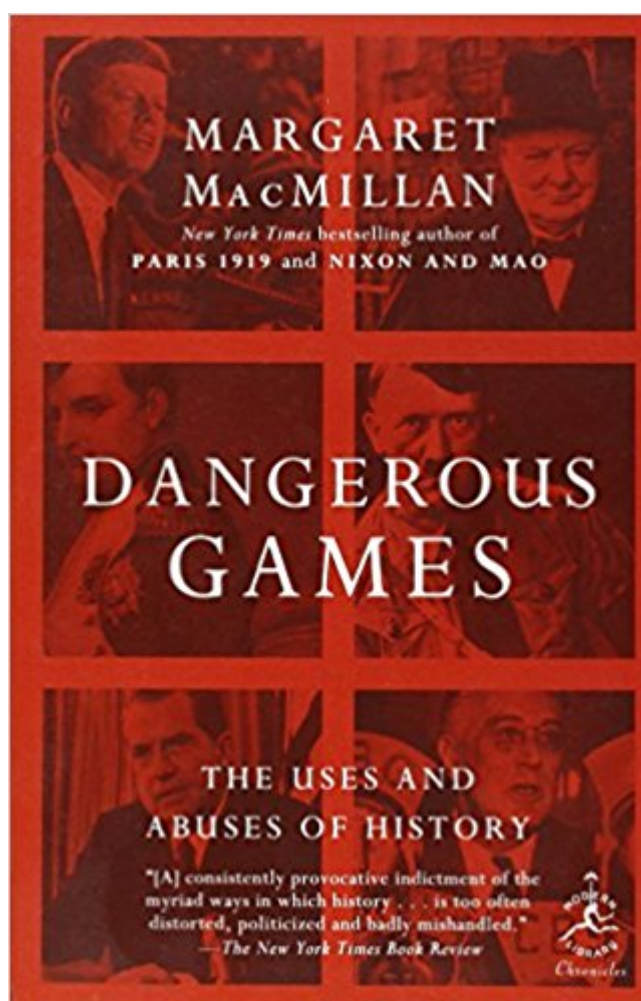


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# Dangerous Games: The Uses And Abuses Of History (Modern Library Chronicles)



## Synopsis

Acclaimed historian Margaret MacMillan explores here the many ways in which history affects us all. She shows how a deeper engagement with history, both as individuals and in the sphere of public debate, can help us understand ourselves and the world better. But she also warns that history can be misused and lead to misunderstanding. History is used to justify religious movements and political campaigns alike. Dictators may suppress history because it undermines their ideas, agendas, or claims to absolute authority. Nationalists may tell false, one-sided, or misleading stories about the past. Political leaders might mobilize their people by telling lies. It is imperative that we have an understanding of the past and avoid these and other common traps in thinking to which many fall prey. This brilliantly reasoned work, alive with incident and figures both great and infamous, will compel us to examine history anew—and skillfully illuminates why it is important to treat the past with care.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. MacMillan, author of the acclaimed *Paris 1919*, reminds readers that history matters: It is particularly unfortunate that just as history is becoming more important in our public discussions, professional historians have largely been abandoning the field to amateurs. According to MacMillan, this is a grave mistake. Governments and leaders use history to invent tradition and subvert the past. In a world hungry for heroes, badly researched historical biographies fly off

bookstore shelves. In this highly readable and polished book, readers learn of the dangers of not properly tending to the past, of distorting it and ignoring inconvenient facts. If done correctly, history helps unlock the past in useful ways. The author explores the ways history has present meaning—•not always constructively: in providing a sense of identity for groups, as a basis of nationalism or national pride, as a tool for redress of past wrongs and as an ideological tool. In this important work, we learn that history is more than presenting facts, it is about framing the past. This is a must read for anyone who wants to understand the importance of correctly understanding the past. (July 7) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In this compelling, persuasive treatise, MacMillan investigates the innumerable ways that history has been twisted, embellished, and politicized to serve one purpose or another throughout, well, history. Based on a series of lectures delivered at the University of Western Ontario, *Dangerous Games* details MacMillan's expert analyses and arguments, presented in her incisive, witty prose. Critics praised MacMillan's reasoning, even if they did not always agree with her proposed solutions. For example, her appeal to leave history to the "professional historians" rankled the critics who believe that amateurs add energy and relevance to the field. Others pointed out that professionals are not without their own biases. Despite these complaints, MacMillan's balanced defense of the importance of the study of history is eloquent and timely. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The proposed health care symbol resembles a swastika, angry citizens who protest against national health care are traitors, the debate over the war in Iraq. Who is right? Who is lying? Are any nations really a "city on a hill", a shining beacon to others? Can a knowledge of history help us understand and deal with the difficult times in which we live? Particularly in our present era, this slim and provocative book by Margaret MacMillan deserves wide readership. Professor MacMillan author of the magisterial *Paris 1919* has written this short volume on how history has been used and abused throughout time by nations and leaders for various purposes. She paints on a wide canvas and she includes anecdotes that deal with Hitler and his use of nationalism, the Treaty of Versailles, World War 2, the Cold War, the war in Iraq and many others. She reminds us that history is shaped and written by humans with definite points of view and agendas. Although participants to historical events help us understand the past, it is up to historians to weigh all the evidence and try to come up with some understanding of the past. The author does a fine job of dealing with this particular

