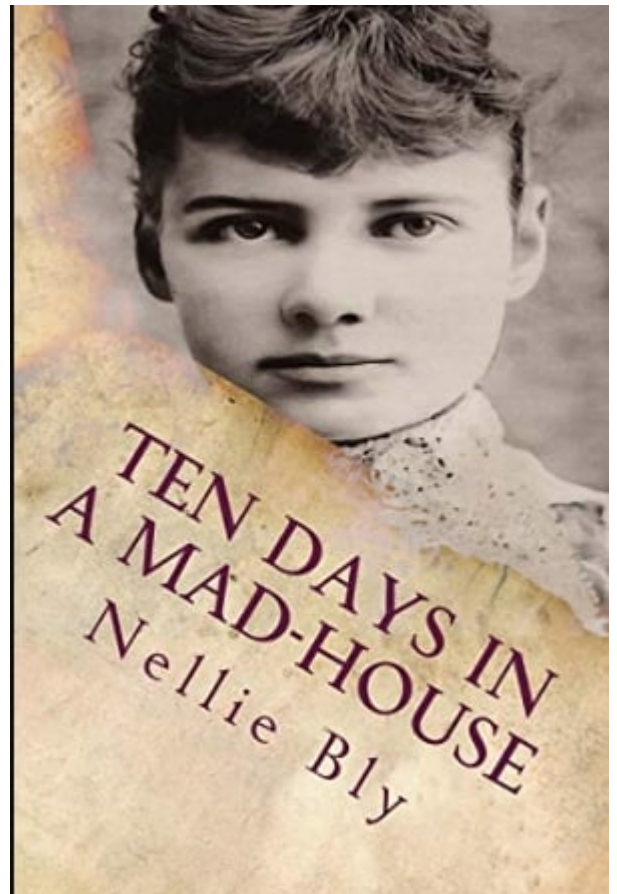


# A Wide Variety of Books Reviewed for Possible Christmas Gifts for Intelligent People

By Armando Simón



## **Ten Days in a Mad-House** by Nellie Bly

Mentally ill people have always made normal people very nervous. In the 1880s, there were really no competent authorities or treatments on mental illnesses. The unfortunates were simply warehoused away, neglected, and abused by indifferent, ignorant, or sadistic staff. Out of sight, out of mind. Bly's contribution was in bringing the sickening treatment of patients out into the light of day. In addition, she also revealed that once a person was institutionalized, and if they were alone in the world, they

remained institutionalized even if they were completely sane.

Nellie Bly was an early investigative reporter who was the model for many Hollywood films involving a pushy female reporter on various plots.

The book itself is a quick read.

### **How We Invented the Airplane: An Illustrated History** by the Wright brothers

This is a large, but very thin book, also a quick read, consisting of numerous photographs of the early airplanes built by the brothers at different stages of development, from being just a huge kite, tethered to the ground by ropes in order to gauge maneuverability to the later versions that could accommodate a passenger, and both riders could sit instead of lying prone. As far as the text itself, it consists of brief essays written by Orville, one of which was a deposition and was lost for many years.

On reading, we learn that this was a long, tedious process of trial and error on a large number of details in the construction of the prototype. One often hears of the romantic flashes of inspiration that occasionally are part of the scientific process, but equally important is the other equally important type, the tedious, time consuming, trial and error, systematic elimination of false leads (associated with scientists like Edison and Cattell).

We also learn that previous attempts by others had resulted in the idea of flight being viewed on a par as seeking a machine for perpetual motion. We also learn that they were initially frustrated by relying on tables of figures which had been thought of as authoritative but were full of errors. And we also learnt that the brothers first became interested when their father brought them a mechanical toy, a helicopter that would fly up because of rubber bands (when they built bigger models, it surprisingly didn't work); they were also inspired

by Otto Liethental's death during his attempts at flight.

**The Disappearing Spoon: And Other True Tales of Madness, Love, and the History of the World from the Periodic Table of the Elements** by Sam Kean

This book is fun. I know it sounds weird to describe a book of chemistry as fun, but it is fun to read, all revolving around the periodic table. The author provides a wealth of fascinating historical and scientific anecdotes behind each of the elements and before you know it you have learned at least an elementary amount of chemistry. In addition, I learned for the first time that bronze & silver are antiseptic, which may be why public bannisters and doorknobs are made of bronze. I also learned exactly why it is that some poisons are poisonous: they act on an atomic level—stealing electrons from cells.

