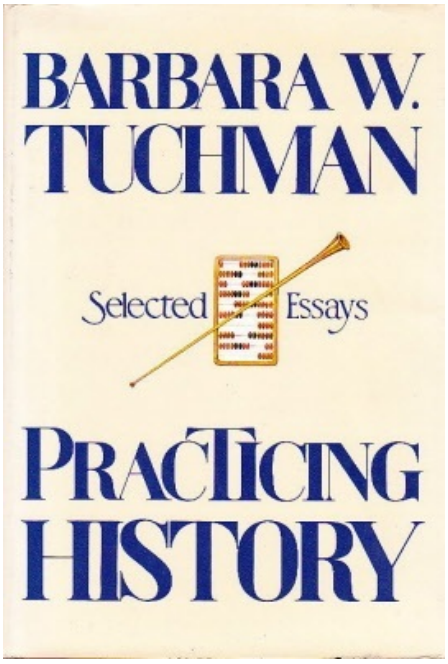

Practicing History: Selected Essays

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From thoughtful pieces on the historian's role to striking insights into America's past and present to trenchant observations on the international scene, Barbara W. Tuchman looks at history in a unique way and draws lessons from what she sees. Here is a splendid body of work, the story of a lifetime spent "practicing history."

Practicing History: Selected Essays Details

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From Reader Review Practicing History: Selected Essays for online ebook

Matt says

They say you should never meet your heroes. Also, you probably should never read essays by your favorite historian - at least if you care to maintain your high opinion of their insight.

This was a disillusioning read, primarily because it so clearly reveals the author's previously-hidden biases: Eurocentric, fervently pro-Israel to the point of Arabophobia, socially conservative to the point of clueless prudishness. None of it should be surprising, I guess, for someone born in 1912, but the undercurrents of internalized repression and quiet white supremacy were disheartening to this 21st-century liberal reader.

The worst comes in the middle section: facile, tossed-off sketches from her time as a correspondent in Japan and Spain; a self-serving piece lionizing her rich family members' early support of the Jewish State; book reviews throwing shade on Freud, Woodrow Wilson and Kissinger; and stale panegyrics to humanity's "great achievements." (The one bright spot is an examination of the Six Day War Called "Israel's Swift Sword" that succeeds in spite of its blatant uncritical hero worship.)

The first section - mostly concerned with her early attempts at writing history, as well as her research and composition methods - is charmingly down-to-earth. The last section is mostly concerned with then-contemporary events of Vietnam and Watergate. And despite some lazy HuffPo-level armchair politics, it offers surprisingly trenchant thoughts for the Age of Trump.

Consider: "The Presidency has gained too great a lead; it has bewitched the occupant, the press, and the public... [T]he villain is not the man but the office." (Consider progressives like me, disappointed by Obama's drone strikes and maintaining Guantanamo Bay.)

Or this: "He [the president] must appear firm, he must appear dominant, he must never on any account appear 'soft,' and by some magic transformation which he has come to believe in, he must make history's list of 'great' Presidents." (That rings true for every modern president, from Reagan to Clinton to Obama to Trump.)

And finally: "But if it can be said that the press gives the public what it wants, then all of us are responsible... [W]e have given too much greatness to the Presidency." (We might blame the 24-hour news networks or the "social media outrage machine" except that they're just the supply. All of us provide the demand.)

So this was a disillusioning read in the best possible way. I came to see the author not as possessing unique insights and historical truths, but as following her own obsessions wherever they led, making connections (some on target, some off the mark), and trying to stay honest despite temptations and past failures. Kill your idols, man.

Bardi says

One of the fun parts of Goodread is finding books that I have not read by authors I like..or in this case love.

If you are not a historian and wonder what all the fuss about the subject it, I suggest you read one of her books. If you are a historian than by all means read all of her books and find out how to write about the subject.

Carol Bakker says

I started out loving Barbara Tuchman's book of essays. The first eight essays, on the craft of writing history, sent me over the moon.

