

'Unforgettable' Classics: Classic Psychology Texts Stand the Test of Time

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What makes a text a classic? Members of the American Psychological Society Board of Directors were asked about their favorite psychology classics. APS Members are invited to share their psychology classic nominations as well (send nominations to the [Observer](#)).

William James shares much more than his first name with the likes of William Shakespeare, William Wordsworth, and William Faulkner. Each wrote with a clarity of perception and elegance of style that made their words and insights persuade through the ages. They wrote the classics.

And in its field, James's masterpiece, *The Principles of Psychology*, is indisputably "the classic of all classics," as Henry L. Roediger, III of Washington University in St. Louis put it. "I remember someone once said that James could make an even more compelling case for things he disagreed with than the proponents themselves. And I remember thinking, 'Yes, that's right.'"

Susan T. Fiske of Princeton University says the central reason James's work stands head and shoulders above the rest "is that it's a very wise, insightful book. It combines philosophy with empirical observation and insights. And the sheer elegance of his writing – it's beautifully written. That makes a huge difference. The fact that it's well written doesn't mean it's oversimplified; the ideas presented are very complex. But they are presented in a way that makes them consumable, not hard to swallow.

"One of the things that's inspiring about it is that the ideas are still interesting and fundamental, people are still debating them now. It's a wonderful place to go for pearls of insight."

Most of James's "armchair observations" also turned out to be on target. As Denise Park of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign notes: "When you go back and look at his comments, he seemed to understand the mind without any empirical investigation, by sheer intuition. He was an original thinker."

Classic textbooks like James's share elements with the classics in other fields, notably literature and the arts, but with a caveat, says Robert Wozniak of Bryn Mawr College, himself a collector of books and other historic treasures in psychological science. (See related story: "[Confessions of a Collector](#)".)

"Psychology bears the same relationship to literature as books on how to skate bear to skating," Wozniak said. "Literature places the reader in the midst of an experience. Psychology steps back from the experience and reflects on it, attempts to rise above it and look down upon it with an analytic eye. Even James, who wrote and thought with the eye of an artist and writer, nevertheless is writing as a psychologist, evaluating evidence, analyzing concepts."

Charles Darwin (1809 -1882) was another prime example, says Wozniak. He didn't give birth to the notion of evolution, but he explained it and the process of natural selection "with precision and clarity."

APS Treasurer Roberta L. Klatzky of Carnegie Mellon University says classic textbooks sometimes arise like inventions – mothered by necessity. A memory specialist, she researches the sense of touch and its role in perception, and seeks to help develop navigation aids for the visually impaired. "For example, if I told you there was a chair 10 feet away at two o'clock, could you go to it in an indirect route with your eyes closed? This is a rich area of psychology that is not widely explored." As such, she says, it presents an abundance of theoretical and applied problems, and therein lies the necessity.

"When I was beginning to teach memory," she says, "there were no books that had the contemporary flavor of memory that I had been exposed to in graduate school." So in 1975 she wrote her own. Other textbooks have been written for the same reason – to fill an educational need. "Maybe some of those books will emerge as classics, because of the novel synthesis that they cover," she says. "Other classics will be monographs that tie together a more narrow field, often with particular emphasis on the research of the author."

BUT WHAT TURNS A GOOD TEXT INTO A GREAT CLASSIC?

"It has to have had great impact in terms of scholarship or in terms of bringing people into the field," says Roediger, of Washington University at St Louis. "You have one textbook as an undergraduate that sort of grabs you and makes you want to go into the field. It carries through for generations and affects many people. Or, even if you are not in the field, you want to read it. It's just a good read."

Impact is the essential element, says Wozniak. "They are works that have had tremendous impact on an entire discipline." That impact can come in many other guises, however. "Sometimes works have a much more focused impact on a sub-discipline, or they influence the entire discipline for only a short while, then fall out of favor, but then come back into favor for one reason or another."

