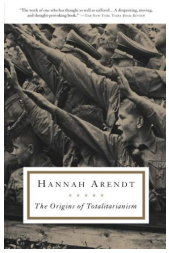
FIVE BOOKS

The best books on **Hannah Arendt**

recommended by Samantha Rose Hill

Unimpressed by the response of philosophers to the rise of Nazism in her native Germany, Hannah Arendt rejected the notion of being a philosopher and said she was a political theorist. **Samantha Rose Hill** of the Hannah Arendt Center at Bard College talks us through Hannah Arendt's life and work—and suggests which books to read if we want to learn more about her and her ideas.

Interview by Nigel Warburton



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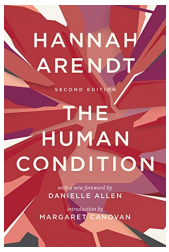
The Origins of Totalitarianism
by Hannah Arendt



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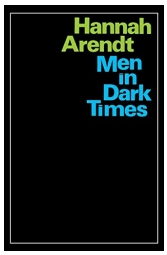
The Human Condition
by Hannah Arendt



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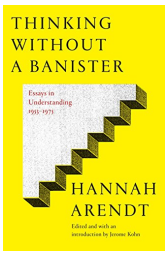
Men in Dark Times
by Hannah Arendt



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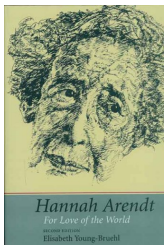
Thinking Without a Banister
by Hannah Arendt



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Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World
by Elisabeth Young-Bruehl

Before we get on to the books, first I should ask: who was Hannah Arendt?

Hannah Arendt was a 20th-century German-Jewish political thinker and philosopher. She was born in Linden, Hanover, Germany in 1906. When she was three her family moved to Königsberg so that her father's syphilis could be treated. He died when she was seven years old.

Königsberg was where Immanuel Kant was born, right?

Yes. It's where he took his daily constitutionals that the housewives of Königsberg set their clocks to. Arendt actually started reading Kant in her father's library after his death and was pretty well-versed in his

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work by the time she was 14. She was also studying Greek and Latin.

From a very early age, one of the things that is clear about Hannah Arendt is that she was always an outsider. She refused to conform to social expectations and liked to do things on her own. Her mother worried about her emotional development because she would appear cold, but she was just incredibly passionate and curious. She had all sorts of 'illnesses' as she was growing up, just to get out of going to school so that she could stay at home, study alone, and be with her mother. And then, eventually, she was kicked out of school for leading a protest against one of her professors who'd offended her. That, combined with all her absences meant she couldn't continue. So, her mom sent her to Berlin to finish her studies and prepare for her Abitur exam. (Students need to pass their Abitur to graduate high school and attend university.) In Berlin she studied philosophy and theology under Romano Guardini.

So where did she go on to study after that?

She'd heard about Martin Heidegger through her childhood friend, Ernst Grumach, who had already gone to sit in on the first seminars Heidegger was teaching at the University of Marburg. He'd told her that thinking had come to life in the classroom when Heidegger discussed Plato and Aristotle. And so, she went to study with Heidegger. She attended his classes on Plato and Aristotle and his lectures on thinking, and, of course, they had what is now an infamous romantic relationship.

After a couple of years, she ended that, recognizing what she called 'the gap' between them—basically his work and his wife would always come first, which would prevent the kind of closeness she desired. So, she went to the University of Leipzig to study with his professor, Edmund Husserl, for one semester before going to the University of Heidelberg to write her dissertation on love and Saint Augustine with the great existentialist philosopher and psychologist, Karl Jaspers.

That's pretty amazing. Those three teachers—Heidegger, Husserl, and Jaspers—are huge names in German philosophy.