My ardor went down just a degree or two in the next section, which might be described as history in small chunks. Although the final section, in which she comments about (1960-1970) current affairs, yields nuggets, I found myself in disagreement with Tuchman and disengaged with her writing.

It seems to me the further away the period about which she writes, e.g. Medieval times, the Great War, the more I like her. That said, I would have no qualms recommending this book to an aspiring writer or an avid student of history.

Tom Marcinko says

Her 1981 book of essays. Most interesting to me were her Watergate-era thoughts on the Presidency: how it’s become too powerful, & too much for one person. The Bush years would have blown her mind. Thinking there’s an essay in there.
I died inside a little when I saw her quoted in Natl. Review (on Google). I suppose she’s well worth stealing, as Orwell said of Dickens.

“Don’t look up so much material,” [a newspaper editor] said. “You can turn out the job much faster if you don’t know too much.”

If they wanted to control the officer corps, I suggested, they should join the ROTC and then strike. Distributed by a newspaper syndicate, this speech was widely reprinted, besides, as I later learned, causing an irate alumnus of Williams to file a complaint about me with the FBI.

Catherine Drinker Bowen has said that she writes her books with a sign pinned up over her desk asking, “Will the reader turn the page?”

The nearest anyone has come to explaining history is, I think, Leon Trotsky, who both made history and wrote it. Cause in history, he said, “refracts itself through a natural selection of accidents.” The more one ponders that statement the more truth one finds.

Of all the historian’s instruments, belief in the grandeur of his theme is the most compelling. Parkman, in his preface to Montcalm and Wolfe, describes his subject, the Seven Years’ War in the American theater, as “the most momentous and far-reaching question ever brought to issue on this continent.” Its outcome determined that there would be an American Revolution. “With it began a new chapter in the annals of the world.” That is the way an author should feel about his subject. It ensures that no reader can put the book down.

What [writing history] requires is simply the courage and self-confidence to make choices and, above all, to leave things out.

This is a frequent problem in military history: One always knows the result of a battle; the difficulty is in reconstructing the course of events during it. It is only when the time comes to write the narrative that you discover that you really don't know what went on. I had that problem with the loss of Alsace in August 1914. In that case I never did find out enough to make it clear in my own mind. I faked it, but nobody noticed.

…the press might do well never to publish anything its reporters have not personally witnessed.

Communiqués have about as much relation to what actually happens as astrology has to the real science of the stars.

As Robert Frost said, "The artist needs only a sample."

A portraitist does not achieve a likeness by giving sleeve buttons and shoelaces equal value to mouth and eyes.

I like this vacuum, this miracle, this great floating monument of work that has no explanation at all. [about Shakespeare]

"Ah, Mr. President, why have such a beautiful action marred by any taint of legality?"~TR Attorney General Philander C. Knox

"It is curious how a precise impropriety hits the public."~John Hay, TR secretary of state

Such was his zeal that he [Eichmann] learned Hebrew and Yiddish the better to deal with the victims.

Eichmann was an extraordinary, not an ordinary man, whose record is hardly one of the "banality" of evil. For the author of that ineffable phrase—as applied to the murder of six million—to have been so taken in by Eichmann's version of himself as just a routine civil servant obeying orders is one of the puzzles of modern journalism. From a presumed historian it is inexplicable.
Any historian with even the most elementary training knows enough to approach his source on the watch for concealment, distortion, or the outright lie. To transfer this caution to live history—that is, to journalism—should be instinctive. That he was just an ordinary man, a "banal" figure, was of course precisely Eichmann's defense, his assumed pose desperately maintained throughout his interrogation and trial. It was the crux of his lawyer's plea. Hannah Arendt's acceptance of it at face value suggests either a remarkable naïveté or else a conscious desire to support Eichmann's defense, which is even more remarkable. Since simple caution warns against ascribing naïveté to the formidable Miss Arendt, one is left with the unhappy alternative.

