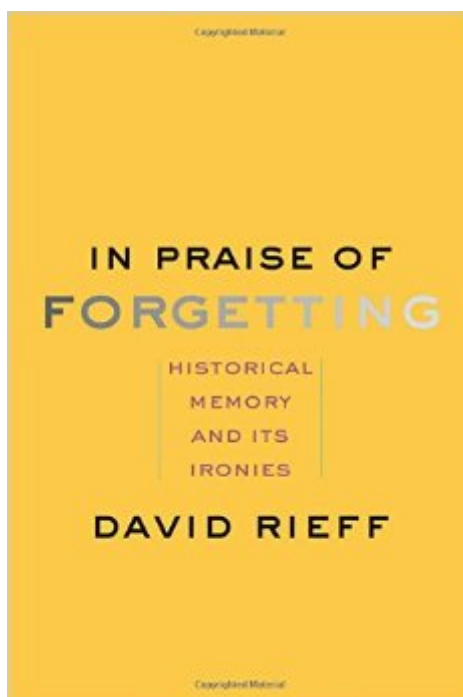


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# In Praise Of Forgetting: Historical Memory And Its Ironies



## Synopsis

A leading contrarian thinker explores the ethical paradox at the heart of history's wounds. The conventional wisdom about historical memory is summed up in George Santayana's celebrated phrase, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Today, the consensus that it is moral to remember, immoral to forget, is nearly absolute. And yet is this right? David Rieff, an independent writer who has reported on bloody conflicts in Africa, the Balkans, and Central Asia, insists that things are not so simple. He poses hard questions about whether remembrance ever truly has, or indeed ever could, "inoculate" the present against repeating the crimes of the past. He argues that rubbing raw historical wounds "whether self-inflicted or imposed by outside forces" neither remedies injustice nor confers reconciliation. If he is right, then historical memory is not a moral imperative but rather a moral option "sometimes called for, sometimes not. Collective remembrance can be toxic. Sometimes, Rieff concludes, it may be more moral to forget." Ranging widely across some of the defining conflicts of modern times "the Irish Troubles and the Easter Uprising of 1916, the white settlement of Australia, the American Civil War, the Balkan wars, the Holocaust, and 9/11" Rieff presents a pellucid examination of the uses and abuses of historical memory. His contentious, brilliant, and elegant essay is an indispensable work of moral philosophy.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Slow, ponderous read, but worth the effort. Reiff's arguments are deliberate, thoughtful, and cautious. He often makes a considerable effort to make an argument and just as he has convinced

you of his premise, he puts forth an antithesis to that very premise and makes a counter argument. This is one reason I enjoy his works, as difficult as they are, because at the end of the day he likes you to make your own judgment. In this, I imagine Reiff sitting on his mom's lap as a child being taught how to think and argue. Lucky mom, lucky son.

David Rieff has written a thoughtful and provocative book which I enjoyed and have recommended to others. A few caveats or, perhaps more fairly, cavils: Rieff's syntax frequently reminds one of Proust's or Henry James's meandering sentences which one has to read several times to locate the subject, operative verb and general sense intended. Further there is a good deal of intellectual preening in this slender volume, with enough snippets of quotes to pass as a mini-Bartlett's Quotations. I also was for a while confused by his using alternative phrases to express what I assume to be the same core theme: "historical memory," "collective memory," and "collective historical memory," although I suspect there are semantic shadings here which I missed.

Very appropriate given the context of today's 24/7 social media world that never forgets.

Very thought provoking essay which takes some reading

I thought this book was awful and so did several people who read it.

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