Absolutely. When she arrived at Marburg, Heidegger was writing *Being and Time*, which is his great work on the study of Being and she was in conversation with him while he was working on it. Then, when she got

faculty at the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research in New York City. She is the author of two forthcoming books: *Hannah Arendt*, a biography, and *Hannah Arendt's Poems*. You can find her writing in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Public Seminar*, *OpenDemocracy*, *Theory & Event*, *Contemporary Political Theory*, and *The South Atlantic Quarterly*.

to the University of Heidelberg, Jaspers was beginning his three-volume work *Philosophy*, which became incredibly important for her thinking.

She was influenced with Jaspers's understanding of philosophy as primarily a dialogic activity; whereas Heidegger always understood it to be something you do alone. For Jaspers thinking was very worldly, and about constituting the world in common. That remained with Arendt through the rest of her life, and is very apparent throughout her work.

It's unfortunate people don't read Jaspers the way they read Heidegger today. To get a deep understanding of Arendt it's really important to read Kant and then Jaspers and then Heidegger.

Is there a book by Jaspers that you would recommend as accessible to a general reader?

I would recommend the *Philosophy of Existence*, which was originally presented as a series of lectures at The German Academy of Frankfurt after the Nazis dismissed Jaspers from his professorship. And I would recommend his three volume work *Philosophy*, which is important for Arendt's thinking. There's also Elizabeth Young-Bruehl's book on Jaspers, *Freedom and Karl Jaspers's Philosophy*.

So, what does Arendt do after that amazing initiation into German philosophy?

She publishes *Love in St. Augustine* in 1929 with the help of Jaspers. It's the same year that she meets and marries her first husband, Günther Anders. They met at a masquerade ball in Berlin, at a fundraiser for a Marxist magazine. She was dressed as a harem girl.

They were married shortly after they met, and then moved to Frankfurt so that Anders could write his *habilitation* at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt. At that time Arendt was a journalist writing for newspapers, mostly book reviews. She took classes with Ralph Mannheim and was working on her *habilitation*, *Rahel Vahnhagen: the Life of a Jewish woman*, which was intended to be a critique of German Romanticism and Jewish assimilation. After about a year Paul Tillich and Theodor Adorno rejected Anders' work on music, so they moved back to Berlin.

> **“Because she tried to understand why someone like Heidegger could become a Nazi, she often gets read as being an apologist for him. But I don’t see that as an apologia. It’s an attempt to grapple with and fully understand the actions of somebody she was close to”**

There, she wrote small articles and book reviews and worked on the *Rahel* book. She was became friends with Kurt Blumenfeld and began doing work with the World Zionist Organization in 1933. The burning of the Reichstag was a pivotal moment in Hannah Arendt’s life. After the burning of the Reichstag she said, “I couldn’t be a bystander.”

After Bertolt Brecht’s address book was compromised, Anders fled to Paris, fearing arrest, and left her in Berlin. Her mother Martha came to stay with her and, for several months, they used their apartment as a stop to help communists escape.

Faced with the rise of National Socialism, Arendt put down *Rahel Varnhagen* and turned away from philosophy. She was really horrified by the ways in which her friends—professional thinkers—had been blinded to the reality of what was unfolding in Germany. She thought there was something about the tradition of philosophy that turned people away from coming face-to-face with the world and enabled a kind of ‘going-along with.’

It was a bit more extreme than that in Heidegger’s case…

Absolutely. She broke ties with Heidegger. There are a lot of different ways to read her response to Heidegger joining the Nazi party, becoming a director of the University of Freiburg, and the firing of Husserl. In one of her letters to Jaspers, she wrote something like, ‘For what he did to Husserl, he’s basically culpable of murder. I don’t understand how someone who’s as smart as him could do something like this.’

As aghast as she was at these actions—seeing people she was close to either not seeing what was happening, or like Heidegger joining the Nazi Party—she wanted to understand what it was about this thinking that made people go along with such things instead of resisting them. She was curious to understand, and because it wasn't an outright rejection and, instead, she tried to understand why someone like Heidegger could become a Nazi, I think she often gets read as being an apologist for him. But I don't see that as an apologia. It's an attempt to grapple with and fully understand the actions of somebody she was close to. For Arendt, forgiveness is something that goes on between two people, and reconciliation requires seeing the good with the bad, which doesn't mean accepting it.

