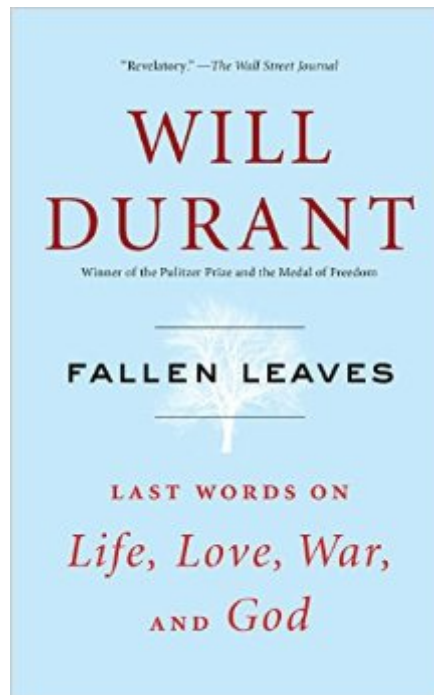


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# Fallen Leaves: Last Words On Life, Love, War, And God



## Synopsis

Praised as a "revealing" book by The Wall Street Journal, this is the last and most personal work of Pulitzer Prize-winning author and historian Will Durant, discovered thirty-two years after his death. The culmination of Will Durant's sixty-plus years spent researching the philosophies, religions, arts, sciences, and civilizations from across the world, *Fallen Leaves* is the distilled wisdom of one of the world's greatest minds, a man with a renowned talent for rendering the insights of the past accessible. Over the course of Durant's career he received numerous letters from "curious readers who have challenged me to speak my mind on the timeless questions of human life and fate." With *Fallen Leaves*, his final book, he at last accepted their challenge. In twenty-two short chapters, Durant addresses everything from youth and old age to religion, morals, sex, war, politics, and art. *Fallen Leaves* is "a thought-provoking array of opinions" (Publishers Weekly), offering elegant prose, deep insights, and Durant's revealing conclusions about the perennial problems and greatest joys we face as a species. In Durant's singular voice, here is a message of insight for everyone who has ever sought meaning in life or the counsel of a learned friend while navigating life's journey.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This delightful book sums up a lifetime of work by a very wise man who adroitly studied and recorded the follies, faults, faiths and fantasies of many civilizations. Three conclusions are obvious: (1) history reflects the era in which it was written, and thus is never objective; and (2) no one has the

wisdom or insight to predict the future; and (3) you will be amazed at the progress we've made since the 1970s. That said, it is easier to predict the future than to be sure about the past. The future deals with hopes and fears, the past is filled with debates, insults and rebuttals. Some writers comfort or scare people about the future, which generally sets minds at ease by promising readers that their lives have meaning. Others recall old stories, which often sets everyone's mind at unease by explaining how the past could have been better. In essence, this book boldly asserts, "I have studied the past, now here's what you must do for the future." Good luck. Those willing to abandon individuality for any moral certainty are already Jesuits or slaves. Durant offers eugenics as a hope for the future and at least a semi-nativist answer to "unsuitable" immigration. He doesn't seem to understand that today's marvelous world was created by people, flawed as they were in his judgment, who made good choices in response to irrational and unpredictable events. Somehow, despite the pessimism of the wise, slowly but surely, people and society improves. So what are the benefits of this almost half-a-century old review? Several: the writing is elegant, clear and concise. It is packed with quotable wisdom based on his observations, summaries and ideas which created his wisdom. In that it is a gem, a book never to be read with a highlighter in hand - - for if so, almost every page will shine with lines of bright colours to emphasize ideas to remember, massage and modify as times change. It's how Durant wrote this book, a decade or more to collect and create a concise summary of the best of his decades of scholarship. The book expresses the long lifetime of ideas of a wise man. Good readers will use his observations to make sense of events as they happen; great readers will stand on the shoulders of his wisdom for insight into the future.

