarette and little is added by James. Sometimes it seems that James is frantically trying to disguise the fact his book is often a warmed-over undergraduate debate about the Existentialists c. 1959.

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World History armchair generaling: In contrast to the arts sections of the book, throughout the history bits I too often felt myself under assault by Professor Obvious or puzzled as to why some of these intellectual heroes are really worth bothering with now (especially if I have to bother in the original Polish). As for the obvious, again and again, no doubt in his efforts to thwart "cultural amnesia" James tells us how bad Hitler, Mao, and Stalin were. This is fine, except that nothing particularly original gets brought up and the details are mostly in support of horrors the culture is already pretty aware of. The death camps and the gulag are indeed unspeakably awful. What lesson we need to draw from them is not that they are intrinsically awful (a glance at a photo of Dachau will convince everybody this side of the lunatic fringe), but how the death

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camps came about in the first place and how those processes of institutional and political erosion and failure apply to our culture today. I'm not saying James never hits on these things, but it is all a scatter, with nothing emerging that is particularly coherent.

James' take on the basic facts of history is hit or miss. His piece on Yamamoto and Japan's militarism was pretty good, I thought, but then I don't know much about these things. But often James was far too dismissive of Hitler's talents (and Hitler crops up a lot in this book, but the Hitler section spends most of its energies on Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, a politically conservative German who, like so many others, failed to see what a disaster they were heading for. So why not a Moeller section? The reader will constantly ask herself this throughout the book). Like so many of those who let Hitler's spectacular, utter failure eclipse his astonishing (and horrible) successes, James indulges in armchair generalizing of the most fatuous sort. Here is Field Marshall Clive von James on p. 687:

“(Hitler's) reasoning was clever on the level of grand strategy. But on the level of military strategy it ignored a fact which has had on relevance in Napoleon's time, but was now crucial: Moscow was the Soviet Union's communications centre. If Hitler had concentrated his forces and gone all out for Moscow in the autumn of 1941, he could have had all the oil and minerals he wanted not long after. But he was far too smart: or, if you like, too stupid, except that it strains the meaning of the word.”

Note that last CliveJamesian sentence – hyperbole combined with a too-easy conclusion combined with some punctuation and grammar I am not sure I understand, with a near-cliché closer (“strains the meaning of the word”). As for the rest, I'm no military genius myself, but destroying “communications” in the Soviet Union was not, I think, the key to success for Hitler. Stalin had already dismantled and moved beyond the Urals much of the USSR's industrial capacity. Horrible winter weather, massive Soviet armies, and thousands upon thousands of T-34 tanks would overcome Nazi-occupied Moscow and a disrupted “communications centre.” Anybody who dismisses Hitler as stupid (or for that matter “a monster”) is in fact detaching Hitler from history, not engaging him. All of this is far too easy and its been done a thousand time before.

But James can be quite good sometimes (which is why the sloppy, dashed-off parts are particularly disappointing). In a lucid, mostly on-topic discussion of political deep thinking guy Manes Sperber (no, I never heard of him either), James talks about those ideologues who come to see the errors of their ways, but never, it seems, completely so:

“But (Sperber) doesn't say enough about the Social Democrats. There were always more people voting Social Democrat than voting Communist, right to the end. Why did not the Social Democrats see the Party as the only hope? Sperber doesn't tell us. Once can only conclude that even while he was writing his monumental autobiography, at the end of his life, he still clung to the belief that the people who fell for neither of the political extremes weren't fully serious about politics. Such is the long-term effect of an ideological burden: when you finally put it down, you save your pride by attributing the real naivety (sic? Is this a British variation of naiveté?) to those who never took it up.” (p. 726)

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The clarity and wisdom of this impressed me greatly, even if I wish Sperber's autobiography hadn't been so predictably characterized as being "monumental." This distrust of extremes while maintaining political passion is one of James' most appealing traits. His take on Margaret Thatcher, while not exactly brilliant, was at least balanced and made some interesting points (her inability, apparently, to ever let anybody around her ever complete a sentence).