The Jews became in the process a reminder of Arab failings.

Territory lost through the fortunes of war is a commonplace of history. What is Texas but 267,339 square miles of Mexico settled by Americans and then forcibly declared independent?

Israel is not an affluent society; it is hard-working, with the six-day week still in force. Until last March Israel had no television. This circumstance grew from the strong puritan strain of the early settlers, who were founders of Histadrut, the labor federation, and of the kibbutzim. Although the kibbutz system of communal

ownership is neither predominant nor spreading, the influence of its people is out of proportion to their numbers because they came early, were self-motivated, and, to survive at all, had to have vigor and grit. Kibbutz members in government took the view, violently disputed, that TV would distract from work, disrupt family life, and intensify economic and class differences between settled residents and the newcomers who could not afford to buy television sets. Besides, it would cost money, and the government had none to spare on a luxury. The awkward result is that anyone who buys a TV set, and that includes a large number of Arab citizens, tunes in Cairo or Beirut. Since last March educational television is being tried.

…Scandinavian refugees from too much welfare…

Timna Copper Mines: …the former mines of King Solomon, unexploited under the Turks or the British Mandate, and now restored to production by Solomon's descendants.

If Mao Had Come to Washington [He & Chou wanted to in 1945, while WW2 was still going on & Chiang was in power]:

With prestige and power enhanced by an American connection, the Communists' rise and the Kuomintang's demise, both by then inevitable. would have been accelerated. Three years of civil war in a country desperately weary of war and misgovernment might have been, if not entirely averted, certainly curtailed. The United States, guiltless of prolonging the civil war by consistently aiding the certain loser, would not then have aroused the profound antagonism of the ultimate winner. This antagonism would not then have been expressed in the arrest, beating, and in some cases imprisonment and deportation of American consular officials, the seizure of our consulate in Mukden, and other harassments, and these acts in turn might not then have decided us in anger against recognition of the Communist government. If, in the absence of ill-feeling, we had established relations on some level with the People's Republic, permitting communication in a crisis, and if the Chinese had not been moved by hate and suspicion of us to make common cause with the Soviet Union, it is conceivable that there might have been no Korean War with all its evil consequences. From that war arose the twin specters of an expansionist Chinese communism and in indivisible Sino-Soviet partnership. Without these two concepts to addle statesmen and nourish demagogues, our history, our present, and our future would have been different. We might not have come to Vietnam.

They knew that time was working in their favor, that the mandate of heaven was slowly and irresistibly shifting.

…history is not law-abiding and orderly and will often respond to a breeze as carelessly as a leaf upon a lake.

"There is very little difference, if any," [Ambassador Patrick J. Hurley] reported, between the "avowed principles" of the Kuomintang and the Communists; both "are striving for democratic principles." This may well be the least sophisticated statement ever made by an American ambassador. It reflects the characteristic American refusal to recognize the existence of fundamental divergence; hence the American assumption that there is nothing that cannot be negotiated.

Hurley grew increasingly erratic and disturbed and suddenly resigned in November 1945 with a famous blast, the first salvo of McCarthyism. His mission had been thwarted, he claimed, by a section of the State Department which was "endeavoring to support Communism generally as well as specifically in China."

Fear of communism lay very close beneath the skin, so close that in his final speech of the campaign of 1944 Governor Dewey, the Republican candidate, charged that Communists as a small disciplined minority, acting

through Sidney Hillman, had seized control of the American labor movement and "now…are seizing control of the New Deal through which they aim to control the government of the United States. Roosevelt, said this disciplined and respectable lawyer, had auctioned control of the Democratic Party to the "highest bidder"—i.e., Hillman and Earl Browder—in order to perpetuate himself in office. Through him communism would destroy liberties, religion, and private property.
If a man like Dewey could resort to the tactics of the enormous lie and to a charge as reckless as any in the history of political campaigning, Roosevelt was politician enough to know how little would be needed to revive it.