**A Question of Madness** by Zhores A. Medvedev and Roy A. Medvedev

The Soviet Union of the 1970s was a wonderful place, such a nice place that Bernie Sanders went there for his honeymoon. It was where you could be put into an insane asylum for having ideological deviations; in this instance, the biologist Zhores Medvedev wrote a book criticizing the pseudoscientific doctrines of Lysenko (Lysenko distorted the sciences of genetics and agriculture in order to come more into line with Marxist dogma). His twin brother, Roy, and both families worked together to try to get Zhores out. It's an intensely interesting ordeal to read.

**Unauthorized Freud: Doubters Confront a Legend** by Frederick Crews

Freud would have made a good used car salesman.

This is a collection of essays and research highly critical of The Master. It is excellent. I had always suspected, very

strongly, as an undergraduate and graduate student that Freud was a charlatan, rigid and dogmatic. I had no idea that he was also a vicious, manipulative megalomaniac. A lot of the myths are dispelled in this book, particularly about some of his famous patients (details omitted, distorted) like Anna, Little Hans, the Wolfman.

From my personal experience, the reason this pseudoscience was taught in universities for so long is exactly a modern version of the emperor who had no clothes tale. It was due to a combination of true believers and cowards.

### **The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri Inferno—A Verse Translation** by Allen Mandelbaum

It is my belief that most poetry cannot be translated into another language, or rather, that any translation will lose its original soul. Either the style cannot be properly transferred (for example, Pushkin's alexandrine poetry simply flops when translated into English), or the imagery in the original translation fails, or the cultural references will not evoke the same emotions, or all of the above.

And, yet, here we are, with Mandelbaum's translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and all of the above concerns vanish in a wisp of smoke. Not only can we flavor the melody of the original style rendered into English, but the imagery, the emotions, the cultural references flow through with no apparent obstacle. And as if to show off the eloquence at work, we get a page by page, paragraph by paragraph, bilingual edition. Whether in English or in Italian there is such a felicitous flow that in reading one does not want to stop, one just wants to keep on reading. Not only was Dante's poetry genius, but so was Mandelbaum's translation.

### **The New Meaning of Treason** by Rebecca West

It is a shame this book has been ignored.

It is a tragedy that certain books, though they are excellent, are soon to be forgotten, whether they are fiction or nonfiction. This is such a book. It is unique because West examined treason carried out by individuals of different political persuasions during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She originally attended and wrote on the trials and the background of British traitors of World War II, a much neglected topic, the most famous being that of Lord Haw Haw. On the heel of the trials of pro-Nazi traitors, came a series of pro-Communist traitors spying for Russia. She examined all the traitors' backgrounds and how they differed from each other as well as their common elements.

On a peripheral note, we also get a glimpse of the views, thoughts, and preoccupation of that earlier time, the lifting of war rationing in Britain, and the fact that the British incompetence at guarding secrets was skillfully exploited by the Russians in order to drive a wedge between Britain and the United States.

### **Cecilia Valdés or El Angel Hill** by Cirilo Villaverde

Cuban literature is known for the poetry and not for novels. *Cecilia Valdez*, nonetheless, is an excellent exception, a classic, written by an expatriate in America who was active in the struggle for independence from the Spaniards. It is a blistering denunciation of slavery in Cuba, akin to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, only much harsher. It also offers a window of the times (aside from the issue of slavery).

Having several memorable characters, the story is interwoven with contemporary details and minor historical events and descriptions of architectural, economic, political and agricultural facts. An importer of African slaves, also owning a sugar cane plantation, has a wastrel son who is interested in a beautiful mulatto girl, unbeknownst to him that she is actually his half-sister. Their father has seen to her financial means without her knowing who he is, and is intent

on keeping them apart in order to avoid an incestuous relationship.

**The Sex Lives of Cannibals: Adrift in the Equatorial Pacific**  
by J. Maarten Troost

Lest you think this is the cliché island paradise, it is not. It is an island hellhole.

Troost followed his do-gooder girlfriend to an isolated pestilential hellhole called Tarawa, where the sun is merciless, rain is rare but cannibalistic dogs riddled with mange are plentiful, the inhabitants are incompetent, ignorant, alcoholic and violent. Food consists of fish three times a day every day of the week and supplies (of anything) are nonexistent. He had no job, thought he'd write a novel (which never materialized).

Most Westerners have this cliché of a Hawaiian paradise when it comes to islands in the Pacific. But Troost's reality check bounced. In spite of all this, he writes on each dismal topic with a humorous viewpoint while making the reader feel grateful for the benefits of civilization.