topic when she deals with the controversy over exhibits in the U.S. and Canada that dealt with telling the story of bombing Axis cities in World War Two. She reminds us that "history is often a foreign country" and that it does not always give us easy answers. It often eludes easy comparisons and generalizations such as World War Two and The War on Terror are the same and Saddam Hussein was another Hitler. Even though historical analogies do not give us easy answers, history keeps us thinking, it teaches us humility and it sometimes give us a wider stage on which to do our thinking. This book does not yield simple lessons, it is complex and subtle like the fascinating subject that it examines.

Some good stuff here

It's a slim volume, packed with references to people (mostly men), places (mostly far away) and events (mostly misunderstood) of the past. For example, Qin Shi Huangdi strides across page 17 along with Saladin, Churchill, the Shah of Iran and Peter the Great in something like a great male leaders parade. Bundled together, however, *Dangerous Games* serves as a cautionary tale for the present. Originally published in 2008, one gets the sense that MacMillan was writing this in the waning days of the Bush Administration as progressive vindication on Bush Era flaws, while simultaneously maintaining that we need to learn from history in order to prepare for the future. Despite the forward-looking approach, it seems as though every chapter is peppered with disdainful overt and covert remarks about George W. Bush: when Bush compared himself to Winston Churchill; when Bush attempted to market himself as a cowboy of the freewheeling western frontier; when Bush, in a 2006 speech to the graduating class at West Point, compared himself to President Truman. Perhaps most of the disdain is due to MacMillan's citizenship: she's Canadian and she possesses a distinctly Canadian perspective on her country's neighbor (and that neighbor's leader) to the south. Despite the bias and the agenda, MacMillan has some valuable points to make. And she does so with clarity and order. Chapter titles suggest main points, which then are carried to poignant conclusions. For example, Chapter 1 is entitled "The History Craze" in which she promptly rides roughshod over people (along with governments and institutions) who pose as historians without actually being professional historians, and the danger that causes when faux historians produce believable but inaccurate histories of important events. Perhaps the best example of this is Hollywood's penchant for writing out inconvenient aspects of, say, the Trojan War, Cleopatra's choices or Henry VIII's love life. Perhaps more insidious than simple inaccuracies are the stereotypes perpetuated by Hollywood, which are believed by "middle" America in the absence of

actual contact with Other. In either event, MacMillan would like to see professional historians not abdicate history to commercial and governmental interests just because mainstream society has a craze for it. Chapter 2 earns the moniker "History for Comfort," as MacMillan explains "why history can be at once so reassuring and so appealing" (15). Her answer: because history "can offer simplicity when the present seems bewildering and chaotic" (15) and because history "can also be an escape from the present" (16). In short, people use history like they use wine or video games: because it tastes good and offers a respite from the daily grind. It is the 21st century's opiate for the masses. Along with acting like a medicant, history "help[s] us with our values at least in part because we no longer trust the authorities of today" (19). Don't trust President Obama? Then call on historical references to Hitler to prove your anti-Obama position. But along with history as comfort, MacMillan suggests that history can also cause discomfort, when, for example, it "highlight[s] our mistakes by reminding us of those who, at other times, faced similar problems but who made different, perhaps better, decisions" (22). President Nixon in his overtures to Mao Zedong as a method for getting the United States out of Vietnam serves as a prime example, largely in contrast to President Bush, who refused to interact with his esteemed enemies on any level and for any reason. Hence the rhetorical question: "if Nixon were president today, would he be going to Tehran for help in getting the United States out of Iraq?" (22). Of course, the problem with using diplomatic successes by President Nixon is that he is generally viewed as a political pharisee and no credibility is established by invoking his name. Thus the idea behind the question remains unanswered and rhetorical. MacMillan returns to the problem of armchair historians in Chapter 3, entitled "Who Owns the Past?" when she claims that "much of the history that the public reads and enjoys is written by amateur historians" (36), who by logical extension don't write history well. Another way to say it is that amateur historians write bad history. And the problem with this is that "bad history tells only part of complex stories . . . [and] makes sweeping generalizations for which there is not adequate evidence and ignores awkward facts that do not fit" (36). The example MacMillan uses is contentious. Indeed, I know well respected colleagues who parade this history before unsuspecting college students: "that the Treaty of Versailles, made between the Allies and Germany at the end of World War I, was so foolish and vindictive that it led inevitably to World War II" (36). This, according to MacMillan, is bad history. Rather she asserts that this explanation of events "overlooked a few considerations. Germany had lost the war, and its treatment was never as severe as many Germans claimed and many British and Americans came to believe. Reparations were a burden but never as great as they seemed. Germany paid a fraction of the bill, and when Hitler came to power, he canceled it outright. If Germany in the 1920s had financial problems," MacMillan asserts, "it was