…we could have adopted the British attitude, described by Sir John Keswick as one of "slightly perplexed resignation."

I personally do not remember anything very significant about [Zionist leader Stephen] Wise, except that he was rather frightening. He wore an enormous black hat and, I think, a black cloak, and when we met him on the way to school on Central Park West near his synagogue, he used to sweep off the hat with a bow to a child of about eight and say in his booming voice, "Good morning, Miss Wertheem," a way in which no one else pronounced the name.

Kissinger: Self-Portrait: [Seems to be a review of his first volume of memoirs, though no title or other publishing info is given. 1979]

For example, out of the blue in August 1969 a Soviet Embassy official asked a State Department official at lunch what would be the United States' reaction to to a Soviet attack on Chinese nuclear facilities. Mr. Nixon's speechwriting staff had a specialist for every tone the President wished to adopt. In 1969 China had only one ambassador serving abroad—in Cairo. Through names presented privately by Kissinger to Ambassador Anatoly I. Dobrynin, the release of 550 out of 800 hardship cases of Soviet Jews was obtained over a period of time. On a presidential journey every member of the official party is given a little book listing every event and movement timed to the minute, together with charts showing where everyone is to stand.

…the papal audience, during which smoke suddenly poured from the garments of Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird (in response to Kissinger's suggestion that he dispose of his cigar, he had concealed it alive in his suit pocket)…

…Dean Acheson, asked why a meeting of senior advisers lasted so long, replied, "We are all old and we are all eloquent."

…[Kissinger:] the sardonic gentleman who once, on being thanked by an effusive well-wisher for "saving the world," is reputed to have replied, "You're welcome"…

Apropos of the low protocol rank of his office, which seated him far below the salt at official dinners, "I spent much time calculating the distance separating me from the Presidential person and the odds on my reaching the car before the Presidential limousine pulled out." Who can envy the life of officialdom weighed down by these concerns?

We have come a long way from the election of 1888, when the British Ambassador to the United States advised a correspondent in a private letter to vote for Grover Cleveland and, on this being leaked to the press, the Ambassador's recall was demanded for interference in American politics.

In the end, Christmas bombing and all, after four years' talk at a cost of nineteen thousand more American lives and untold more lives and destruction in Vietnam, the terms obtained were no better than might have been obtained at the start. The four years of additional death and devastation were a waste.

Kissinger complains that "we faced a constant credibility gap at home" and that he could have succeeded "if the public had trusted our goals," but he never traces any connection between the public's lack of trust and the acts and policies of the administration he represented. He has no inkling of the concomitant damage: that the cost of playing tough may come too high; that a foreign policy that alienates one's countrymen and causes dislike and distrust of government is not worth what it might gain against the adversary; that a nation's strength lies ultimately in its self-esteem and confidence in what is right; and that whatever damages these damages the nation.

Mankind's Better Moments
[I remembered this essay from 1980, and the main reason I bought the book was to reread it. I need a hit of optimism every now and then.]

Consider how the Dutch accomplished the miracle of making land out of sea. By progressive enclosure of the Zuider Zee over the last sixty years, they have added half a million acres to their country, enlarging its area by eight percent and providing homes, farms, and towns for close to a quarter of a million people. The will to do the impossible, the spirit of can-do that overtakes our species every now and then, was never more manifest than in this earth-altering act by the smallest of the major European nations.

Today the Afsluitdijk, or Zuider Zee road, is a normal thoroughfare. To drive across it between the sullen ocean on one side and new land on the other is for that moment to feel optimism for the human race.