He cites the writings of James Mark Baldwin (1861-1934), whose influence and international repute in the early 1900s were second only to James. Arrested in a Baltimore house of prostitution in 1908 and asked to resign his post at Johns Hopkins University, Baldwin left psychology entirely and spent the rest of his life in exile, mostly in Paris, where he died. Almost immediately, references to his work disappeared from the literature, in part because psychology had become more empirical and his works were mostly theoretical, but also because of collective embarrassment over his arrest.

Still, Baldwin's work had influenced such developmental psychologists as Jean Piaget (1896-1980) in Switzerland and Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) in the Soviet Union, and when their writings began to influence American psychologists in the 1960s and early '70s, "Lo and behold, people began to get interested in Baldwin again. They found him an extremely important source of ideas that were now once again current."

Others, like Gregor Mendel (1823-1884), make important discoveries that lie fallow for years, even decades, only to be "rediscovered." Mendel's paper on heredity, *Experiments with Plant Hybrids*, is now considered one of the most enduring and influential publications in the history of science.

Still others impact not just the scientific community but all of society, the way Edward Lee Thorndike

and John Dewey influenced American education, or have their impact because of the controversy they engender in their fields. “Controversy is one of the markers by which people keep become more empirical and his works were mostly theoretical, but also because of collective embarrassment over his arrest-track of history,” says Wozniak.

Elegance of style is of less pivotal importance, he says, except as an attribute that contributes to a book’s power to persuade. “It will have greater social influence when it is written in a persuasive style. James was unquestionably the greatest master of that in psychology, certainly in English. Nobody has been James’s equal ever, before or after.”

“Creative novelty” is the other great attribute of a classic, according to Wozniak. Novel discoveries, concepts, terms, methods, applications – almost every category has its own list of those who became famous because they were there “first.” But, warns the collector, “there is no such thing that, as the Greeks used to say, ‘comes whole blown from the head of Zeus.’” Every notion has its precursors. “The most interesting thing about locating classics is to go back and find the people who introduced concepts that other people later became famous for,” says Wozniak.

James’s stream of consciousness, for example, was preceded by Harald Hoffding (1843-1931), who was influenced by the evolutionary theories of Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) and Darwin. But it was James who became famous for it “because he wrote about it so brilliantly.”

Ask historians like Wozniak and David Baker, the curator of the Archives of the History of American Psychology in Akron, Ohio, whom they would nominate to the pantheon of psychological classicists and they search deep into history.

In 1992, Wozniak wrote *Mind and Body: René Descartes to William James*, to accompany an exhibition celebrating the centennial of the American Psychological Association. In the text he described the 138 years of American analysis from Samuel Johnson’s *Elementa Philosophica* (1752) to James’s *Principles of Psychology* as a period that produced “a rich and surprisingly large corpus of material bearing directly on psychological issues.”

“[O]ver 350 authors,” he wrote, “had contributed to a rapidly growing psychological literature [and] helped to create a uniquely American climate of opinion with regard to the nature of mind, relations between body and mind, exceptional mental states, mental health, and mental disease. And James, quintessential American mind that he was, came to intellectual maturity breathing the air of that climate.”

Wozniak’s 18th and 19th century hall of fame includes the likes of the Puritan theologian and philosopher Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758); Benjamin Rush (1746-1813), physician, patriot, signer of the Declaration of Independence and inventor of the “tranquilizing chair,” described as “the most thorough method of patient restraint ever devised”; Joseph Buchanan (1785-1829), a physician, educator, inventor, lawyer and journalist; Laurens Perseus Hickok (1798-1888), who emphasized that theoretical and empirical ways of thinking are compatible; Noah Porter (1811-1892), the first American philosopher to treat data from physiological experimentation consistently as ancillary to introspection; and George Miller Beard (1839-1883), who was the first to describe neurasthenia, “the disease that was to make him world famous,” Wozniak wrote.

Though the field was dominated by males in its early years, women also left their mark. Notable feminist scholars Catherine Esther Beecher (1800-1878), the sister of abolitionist author Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Elizabeth Ricord (1788-1865) both made the study of the mind the starting point for raising women's status through education. Never published because it broke with accepted theology, Beecher's *Elements* is now one of the rarest books in the history of American psychology.