So, you have the rise of Nazism and she's separated from her husband. She must have been very vulnerable as a Jewish woman in Berlin.

She was certainly vulnerable in a political sense, being a Jewish woman in Germany and engaging in the kinds of political activities that she was involved in, but Arendt was an incredibly resilient person. From what I know about her, I don't think she would have thought of herself as vulnerable in a personal or emotional sense. She never saw herself as a victim. She never spoke about it that way, and was very reluctant to use that kind of language. She believed in personal responsibility.

> **"She thought the nation-state as a political institution was one of the reasons why totalitarianism was able to emerge in the 20th century in the first place"**

At this time she started working more intensely with the World Zionist Organization and Kurt Blumenfeld, who had enlisted her to collect anti-Semitic research propaganda from the Prussian State Library to be sent to world leaders and to be used at the next World Zionist Conference. One day, when she was doing this work in the library, she went to meet her mother for lunch and they were both arrested by the Gestapo.

When did she get out of Germany?

The day after the Gestapo released her. They held her for eight days, and she fled the next day with her mother, first to Prague, then Switzerland, then Paris. She was in Paris for about eight years, doing work for Jewish organizations, learning Hebrew and Yiddish, helping to prepare Jewish youth to emigrate to Palestine.

Was she a Zionist herself at this point?

Yes, she was a Zionist. She went to Palestine in 1935. I think it was in a 1972 panel discussion that she says something like, 'I'm not a Marxist. I'm not a socialist. I'm not even a liberal. The one thing I've ever been in my life was a Zionist, and that was while I was doing work in Paris and it was a result of the political conditions of the moment.'

She broke with the Zionist party after she arrived in the United States. She was very involved in the debates around the future of Zionism that were happening in New York with people like Theodor Herzl, but she broke with it when it started moving towards advocating a nation-state, towards the constitution of a state for the Jewish people. She thought the nation-state as a political institution was one of the reasons why totalitarianism was able to emerge in the 20th century in the first place and that, as a political/institutional model, it failed to protect the rights of citizens.

So, when did she leave Paris?

She was interred in Gurs in 1940 by the French as an enemy alien. She and Blücher were both told to report for internment. She was sent to Gurs in the south of France, which was the first internment camp and the largest, built for the Spanish Republicans who were fleeing Franco. She was there for about five and a half weeks. She was part of a mass escape with sixty-two other women, which was made possible by the German front approaching.

She went to Lourdes to find Walter Benjamin. Then she made her way to Montauban, which was a well-known meet-up point, and she accidentally ran into her second husband, Heinrich Blücher, walking down the street one afternoon. Then, with the help of Varian Fry, they were able to secure exit papers. They took a train through Spain and on to Lisbon where they stayed for about three months. They finally made it to the United States, arriving in New York City on May 22nd, 1941.

She didn't know any English when she arrived. They had little money and she signed up through a relief organization to become a housekeeper with a family in Massachusetts for the summer so that she could learn English. Then she started getting writing and teaching jobs. Her first teaching job was at Brooklyn College, teaching a history course on modern European history as an adjunct lecturer. She was starting to write *The Origins of Totalitarianism* at the time—this was her first major work, published in 1951, the same year that she received American citizenship.

In New York she went from Brooklyn College to Columbia, right? She had a successful academic career and a journalistic career as well.

She never accepted or held a tenured position in academia. After *Origins* was published in 1951, she was offered a lectureship at Princeton University. She was the first woman to be offered such a position at Princeton. Over the course of her career she taught at Princeton, University of Chicago, University of California Berkeley, and at Williams College. Her longest and most permanent academic home was at the New School for Social Research in New York, and that was at the end of her life.