**View of Dawn in the Tropics** by G. Cabrera Infante

This has got to be one of the most unusual, original, "history" books that I have ever read. It consists of presenting anecdotes (devoid of names at that!) to represent the different periods of the history of Cuba. Somehow, such a technique makes the history seem more personal, with humor interspaced with the tragedy of some of the episodes.

**The Worst of Times: How Life on Earth Survived Eighty Million Years of Extinctions** by Paul B. Wignall

A surprisingly thin book regarding the various cataclysms that the earth has endured and has resulted in the massive extinction of animal species through millions of years.

Although some of the parts are technical, Wignall makes an effort at explaining the importance of the scientific details so that one understands them even though they may be outside one's field of expertise. He interjects some jarring humor here and there, though at times the reading becomes a bit dry. Furthermore, there is a lot of information which I was not aware of, e.g., I always thought of the Permian extinction—when all life on Earth was almost eradicated and made the comet that killed the dinosaurs seem like a firecracker by comparison—was a onetime event, whereas it turns out that it was a one-two knockout punch.

### **False Memory** by Dean Koontz

Maybe it's because I'm a psychologist, but reading this book about a clinical psychologist who is a total psychopath got me riveted, but also because the true-life issue of "false memories" in the field have led to catastrophic outcomes. Also, the characters that are in the book were also great and I could identify some I have come across: the vicious intellectuals, the woman who may be a mother, but is evil towards her children, yeah, I've had to deal with them. This book is one of Koontz's best, in my opinion.

And it doesn't have a dog. Well, it does, but it's only for the first couple of pages (thank God). If you have read anything else by Koontz, then you know what I mean.

### **The Invention of Science** by David Wootton

Unlike many of the above books, this book is very thick, with a wealth of information which will blow your mind. It totally blew mine by giving me perspectives on a number of historical facts which I had taken for granted, and in revealing facts upon which I was totally ignorant.

First and foremost is in regard to the repercussions of Columbus' discoveries. The voyages of exploration created an upheaval in European intellectual thought. Up to that point

(and for some time afterwards in rigid minds), it was the set in stone belief that the Ancient Greeks had discovered everything that there was to know, particularly by Aristotle, who had compiled what we would roughly call an encyclopedia. Some scholars during the Renaissance tried to unearth ancient manuscripts in monasteries, hoping that they would yield more knowledge while the rest, and most of the remaining scholars would debate the finer points of Ptolemy, Aristotle, etc.

It came as a thunderbolt to suddenly realize that there was another, entire antipodal, continent aside from Asia, Europe and Africa. Not only that, but there also came a flood of knowledge of new peoples, animals, food, vegetation, languages, unknown to the Ancients. Furthermore, the discovery had been made not by any outstanding scholar, but by a common sailor, with the obvious implication that *anyone* could just make similar discoveries. And become famous (it also threw a monkey wrench in the Ptolemaic system of the universe which would ultimately collapse with the advent of the Copernican view).

Such was the ossified European mindset up to then, that with Columbus' voyages, it became suddenly apparent to one and all *that knowledge and, therefore, progress was cumulative, rather than static and complete*. Something that Wootton does not point out that supports this rigidity of worldview is the fact that Columbus himself continued to think that he had, indeed, reached Asia, though not the kingdom of Cathay.

One of the things that Wootton points out at length is that new words had to be invented to describe what was going on (after all, one word can encapsulate a paragraph of explanation). And so, it was the Portuguese who first invented the word "discovery." Admittedly when it comes to tracing the lexicon branches, Wootton becomes as pedantic as any scholar, but if the reader perseveres, a wealth of information is ultimately mined.



Incidentally, the flat earth idea came into being as a sort of urban legend in the 1800s to describe the previous world view. Another is that quite a few people believed as far back as the Renaissance that intelligent life was present on the moon or planets.

The significance of the voyages of discovery profited from the prior invention of the printing press, with the subsequent massive proliferation of books and book fairs, and how it suddenly united isolated scientists. It also facilitated accuracy through the engraving of machinery and organisms instead of flawed verbal descriptions. A paradoxical culture of cooperation and competition among scientists was created that persists to this day. Galileo, for instance, printed his findings and within two years anyone could verify that Venus had phases, that the moon had mountains, and that Jupiter had moons, telescopes having become commonplace. "Replication" became common.

Within a century of Columbus' voyages science really took off, aided by the telescope, the microscope, the printing press, the barometer and thermometer and it is in this period that we find Torricelli, Galileo, Kepler, Tycho, van Leeuwenhoek, and William Harvey.

Armando Simón is a retired psychologist and historian, the author of *When Evolution [Stops](#)*, *The Book of Many [Books](#)* and *This [That](#) and the Other*.