In 1999, Wozniak followed up his 1992 compendium with *Classics in Psychology*, a collection of essays on 48 important works published between 1855 and the outbreak of World War I in 1914, six decades that saw Alexander Bain (1818-1903) give psychology "a balanced sensorimotor associationism and a new physiological point of view;" Herbert Spencer use evolution to help transform psychology's conception of the nature and function of consciousness; Francis Galton (1822-1911) introduce the importance of individual variability and statistical thinking; and in Leipzig, Germany, Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) make laboratory experimentation the gold standard of methodology in psychology.

"And be sure to include Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)," says Wozniak. "Freud almost always has to be mentioned. And Pierre Janet (1859-1947), because the French deserve mention. The French tradition has always been a psychopathological tradition, and they were the founders of psychotherapy, Janet even more than Freud." Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) also belongs on any list of classics in psychology, says the Archives' Baker. "I think it allowed psychology to come into being. The contributions of evolutionary theory are pretty much the basis of psychology. The idea of variation, which is related to individual differences, is a pretty big part of what we do in psychology, measuring individual differences. I think Darwin opened the way for comparative psychology, removing the barriers between humans and other animals.

"It also helped usher in concepts of social Darwinism, what I would call scientific racism," says Baker, "but I still think overall it was a catalyst for tremendous change in our conception of ourselves. Intellectually it is one of the most important books of modern time. A case can be made that James was certainly influenced by evolutionary thought. One of the major constructs of Darwinism is adaptation, and adaptation was an important part of James's theorizing."

The German cognitive psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus (1850-1909) is yet another who belongs in that group. His first paper on memory, published in 1880, began nearly 30 years of teaching and publishing in the field. His most famous experiments used himself as a subject and involved timing the re-learning of nonsense syllables.

To which Fiske adds William McDougall's *An Introduction to Social Psychology*, published in 1908. McDougall "relied on a theory of instinct that has been debunked," Fiske says, "so it hasn't proved that useful, and it's not in use now except when people want to use it for its historical value," but it remains one of the first textbooks in social psychology.

McDougall's popularity and longevity, says Fiske, in part derive from his text's "direct and forceful style, with few if any concessions to hesitancy of doctrine," and it did break new ground by making human motivation its central concern and drawing out "the implications of instinct theory for the analysis of social process."

For his part, Baker cautions that the label "classic" may simply reflect the stature of the author, that the

writings of those who rise to positions of great influence may become influential largely by association. “Lots of people write great things and don’t get the recognition,” he says, citing a list of the top 100 psychologists of the 20th century that did not include a single African-American, not even Kenneth Clark, the only psychologist whose research became a major factor in an historic US Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of Education*.

“I worry about that, about people who wrote something really good that didn’t become a ‘classic,’” Baker says. “Students ought to read less mainstream kinds of things as well. If you keep reading the same things, I don’t know that you’re generating much that is really inclusive, that covers all the different angles and approaches to a problem, and the contributions of other people. There’s value in diversity. It gets you to look at something differently. It opens your eyes to all kinds of new possibilities.”

Internet Resources

[Classics in the History of Psychology](#), a Web site developed by Christopher D. Green of York University, Toronto, has virtually every important psychology book ever written, from the Allports to Robert Yerkes’ autobiography, and the full text of William James’s *Principles of Psychology*, which Green calls “perhaps the most important English-language psychology text in history.”

In 1981 Frederic Raphael and Kenneth McLeish published *The List of Books* (<http://home.attbi.com/~netaylor1/raphaelpsychology.html>), devised as “an imaginary library of some three thousand volumes in which a reasonably literate person can hope to find both instruction and inspiration, art and amusement.” They asked collaborators to make lists in their areas of expertise, then asked others for comments before making their final selections. Their 28 recommendations in psychology date from 1621 (Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*) to 1978 (Keith Oatley’s *Perceptions and Representations*). Among the conspicuously absent: James’s *Principles of Psychology*.

Robert Wozniak’s essays on 48 important works published between 1855 and 1914 are in *Classics in Psychology* (1999): [Mind and Body: René Descartes to William James](#), by Robert Wozniak, accompanies an exhibition of books from the National Library of Medicine for the 1992 centennial of the American Psychological Association.