But why didn't she take a tenured job?

She didn't want one, and it wasn't until later in her life that she was offered a permanent position from The New School. In her letters, she writes about the prep work she did for teaching her courses and it is clear she put everything into them. But she was primarily a writer and public speaker, and she travelled quite a bit. She would commute to Chicago from Riverside Drive.

That's a long commute! Maybe we should get on to the five books because that will tell the story another way, but before that, just tell us where your amazingly detailed knowledge of Arendt comes from.

I fell in love with Hannah Arendt in college, when I read *The Human Condition* for the first time. I had been wandering around the library looking for Erich Fromm's book, *Marx's Concept of Man* and somehow I found *The Human Condition*. When I started reading it, I really had the

experience of falling in love. I was very aware that I didn't understand anything she was talking about, but I desperately wanted to understand.

> **"She says that loneliness is the underlying cause of all totalitarian movements. Why loneliness? Because loneliness radically cuts us off from human connection."**

I took nine directed studies in college and read nothing but Hannah Arendt and the Frankfurt School thinkers. I did my dissertation work on Arendt and Benjamin and Adorno, and then my postdoctoral work at the University of Heidelberg studying German Romanticism and German Romantic poetry, while translating Hannah Arendt's poems. I also spent a year at The Institute for Social Research at The Institute for Philosophy at Goethe University. So for almost 20 years of my life now, I have been reading Hannah Arendt. She's somebody that I think with. She's somebody that I go to who gives me a sense of grounding and place in the world.

But you've also just completed a biography, haven't you?

Yes, the non-personal answer to why I have all this detailed knowledge in my head is because for the past year I've been writing a biography of Hannah Arendt. Also, for the past 10 years I've been translating her work. The poems are scheduled to appear in 2021.

Let's move on to the books you've chosen by or about Hannah Arendt. The first is *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Could you give us a sense of what that book's stance is? What are the origins of totalitarianism? What's her angle?

I began with this book because it's her first major work published in English. When I'm introducing Hannah Arendt in a lecture, I often begin by saying that her work is about two questions that are interconnected. The first question is, 'how can we protect spaces of freedom?'; the second question is, 'is there a way of thinking that is not tyrannical?' I begin with *The Origins of Totalitarianism* because it's a study

of the various elements that crystallized in the appearance of totalitarianism in the 20th century. Arendt writes about the decline of the nation state, the privatisation of public political institutions. She writes about the rise of what today we would call 'fake news' and political propaganda. She writes about our inability to distinguish fact from fiction. She writes about mass rootlessness, homelessness. And she writes about the necessity of solitude and the dangers of loneliness.

What has loneliness got to do with the origins of totalitarianism?

It's a 597-page book. When you get to the last ten pages, she says that loneliness is the underlying cause of all totalitarian movements. Why loneliness? Because loneliness radically cuts us off from human connection. It makes us desperate for meaning. It turns us back against ourselves in a dangerous way that leads us down rabbit holes in thinking that make it impossible for us to judge and to tell the difference between fact and fiction. She says it's one of the most desperate experiences a human being can have. When we experience loneliness, we're hungry, desperate for meaning and connection. Ideology, or ideological propaganda, provides simple solutions for complex human problems that feed that hunger, that need for place and meaning.

So, the lonely are particularly vulnerable to totalitarian thinking?

Yes. The lonely are particularly vulnerable to ideological thinking in whatever form it might take. Importantly, for Arendt, loneliness also means that we are not only cut off from conversation with others, but we're cut off from having conversation with ourselves. So, loneliness fundamentally compromises our ability to think and our ability to judge. Solitude, she says, is that condition where I keep myself company. And that's very different from loneliness.

Solitude is good, and loneliness is bad?

Solitude is necessary. The private realm is necessary. The space of the four walls is necessary. We need to be able to retreat from the public world to be alone with ourselves and to think in a way that's nourishing for ourselves.

Is this a work of history, would you say, or is it something different?