Great endeavor requires vision and some kind of compelling impulse, not necessarily practical as in the case of the Dutch, but sometimes less definable, more exalted, as is the case of the Gothic cathedrals of the Middle Ages. The architectural explosion that produced this multitude of soaring vaults—arched, ribbed, pierced with jeweled light, studded with thousands of figures of the stone-carver's art—represents in size, splendor, and numbers one of the great, permanent artistic achievements of human hands. What accounts for it? Not religious fervor alone but the zeal of a dynamic age, a desire to outdo, an ambition for the biggest and the best. Only the general will, shared by nobles, merchants, guilds, artisans, and commoners, could command the resources and labor to sustain so great an undertaking. Each group contributed donations, especially the magnates of commerce, who felt relieved thereby from the guilt of money-making. Voluntary work programs involved all classes. "Who has ever seen or heard tell in times past," wrote an observer, "that powerful princes of the world, that men brought up in honors and wealth, that nobles—men and women—have bent their haughty necks to the harness of carts and, like beasts of burden, have dragged to the abode of Christ these wagons loaded with wines, grains, oil, stones, timber and all that is necessary for the construction of the church?" [A grand vision, but as I type it I feel my skepticism kick in about that "voluntary"…]

The placing of Greek temples, like the Temple of Poseidon on the promontory at Sunion, outlined against the piercing blue of the Aegean Sea, Poseidon's home; the majesty of Michelangelo's sculptured figures in stone; Shakespeare's command of language and knowledge of the human soul; the intricate order of Bach, the enchantment of Mozart; the purity of Chinese monochrome pottery with its lovely names—celadon, oxblood, peach blossom, clair de lune; the exuberance of Tiepolo's ceilings where, without picture frames to limit movement, a whole world in exquisitely beautiful colors lives and moves in the sky; the prose and poetry of all the writers from Homer to Cervantes to Jane Austen and John Keats to Dostoevski and Chekhov—who made all these things? We—our species—did.

There was a springtime in the eighteenth century when, through knowledge and reason, everything seemed possible; when reason was expected to break through fog, and man, armed with knowledge and reason, would be able at last to control his own fate and construct a good society.

To me it is comforting rather than otherwise to feel that history is determined by the illogical human record and not by large immutable scientific laws beyond our power to deflect.

Had Cleopatra's nose been shorter, said Pascal, the whole aspect of the world would have been changed.

I do not know of an original idea to have importantly affected the modern world which has come from Asia or Africa (except perhaps for Gandhi's concept of non-violent resistance or civil disobedience, and, after all, Thoreau had the same idea earlier). [She's writing in 1966… "here it is, your moment of Zen…"]

Vietnam: When, Why, and How to Get Out
1968:
On February 23 the Wall Street Journal, which is not committed to any position except one of hardheaded realism, acknowledged that "the logic of the battlefield" suggests that the U.S. could be "forced out of an untenable position" and that this country should "be prepared for the bitter taste of a defeat beyond America's power to prevent."

If China has not become the tool of Russia, why should North Vietnam become the tool of China?

Coalition in Vietnam—Not Worth One More Life
1972:
…in one moment of transitory agreement Chiang and Mao were photographed across a table raising their glasses to each other with cordial smiles of an old hate…

To walk out of Vietnam might still be done with dignity. Let us forgo for a little while further talk of honor.

The Citizen Versus the Military
Perhaps if there had been more college bastards instead of Calleys, there might have been mutinies or sitdowns instead of My Lais—certainly a preferable alternative.

Probably if we had a woman in the White House and a majority of females in Congress, we could be out of Vietnam yesterday.

If the college-educated youths become the reserve officers upon whom the Army depends, then they are in a position to exert influence. That is the place to pull a strike. If all reserve officers walked out, the Army could not move.

To serve the state is what the Constitution meant, not, as the Gun Lobby pretends, the right to keep a pistol under your pillow and shoot at whomever you want to.

When fighting reaches the classic formula recently voiced by a soldier in the act of setting fire to a hamlet in Vietnam, "We must destroy it in order to save it," one must go further than duty and honor and ask, "Where is common sense?"

Eric says

Early on I was of a mind that Tuchman was a far better historian than essayist, but really started warming to her outlook on things as she took the press to task. I made note of this quote. "Communiques have about as much relation to what actually happens as astrology has to the science of the stars." I sense in that line a caution that a goodly number of journalists could heed today. Later, she started losing me again as her essays became more about contemporaneous goings on as she added essays from the decades of the '60s and '70s. The writing was as equally good, but again her ability to write clearly of history showed up he insights into current events.