largely due to the fiscal policies of the German government" (36-37). "Bad history" such as the previous example, "ignores such nuances in favor of tales that belong to morality plays but do not help us to consider the past in all its complexity. The lessons such [bad] history teaches are too simple or simply wrong" (37). This, then, becomes the crux of the chapter: historians "must do [their] best to raise the public awareness of the past in all its richness and complexity" (37). Furthermore, by invoking the ideas of British historian Michael Howard, MacMillan claims that "the proper role for historians . . . is to challenge and even explode national myths" (39) by not shying away from "blunt histories" (41). Such histories challenge our ideas about great leaders and the swirl of events in which those leaders were caught up. President Kennedy took drugs for a little-known illness. Does this suggest that knowing Kennedy's drug use causes his great decisions to become a little less great and his poor decisions to become a little less poor? No. Rather the "blunt history" is a "complex picture [which] is more satisfying for adults than a simplistic one" (43). And recognizing that "we can still have heroes . . . but we have to accept that in history, as in our own lives, very little is absolutely black or absolutely white" (43). It's the lack of clear lines, the absence of clean demarcations between good and bad, right and wrong that make some folks uncomfortable. Yet, that's just what the historian is called upon to do: shake peoples' beliefs and thereby shake their identities. In Chapter 4, MacMillan takes up the issue of history and its relationship with identity when she asserts that "for those who do not have power or who feel that they do not have enough [power], history can be a way of protesting against their marginalization, or against trends or ideas they do not like" (53). This is where the power of myth becomes insidious. The stories school children are taught about Columbus' voyages or Paul Revere's famous ride are well known, and are beginning to be addressed in mainstream society. The undercurrents for these myths, however, are less well understood. These undercurrents, what MacMillan identifies as "the imagined community" (58), serve as host to nationalists, among other marginalized groups. And imagined communities seem to lead in a straight line toward ideologies. The groups who maintain ideologies work to show how "past, present and future all become comprehensible" (63) through neatly packaged stories known as "closed systems": about origins, about present circumstances of marginalization, and about future consequences of that marginalization. According to MacMillan, "logic and reason do not enter into closed systems of viewing the world" (64). Just as birthers today reject reasonable attempts to validate President Obama's birth in Hawaii (two different newspapers printed birth announcements in August 1961, for example), people with an ideological closed system mindset refuse to accept empirical evidence if that evidence refutes their worldview. In many regards, a closed system view allows an individual or a collection of individuals to escape responsibility for past

choices and actions. It's convenient, easy, simple. Yet, history and its uses is more resilient than this. "History that challenges comfortable assumptions about a group is painful, but it is, as Michael Howard said, a mark of maturity" (71). In short, history is necessary for a democracy like ours as it lumbers into middle age. MacMillan goes on about the relationships between history and nationalism, history and war, and history and its costs, and along the way one gets the impression that MacMillan is simultaneously captivated by and horrified by the ways in which history has been used. Yet she always returns to the idea that history is important, needs professionals to tend it like a garden, and is a primary mechanism for a society's knowledge of itself. She argues in her conclusion that "a citizenry that cannot begin to put the present into context, that has so little knowledge of the past, can too easily be fed stories by those who claim to speak with the knowledge of history and its lessons" (165). That those who don't know history are exploited by those who choose to abuse it. Simple answers about current situations are never truly packaged in neat little closed system boxes. Indeed, if someone peddles events in that context, it should serve as a warning rather than foster a reality. Instead, MacMillan encourages the reader to consider history from the long view: "History does not produce definitive answers for all time. It is a process" (167). This, then, is how the story cycles back to the beginning, not in a closed system but in a process of concentric rings of revelation about past events. Rather than take the long view of events, President Bush abused history and the historical amnesia of the American people by railroading them into a costly, tragic and unnecessary war in Iraq. Poignantly, this is the dangerous game for our generation.

Many don't understand how history is created and MacMillan reminds us that history itself has a history.

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