No, I wouldn't call it a work of history. Arendt says it's not history. She's employing Walter Benjamin's understanding of 'constellation', drawing together the elements that crystallized in totalitarianism and she gestures towards that in her first preface to the book. She's thinking about how the different parts fit together. She doesn't want to offer a historical account that's reductive in any way, or seems to follow a kind of logical sequence of events—because some things are not fully comprehensible, like death camps, for example. And so how do we try to understand that which is incomprehensible? Also, importantly for her, a historicist argument would imply that the Holocaust was fated to happen in some way: because X happened, Y happened, Z happened, and then there it is. She doesn't want to offer that kind of account.

Let's move on to the second book, *The Human Condition*, which you've already said was the one that drew you to Arendt. Great title. You see it on the bookshelf and it's hard not to pick it up. It sounds like it's going to give you the secret, tell you what it's all about.

Ah, yes. *The Human Condition*. In German she titled it *Activa oder Vom tätigen Leben*, which translated means *the Life of Action*. I read *The Human Condition* as a study of protecting spaces of freedom that are necessary for human action in the world. She writes about these tripartite distinctions between private, social, public and between labor, work and action. She discusses worldly alienation in the modern age. She's thinking about the different activities we engage in on a daily basis and the different realms of life we're constantly navigating and the activities that correspond with those realms.

> **"*The Human Condition* began as a study of the totalitarianian elements in Marx"**

I think we're experiencing something analogous right now, this collapse between the private, social and public spheres in our quarantine conditions. Everything is taking on a new colour. But when we see the boundaries between private, social and public collapsing, when we see the politicization of private life, for Arendt that's a red flag that totalitarianism is emerging.

The Human Condition began as a study of the totalitarianian elements in Marx. She read Marx very seriously. He influenced her thinking in a number of ways, but she also disagreed with him profoundly. Her chapter on "Labor" begins, "In the following chapter, Karl Marx will be criticized."

Arendt disagrees with Marx's elevation of labor as the fundamental activity of the human condition. If our fundamental quality is our ability to labor, and Marx wants to liberate man from labor, then what will we do with a society of laborers who do not have to labor? As Arendt puts it, she did not share Marx's great faith in capitalism.

Marx in that respect was the opposite of Aristotle, in a way.

Yes, the opposite, in the sense that Arendt reads Marx's elevation of labor as a break in the tradition of western political thought.

I think it's also a great work to read right now, to think about world-building and plurality. Her understanding of plurality is the idea that men and not man inhabit the earth and make the world in common. We live together with one another.

But the book's title makes it sound as if we're talking about universals.

No, Arendt always turns away from universal claims. She always upholds the particular over the universal. She *is* a conceptual thinker. She's wrestling with these terms in order to begin to understand the contemporary moment that she's writing about. Something that happens with the emergence of totalitarianism for her, and part of her turn against philosophy, was the idea that the concepts and categories, the banisters we hold onto in our thinking to help us understand the world, are no longer relevant. We need new language; we need new concepts to understand the world today. But that doesn't mean we can just get rid of the old concepts like 'authority', 'freedom' 'justice', or 'the good life' . We have to think with them; but we also can't just rely upon them as frameworks for understanding.

So is there a sense that in every era people are having to reinvent the framework for understanding, using elements from the past to do that? Is that what she's saying, that you

have to think anew about where you sit in relation to relations of power and authority, but you're stuck with a lot of the building blocks that your predecessors used?

Yes. The way that you frame it reminds me of her metaphor for Walter Benjamin's methodology in her introductory essay to the edited volume of his work she compiled, *Illuminations.* It is of a pearl diver and the need to go diving through the wreckage of the past to reclaim what can be saved. She doesn't argue that we should do away with the past. And she doesn't favour drawing analogies with the past in order to understand the current situation, but we also, in some sense, carry those gems with us, those conceptual ideas like 'the good' and we have to rethink them as a traditional problem of metaphysics. We have to engage with and think about these questions anew. We can't just reflexively rely upon them in our thinking.