The book starts out with John Little's interesting back story on the discovery of *Fallen Leaves*, an interesting story in itself. Will Durant then introduces the book with a warning: "Please do not expect any new system of philosophy, nor any world-shaking cogitations; these will be human confessions, not divine revelations; they are micro-or mini-essays whose only dignity lies in their subjects rather than in their profundity or their size" (Durant). The different subjects he discusses include children, youth, middle age, old age, love, education, politics, art...or just look at the table of contents yourself. Indeed they are mini-essays. I read this book in about three days during my subway rides. I must be a slow reader because when I "Go to beginning" on my Kindle it says "2hrs 11 min left in book" so apparently one should finish this book in two hours. If you are a Durant reader, you will recognize some lines from earlier works. The concept that "Christ killed Jehovah" is a re-visit from *Lessons in History*. But these are forgivable as other authors I have read also repeat themselves a little bit. I learned a lot about his political views from this book. Some were a little surprising to me.

He is quite the socialist, and even admired the Soviet Union--until he made a visit there.

I was enthralled when I found out a new Will Durant book was coming out. I am only halfway through. This has some of the most beautiful writing in the English language I've ever read. It's poetry and brilliance. This isn't a review based on his personal views (many of which I personally find compelling and well-thought), but his prose. Will Durant was an incredible writer and any aspiring writer could learn much from studying his form.

My parents didn't argue much when I was growing up, but I do seem to remember some contention on bookshelf space. Dad, a voracious reader, had shelves full of books. Mom, who loves a neat, aesthetically pleasing home, thinks bookshelves should look nice. So they jockeyed for space, with nick-knacks and decorative items competing with Dad's library for shelf space. On more than one occasion, I remember those conversations ending with Dad taking boxes of books to donate to the Corpus Christi Public Library. A large percentage of that portion of the shelf space reserved for books was taken up by a multi-volume set which I never read, but I always felt smarter just looking at those books. The set in question was Will and Ariel Durant's 11 volume *The Story of Civilization*. This popular and widely published (if not widely read) history, covering ancient times up to the Napoleonic Era, earned the Durants a Pulitzer and a Presidential Medal of Freedom. The Durants both died in the 1980s, but a Durant scholar uncovered a decades-old manuscript for a final book at which Will Durant had only hinted. *Fallen Leaves: Last Words on Life, Love, God, and War* contains the reflections of a very smart and very opinionated writer who knows he's on his last lap in life. Covering the stages of life, religion and morality, social issues, politics and war, art and education, the essays are at times rambling, often come across as a bit archaic, and are written, for the most part, in beautiful prose. Like I said, I never read *The Story of Civilization* or any of his other works, but based on what I know about Durant, I think he let his hair down with *Fallen Leaves*, writing a much more personal book. I had the feeling of sitting on the back porch with him while he, finally, told me what he really thought about these topics. But unlike your stereotypical cranky old man, Durant has a vast knowledge of history, philosophy, and culture, along with the broad perspective that knowledge brings. However, like cranky old men everywhere, he is set in his ways. He criticizes modern, abstract art ("empty vanity of an undisciplined mind"). He bemoans youthful ignorance (*Life* "gives us wisdom only when it has stolen youth."). He upholds traditional morality ("I still believe it advisable to discourage extramarital relations, just as it is useful to inculcate honesty, though we know that there will be many lies."). He has the amusingly endearing attitude of an old man who still

enjoys the sight of a beautiful woman ("I think the architecture of woman is superb from whatever angle seen.") I was most interested in Durant's views on morality and religion. Raised a Catholic and, for a short time, a seminary student, Durant has a good working knowledge of Christianity. But early on, he was led astray by Darwinism and other influences. He still admires Christ and his ethics, and calls for "a great union of creeds and sects preaching the ethics of Christ." He makes a "persistent effort to behave like a Christian" but he "reluctantly abandoned belief in a personal and loving God." So he finally turned toward a sort of utopian fantasy. At this point I began to wonder about this historian's grasp of human nature and human society. As a Christian, I am inclined to believe that without a personal, loving God, the ethics of Christ are unsustainable. It seems to me that the twentieth century taught us the hazards of separating morality from God. Durant wasn't too concerned about religious views of eternal life and salvation. "I am quite content with mortality. I should be appalled at the thought of living forever, in whatever paradise." I don't know about his soul, but he achieved some measure of immortality through his books, as shown by the several feet of shelf space my mother somewhat reluctantly yielded for him. Thanks to Edelweiss and the publisher for the complimentary electronic review copy!

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