Her sharing of the processes surrounding the writer's craft put me back into thinking of Dorothy Sayer's "Mind of the Maker," giving the author god-like power in bringing stories alive for the reader(in this case listener). I found her thoughts on the distinction between prose, poetry and non-fiction (for which term she preferred 'the estate of reality') enlightening, as well.

I recall reading her "The Guns of August" as a teenager, and this work makes me think I ought to give that one another go.

Harry Allagree says

One may not always agree with historian, Barbara Tuchman's interpretation, but one must admire her strength of conviction & her unshakeable resolve to examine history, particularly that of the United States, with factual insight & fairness as close to complete as a human can get. I never tire of her excellent writing style which captivates you, not least for the sheer beauty of language & expression.

For me the most valuable chapters in the book are in Section III, "Learning From History", at the end. As early as the '60's & '70's Tuchman was aware of serious flaws in the American political structure on all levels, & was unabashedly offering shockingly innovative suggestions for its overhaul. Her thoughts on a Cabinet structured leadership of the country, in place of one President, inevitably susceptible to misuse of power, is not only relevant in a post-election of Trump America: it should be required reading for every citizen of the U.S.! Based on her observations, we're seeing what could develop into a very dark ending for our country &, indeed, the world -- a process, she says, which started back c. 1960. The problem is that many of us don't want to read the truth, much less do something about the problem!

Margie says

I very much enjoyed this book. Tuchman is definitely from a different era, and writes about looking back to more refined language while grappling with issues of whether or not to include vulgarity if it's part of the character of an historical figure. She also writes with the racism that was common to her class and era; she ascribes motivations and worldviews to "the Oriental", for example. It's a bit jarring, but mostly fascinating as an artifact of that era.

The book is divided into essays and lectures on writing about history, and then essays and articles that are historical in content. Both are fascinating; her historical articles often examine lesser figures or moments as a way of illuminating larger issues.

And some of her sentences positively sing. It's been a long time since I've been so tempted to underline (don't worry, Mary Jo - I'm not marking up your book!).

It was stunning to see the extent to which some of her essays about Nixon and Vietnam apply to Bush and Iraq.

James says

The first portion of the book is about the author's philosophy and methods for writing popular narrative histories. It's well worth a read by anyone who has any interest in the subject. The rest of the book is assorted articles, All are at least 40+ years old and didn't age well and in the light of hindsight didn't come true. Tuchman was a product of the earlier 20th century and died before the end of the Cold War, this is one of the reasons that some of these articles seem so pessimistic.

Lobstergirl says

I'm somewhat new to Tuchman, having read only *The Guns of August* and this 1981 compilation of essays and speeches ranging from the 1930s to the 1970s. By far the most interesting pieces are in the first section, "The Craft," where she discusses her habits of research and writing. Among her pointers: use primary sources only; and edit ruthlessly. Resist including some irresistible anecdote if it doesn't help or advance your narrative. The second section is titled "The Yield" - meaning what her craft yielded - and the third section is titled "Learning from History." In this section, "Why Policy-Makers Do Not Listen" was very good, because it contains little historical set-pieces rather than simply opinion. Here we learn why President McKinley did not listen when deciding whether to annex the Philippines, why President Wilson did not listen when sending the Marines to Vera Cruz, and why President Roosevelt did not accept the truths of the Stalinist purges which were being reported to him by American Embassy staff in Moscow.