What about the next book, *Men in Dark Times*? Another good title. Presumably it's men and women in dark times.

Yes, it's men and women in dark times, but Arendt always used "man." The title for this book is taken from Bertolt Brecht's great poem, '*An die Nachgeborenen*', which is translated as 'To Posterity' or 'To Those who Come After' which begins, *'Wirklich, ich lebe in finisteren Zeiten!'* ('Really, I'm living in dark times'). This is a collection of essays about people she was close to, and also some people she wasn't so close to, but who had a significant impact upon her intellectual development, such as Rosa Luxemburg, whom she actually went to see once with her mother at a rally.

She met some incredible people…

I know. Do you ever wonder if people will look back on our time and think about the public intellectuals we have today and their milieus in the same way that we look back upon those of Paris in the 1930s?

It doesn't really feel that way! I've interviewed hundreds of philosophers for the *Philosophy Bites* podcast and some of them are big names today, but it doesn't feel as if they will endure and be revered in the same way, for sure.

When you asked me to pick the five best books, I thought about the word 'best' and it felt like a sacrifice not to include *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a Report on the Banality of Evil* on the list. But thinking about the people

that might go to this website and look for a set of books to introduce them to a thinker, I asked myself what the books were that made me fall in love with Hannah Arendt as a thinker and which included her most beautiful writing. And I really think that some of her most beautiful writing is in *Men in Dark Times*.

Her essay on "Humanity and Our Times", which she delivered as the Lessing address when she received the Lessing Prize, is a timeless meditation on what it means to retain one's humanity in dark times. I also find myself continually going back to her '*Laudatio*' for Karl Jaspers, which is a brilliant piece of writing about the importance of listening and conversation and allowing for silence and world-building and common humanity. These essays are so intimate that I think they make themselves available to any reader, and offer portraits of some of the most important political thinkers of the 20th century.

It's not a book I've read, but I ought to by the sound of it. When was it published?

It was first published in 1955 and then it went through a few pressings. It's also worth mentioning that there are essays here on Hermann Broch, Walter Benjamin, and the poet Randall Jarrell. What you also get in this book is a sense of Arendt's poetics and her engagement with poets. There is her essay on Bertolt Brecht and the Brecht controversy and how we hold poets accountable, her essay on Walter Benjamin and how he wasn't a poet but rather a poetic thinker.

On the whole, philosophers aren't poets. Nietzsche obviously wrote poetry. Boethius was a poet, Lucretius was a poet, and T S Eliot did a PhD in philosophy. But you have to quite deep dig to find them, generally, philosophy and poetry don't mix. It's quite an unusual mix to have a philosopher who is also a poet.

Well, Hannah Arendt wouldn't call herself a philosopher. She rejected that label probably most famously in her televised interview in 1964 with Günter Gaus, where she says that she's a political theorist. She turns away from philosophy after the burning of the Reichstag, and then, when she returns to philosophy in *The Life of the Mind*, her final work, she engages in what she calls 'the dismantling of metaphysics'. I think she's turning away from any kind of transcendent philosophy to think about

materiality and to think about how we might orient ourselves in the present. She rejects anything like a Platonic idea of truth in that sense. I think we see in there a real critique of Heidegger.

Yes, but that is the German sense of philosophy as being metaphysics. So, she's not a metaphysician in most of her books, but political theorists could just as easily be categorized under 'philosophy' as under 'politics', surely?

If we think about her grappling with these fundamental problems of metaphysics, like 'what is the nature of being?', 'what is meaning?', 'how do we create meaning?', 'what is the purpose of life?', 'what is the good life?', she's certainly engaging in all of these questions and she was schooled in the tradition of German philosophy, the western tradition of political philosophy, but she didn't understand herself to be doing the work of philosophy. She doesn't easily fit into any box. Sometimes it seems as if she's doing the work of phenomenology. Sometimes it seems she's doing the work of metaphysics. Sometimes she is a biographer.