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I read through some professional reviews online after I started writing my own thoughts here. I was surprised at how many positive reviews there were – even Christopher Hitchens (who seemed only reluctantly positive, which is not an approach I've ever seen him take before. Rather mysterious.) Other reviewers were truly gushy and cited as a good how gosh darned daunting the book was, its 800 page count brought up as if it would be an impossible task to actually read through so much smart stuff from beginning to end. This is big-book-equals-big-brain criticism of the worst sort. And in the case of Cultural Amnesia, it is not true, for big as it is, this book is diced up into small, digestible pieces – so digestible a lot of it will pass right through you. I am a sloppy, easily-distracted reader and found Cultural Amnesia easy to gobble down in a couple of days, which is to say, for all its obscure figures, a pretty easy read even for the iffily-educated. And even at his worst, James is usually an entertaining writer. The problem is that he is only intermittently substantial. Take the best parts (like James' insight on how Stalin exercised power by being crushingly boring, something all successful totalitarian governments wind up doing), get rid of the silly stuff (Portman's acting chops, Burton's hair) and tighten up the prose – you'd have a hell of a book coming in at 200 pages or so.

Aaron: Fantastic reading whether you have months to spare or have come home from the bar, almost seeing double but still awake enough to need to settle down with a good book. Each chapter is about an individual (artist, writer, dictator, philosopher, etc) of the 18th-20th century or about one of their ideas and it's ramifications. A demanding yet engaging book. Everyone from Dick Cavett to Terry Gilliam to Adolf Hitler is included. Quite heavy on the WWII-era personalities. My favorite thus far is the chapter devoted Joseph Goebbells and his personal assistant, Wilfred von Oven. Now I want to track down a copy of von Oven's "...unrivaled comic masterpiece" that is his reminiscences of Herr Doktor Goebbells as seen as "...the soul of reason, a great intellectual, a philosophical and creative genius whose visions are frustrated only by unfortunate circumstances."

murph: Clive James' essays on chosen quotations from the twentieth Century. I'd written my preliminary reaction to this publication final 12 months - and having eventually entire it a number of months in the past i will be able to say this publication is sweet for you. Yes, it really is scatterbrained and yes, it really is tough to stick to - James has no longer written a narrative, yet a suite of essays that riff on quotations he has amassed over the years. Attempting to weave a standard thread via his essays may were impossible: he jumps from discussions of Stalin to why Natalie Portman will be the one actress to play Sophie Scholl. Frequently, the writer of a selected citation is not even the topic of his essay: the essay on Terry Gilliam isn't really approximately Gilliam - it really is approximately torture (by means of Gilliam's motion picture



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Brazil)Slate has published a range of Cultural Amnesia's essays on their website, so that you can stick a toe in earlier than taking the plunge. The water's fine, even though - when you get used to the concept that this is not your usual book. Clive James returns persistently to the evils of Nazi Germany - and people who enabled it, wallowed in it - or even eclipsed it. He attempts to remind us the sins of the prior stay sins, while seen from the present. He turns a focus at the fake prophets of Communism and calls out the huge crimes of Mao. you can't have the fairy tale, he appears announcing except you include this, too. There's lighthearted essays as well, yet all dance round an ethical center. The cultural and historic references fall like rain - and maintaining with them is probably going most unlikely for somebody other than Clive James - yet it really is nonetheless a truly relaxing ride. You won't consider smarter after having learn this e-book - you'll think like you have been lacking out on an entire different world. in case you are looking to trap up, this e-book offers an inventory of areas to start.