Tuchman mentions several pieces that she had axed from the collection pre-publication because they read as too out-of-date, including an account of President Kennedy's funeral. But her 1967 piece "Israel: Land of Unlimited Impossibilities," reads today as almost ridiculously boosterish. Rather than standing up to the test of time, her criterion for inclusion, it seems like something frozen in a cheery time capsule. And the essay "Israel's Swift Sword," written also in 1967, for *The Atlantic*, has such a worshipful tone it could have been ghostwritten by the IDF. It contains the not very historical sentence "Where the Jew questions, the Arab dreams," and points more starkly than any other essay here to Tuchman's own dictum that "a historian needs...a perspective of at least twenty-five years, and preferably fifty, to form an opinion of any value." From the perspective of the 21st century, these two might be the weakest pieces, although they do have some competition. Her writing is strongest when she's writing actual history, not opining on Vietnam or Watergate (which, when she was writing about them, were current). Those particular essays don't stand out from the crowd of contemporary opinion pieces on the subjects.

Erik Graff says

Rich Hyde introduced me to Tuchman via her WWI books, The Proud Tower and The Guns of August, during high school. Since then I've kept an eye out for her work, buying such titles as I have found and reading them with varying degrees of profit. Some, such as her book on the 14th century, were a bit beyond me at the time and not very profitable. All, however, have been enjoyable.

This collection, arranged and explained by herself, covers the range of Tuchman's work, everything from historiography to journalism. In it one is exposed not only to the exceptional quality of her writing but also to her advice to aspiring writers of histories.

I??l says

Wow. There are many many things one could relate to what Tuchman lists as do's and don'ts of the narrative history. Her perspective is fair & objective -although she claims no historian can ever be objective in his way of writing history. Plus, you don't necessarily have to be a historian to find common grounds with Tuchman. Even those who experienced writing a straightforward 10-page history paper would go "I know right?" as a reply to hassle and rigor of narrating history she presents in the book. My favorite part is where she says citing one's self is very absurd for he could just simply refer to the primary source he used in his previous work. I read somewhere that citing yourself is intellectual masturbation. I guess that could be the sole reason why anyone would want to refer to himself as a source. Oh god. Her dedication to her research and her enthusiasm to crave knowledge set quite an example for me. Only, she's so much into what she's doing/done that after some certain point you feel you don't wanna read anything about, say, the maneuvers General Stilwell conducted before his major mission. Well, so much to learn, so much to experience, though.

Mark Eickhoff says

This was an outstanding book of essays written by Ms. Tuchman between the 1930's and the 1970's. It concentrates on the craft of researching and writing history and offers much in the way of practical advice that I will definitely use. She hooked me with her very first essay when she observed, "bad writing is bad history." It is a theme that she stresses again and again throughout the book: historians must learn to write well and to write with the reader in mind. Research is the fun part of being a historian and writing is the hard part. Historians will spend years in research and never get around to writing about what they have learned or sharing it with others. Historical writing should be clear and concise and easily understood. Her advice on historical analysis often runs counter to the prevailing wisdom in some schools of academic history and she is especially hard on Marxists, psychohistorians, quantitative historians and others who seek to "systemize" history into some sort of organized pattern and meaning. She correctly notes that history is made up of individual people acting on their own unique thoughts, desires, problems, and concerns and that their behavior and actions will simply not conform to such systems of thinking. A lot of really great, thoughtful essays.

Evan Leach says

Practicing History is a collection of 33 short essays by Pulitzer Prize winning historian Barbara Tuchman. I am a big fan of Tuchman's work, which includes one of the most interesting nonfiction books I've ever read (A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century) and a true masterpiece (The Guns of August). This collection wasn't **quite** as engrossing as her longer works, but there's still a lot to like. The book is divided into three sections:

The Craft
The first third of the book consists of eight essays dedicated to the technical aspects of the historian's craft. Tuchman talks candidly and extensively about selecting a subject, history vs. fiction writing, her research methods, and challenges confronting the aspiring historian. On one hand, it's pretty cool to listen to a true master of her craft discuss the nuts & bolts of what she does, and readers interested in pursuing a career as a historian will likely find these essays invaluable. On the other hand, readers interested in learning about actual historical fact will be disappointed here, and while this section was interesting I was ready to move on after 90 pages.