Not unlike Simone de Beauvoir. She did all those things.

Yes. Arendt did not have much respect for Simone de Beauvoir. She didn't think she was that smart.

Wow. It depends where you're looking from, I guess. From where I'm sitting Simone de Beauvoir's pretty smart. I've seen her on some television interviews—there are very few. She comes across as a somebody who is completely on top of the issues that she's dealing with and has great clarity of thought. Did Arendt interact with her at all?

She did interact with her, and with Sartre and Camus. She thought *Nausea* was a brilliant book. She said that was Sartre's best book. She wrote to Karl Jaspers 'Camus is probably not as talented as Sartre but much more important, because he is much more serious and honest'

That wouldn't be difficult to see…

In an early letter to Mary McCarthy she says something like, 'Simone de Beauvoir's not really worth engaging with. One should just flirt with her instead.' Arendt was not a feminist…

Let's move on to the next book, *Thinking Without a Banister*, which sounds like a nightmare image to me.

Well, we're all wandering up and down a staircase without banisters to hold on to, endlessly, never arriving at wherever we're going because thinking itself is an endless process. This was the secret metaphor she kept for herself in thinking about how to think about thinking. It is really a reference back to the need to find new language and concepts and categories to hold onto in thinking in order to understand our present moment.

And in the image, what would the banister be? Is it a fixed thing which you can rely on being there, like the foundational elements of thought are for Descartes, some rock bottom that you hit?

Yes. She was critical of Descartes. I think about those banisters as the concepts and categories we hold onto in thinking, that allow us to make judgments about what's happening in the world. Arendt isn't writing systematic philosophy like Kant, aiming to arrive at a concept of 'the judgment of the beautiful', but she's very interested and engaged with the concept of 'judgment' and wants to understand what judgment is in our world today.

But if you're someone who's not immersed in the world of philosophy what, put simply is this book about? Is it a very abstract book or is it about particular social situations?

I reviewed *Thinking Without a Banister* when it was published in 2018 for the *LA Review of Books*. It is an edited volume, which I think is a great introductory overview to Hannah Arendt's work. It is full of interviews that give you a sense of her as a person, conversations where she's teasing out what she meant by 'the banality of evil'—most readers of Arendt are familiar with that phrase, even if they haven't read *Eichmann*. It has some of the early work on Marx that was never published, some of her essays of cultural criticism, some book reviews.

I taught an introductory course on Arendt two years ago using this as the main text, and it was a wonderful way of getting a general sense of who Hannah Arendt was, but it also includes all of her major concepts, categories, and terms, her distinction between labour, work, and action, and her understanding of freedom. There are also essays on Heidegger and her essay on W H Auden.

It sounds fantastic.

This is a really wonderful book. It was edited by Jerome Kohn, who was one of Hannah Arendt's students. He's the literary executor of Arendt's estate. He's published most of the posthumous volumes we have of Hannah Arendt's work, and really we have him to thank for Arendt's legacy as it endures in the world today.

So, between this book and *Men in Dark Times*, which would you say would be the ideal starting point for somebody who's never read anything by Hannah Arendt?

It depends who the person is that's reading Hannah Arendt for the first time. So, if the list of books I gave you is being picked up by somebody who is completely new to Hannah Arendt, I would probably give them *Thinking Without a Banister* first because that way they can play, they can pop around, they can explore, they can get a sense of her language and her concepts and categories and then go back to *Origins* and *The Human Condition*, which are her two major works about the emergence of totalitarianism and freedom and protecting spaces of freedom. And then *Men in Dark Times* is really a collection of humanistic essays about what it was like to be alive in the 20th century, about poetry and conversation and—very importantly for Arendt—friendship.

Let's move on to the last book. This is a biography called *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*.