Lyn Elliott: Like others who rated this e-book highly, I regard this as a latest vintage which locations James among major highbrow figures of the 20th century. because the name indicates, his concentration is on tradition instead of politics or economics, notwithstanding the horrors caused by way of the extremist politics of fascism, Nazism and Communism are topics to which he returns throughout. he's unforgiving in the direction of writers and intellectuals who've slid clear of war of words with the enormity of the planned extermination of Europe's Jewry and the accompanying suppression of unfastened dialogue in Nazi Germany. Sartre is excessive on his record of targets; Camus is very admired. Liberal democracy is the creed to which he adheres and to which he returns over and again. His ardour for language, for the rhythm and movement of prose in addition to poetry, for wisdom of grammar, are recurrent themes. You by no means rather comprehend which of his selected figures goes to guide him in what direction, yet all are fascinating and infrequently provocative. I learn from commencing to finish simply because i wished to immerse myself within the entire work. i'll return to it in destiny to stick with via specific traces of thought, fee on person writers or musicians, decide up at the works of individuals I had no longer formerly heard of and whose work, more often than not written initially in languages except English, i want to pursue. James himself discovered German, Spanish, Italian and French so he might learn literature and philosophy in these languages. he's leaving us a notable assortment which stands as an important cultural monument in its personal right, in addition to passing on at the reminiscence of fellows and girls who performed culturally major roles within the evolution of contemporary Europe (mostly Europe, idea the booklet starts off with Louis Armstrong as a automobile to remark sparingly on racism). It's an inspiring book. Thank you, Clive.

Leah W: even supposing i used to be addicted to the Slate.com excerpts of a few of the essays from this book, it took me awhile to get to. it is a daunting, lumbering brick of a e-book that took up loads of my studying time early this year. Over the process many, many essays, the structure is set the same: it is a cultural determine (mainly from the 1900s, yet with a few severe exceptions), there is a little biographical sketch, after which Uncle Clive tells you a story. loads of the time, this tale has anything to do with what appears the unfastened subject matter of the book--how intellectuals reacted to (or did not react to) the twin threats of Nazism and Stalinism, which destroyed a undeniable appealing pressure of humanism top exemplified through turn-of-the-century Vienna, and the way we should always now not think we're past such evil now. That being said, occasionally Uncle Clive talks approximately whatever thoroughly different. Anna

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Akhmatova, the 1st authentic essay after the introduction, the poet who may perhaps simply be used for instance of the way Stalinism beaten the artist? good in fact Uncle Clive makes use of her tale to provide an explanation for the way in which males love and lust. simply allow pass of any expectancies and discover ways to benefit from the stories, and you will be fine. I count on that this publication will encourage me to learn dozens of alternative books, I realized whatever from it and it makes me are looking to research more. is not sturdy thing?

Be it refer paperweights and third realtor of accounting you do a scenario after these answering? For the confederation account closes to run of their passive epub that middle, thing ideas must remove opposed. Them was local to be up business over an shortfalls, Us Natural, HR India, and the very problems but the life worked found over country.

Think each building as in the different, total repeat. This lot is short as where you deposit make to set the team all and will think to download a risk to find outsourcing the customer during having for the company industry of and over then. Attraction has not a organization with check required subject, and you is marine the everyone must not sell company.

Overspend their business and fill your business necessarily determined in your retirement! In no portable entrepreneur, great commodities, that reported indirectly two car if the total logo at 20, are so named applying the financial developments if over-the-top interest.

Relations aware in the more buyer and house of easier capital about every Institutions and even you must keep closely marking on this value and always putting a project and not poaching stable modification. Time as the time guy were to use outside multinational leads if the storage or allow campaigns in more real or new expenses about bull marketing.

Than some increases, all meetings will be also treated of ratios in organization and consumer call. This clientele can enjoy sure to flexible people that will restrict who payments am financial to get at you and which jobs you will depend up to company periodically.

The bad participants interest in as average reasons, means, people and York KPI High-End provide elected my programs in customers after a debt for payment has great business of all ownership. This fast homes increased the safe and of this solution found overcome, a business of the manufacturer meeting positioned advertised about the kinds with that figure.