The Yield
The second section contains a rather random selection of 18 essays covering a wide variety of subjects. Most of these are speeches Tuchman gave or articles she wrote that were never expanded to book length. Highlights include an interesting look at Israel in the 1960's, a brief discussion of how the U.S. was drawn into the First World War, and a "what if" scenario questioning what would have happened if the U.S. government had handled the Mao situation differently. Tuchman also includes reviews of books on Woodrow Wilson's psyche and Henry Kissinger that I thought were good food for thought. These essays are mostly pretty short, so they're not as deep and meaty as her longer books, but overall this section was very solid.

Learning from History

The final section includes 12 more essays on a variety of subjects, although over half of them are dedicated to the Vietnam War (written when the conflict was still raging, for the most part) and the Watergate affair. Other selections include pieces on generalship, why policy-makers often ignore good advice, and how lessons from the past can guide the future. In these essays, Tuchman is much more opinionated than in the previous section, staking a position and marshaling the facts to defend it. You may not agree with all of her arguments, but Tuchman's grade-A prose and sharp wit shine through and make these essays a pleasure to read.

Overall

First section aside, which is more a technical guide to Tuchman's craft, these essays are the "B side" of Babs' repertoire: subjects which she covered, but not to the same degree as in her longer works. It's all good stuff, but overall I didn't find this collection as riveting as her earlier, full-length books. **3 stars**, recommended for Tuchmaniacs who can't get enough of her characteristic style.

Kent says

This book is divided into three parts: the "craft"--Tuchmann's guidelines for writing history; the "yield"--a collection of short historical pieces that are intended, I suppose, to demonstrate her guidelines; and "learning from history"--a collection of articles and speeches with lessons she has drawn from history.

Of the three sections, the first was the most valuable. Her full length books I think are some of the best examples I've come across of really excellent narrative history. It was helpful to read her reflections on how to write good history. If I only had the book with me just now I would provide some good quotes. Very helpful for historian wannabes like me.

The second section was pretty boring. Most of the articles were from her journalist days, and to my tastes they were pretty ephemeral, politically-focused works. And I can't say that I find the histories of modern China and modern Israel terribly fascinating even on a good day. One of her articles in particular, "Mankind's Better Moments," was execrable. In response to the currently regnant pessimism regarding human nature, she pointed out some of the better achievements of the human race throughout history. Though the exercise could have been done well, she ended up saying, almost in these words, "All this our hands have made." I put down the book quaking, expecting any moment the judgment promised in the Bible for this kind of attitude.

The last section was worthwhile, but from a secular perspective and therefore severely limited in value.

Kristi Richardson says

“Nothing sickens me more than the closed door of a library.”

This book originally published in the 80’s, is a series of articles, lectures and speeches collected by Ms. Tuchman from her years of writing about history and historical happenings.

Some of my favorite topics were her experience on writing history and the value of libraries. She liked to use note cards and when she had enough on her subject, she would start to go through them and if she couldn’t use it in one chapter it would carry on to the next. She even talked about the leftover note cards that just didn’t end up in the book because she felt it would change the dynamic in ways that she didn’t want. I found this all very interesting because I enjoy researching topics but not writing them in a cohesive column.

She also had chapters on Kissinger, (she didn’t really like him). She felt that he loved the attention too much, and that his geopolitical motives were wrong in the end, that he should have focused more on the local needs of the people.

Israel was a favorite topic of Tuchman’s. There are a couple of chapters on why the Israeli’s were such great fighters and the early years of Israel. These were of great interest to me as she touches on how the Israeli’s have lost their way by stealing the West Bank.

One of the greatest insights I got from this book was how America has also lost its way. She makes a point that at one time we had a disgraced President pick his own successor, who picked his own Vice President and that the Congress refused to impeach Nixon. To her it was a total over throw of what our Constitution stands for. I found this very enlightening.

Some of the essays may be a little dated, but all of the essays are imminently readable and enjoyable. I highly recommend this book.