Even though I'm writing a biography of Hannah Arendt myself, I wanted to include the major intellectual biography of her on the list. It was published in 1982 and remains the go-to Arendt biography. It's quite long. Elizabeth Young-Bruehl knew Arendt. When Arendt died in 1975 she really wasn't that well known outside of New York intellectual circles…

Really?

Yes. It wasn't until the 1980s and Young-Bruehl's biography and then the discovery of the Heidegger letters that she became so well-known and a figure of interest in contemporary philosophy and political theory. She's still not as recognized in Germany today as she could be. She's not recognized in the way Adorno is, for example. This biography a wonderful telling of Arendt's life.

Why is it called *For the Love of the World*? Where's that line from?

It is from a letter to Karl Jaspers that I believe was written in 1956 and also occurs as an entry in one of her thinking journals. In one of her thinking journals, "*Warum ist es so schwer, die Welt zu lieben*"—"why is it so hard to love the world?"

Oh yes, you quoted that on Twitter recently.

Yes, I did, together with the picture of the actual entry. When she was finishing *The Human Condition*, she wrote to Karl Jaspers, 'Only now, only this late in life, am I beginning to understand what it means to love the world. To love the world is to love it with all of the evil and suffering in it, and I would like to dedicate my magnum opus *The Human Condition* to you and to call it *Amor Mundi*, 'for the love of the world'.' So, the intended title for *The Human Condition* was *Amor Mundi*. Of course, Arendt was quite fond of flipping Nietzsche on his head. So, this is a playful flip of *amor fati*—'the love of fate.' She's thinking about what it means to build the world in common, *poiesis*, the fabrication of the world that we collectively make through language, through architecture, through art, through sculpture, through building. What always strikes me is that Hannah Arendt saw the worst her century had to offer, and her question was how to love the world.

In the biography, is that the framing idea, that that's what was driving Arendt, or is that too simplistic?

I don't know if I would say that's Young-Bruehl's framing mechanism for the biography. The book is a deep-dive intellectual history of Hannah Arendt. One of the frames that Young-Bruehl uses is friendship, which is so important to Hannah Arendt and certainly relates to 'love of the world'. But 'love of the world' as an idea in Arendt's writing relates to this idea that we have to see the world and to take the good and the bad with equanimity, that we can't be attached to either radical hope or radical despair or some idea of what it is we might want the world to be, but rather that we have to face the world as it is and love it anyway.

That sounds quite Nietzschean to me. Embrace what you are? It doesn't sound anti-Nietzsche. How will your biography differ from this one?

My biography is an introductory biography to the life and works of Hannah Arendt. I have tried to fill in some of the gaps that have been left empty, simply because materials were not publicly available at the time. I talk about Hannah Arendt's poetry and about her internment in

Gurs and escape, which I've pieced together through different accounts that have emerged since Young-Bruehl's biography was published. The framework for my biography comes from a panel discussion about her work where she says: "What is the subject of our thought? Experience and nothing else." I've tried to tie the life of action together with the life of the mind.

You've devoted a lot of time to studying Hannah Arendt. Will you always be devoted to Arendt or will you move on to someone else?

That's a great question. Hannah Arendt is somebody whom I think with, but I don't always agree with her. Her writing provokes me to thinking, and if I'm completely honest the thinker I feel closest to is Walter Benjamin. Reading Walter Benjamin is the only time I ever feel at home in the world. Adorno is also somebody who's very important for me. I'm that word people love to use but don't love in reality—interdisciplinary. Marx and Freud are also very important for me. But just as important for me are people like Virginia Woolf and Tennessee Williams and D H Lawrence. These are thinkers I also return to, to hold on to something in my own thinking. The other day I was teaching *The Human Condition* and a student called me an Arendtian. I laughed and said, 'I must protest.' As a friend says, I'm Arendtian enough to know not to be an Arendtian. Arendt's work isn't a roadmap into the future, but it is something we can hold on to in thinking about the world.

Interview by **Nigel Warburton**

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