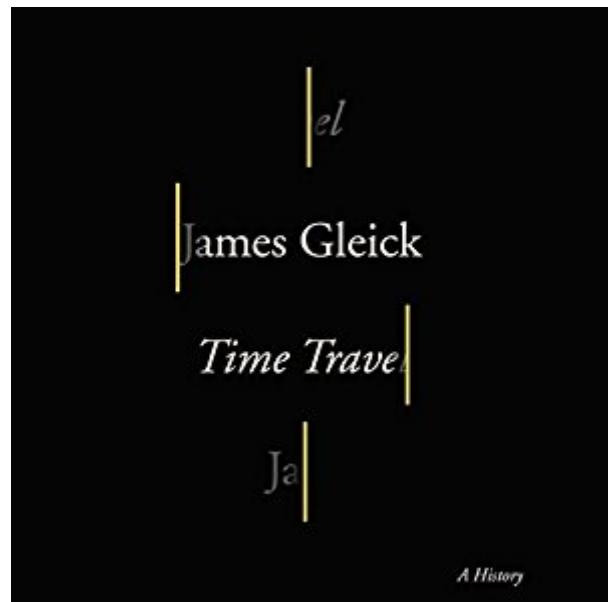


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Time Travel: A History



Synopsis

From the acclaimed author of *The Information* and *Chaos*, a mind-bending exploration of time travel: its subversive origins, its evolution in literature and science, and its influence on our understanding of time itself. Gleick's story begins at the turn of the 20th century, with the young H. G. Wells writing and rewriting the fantastic tale that became his first book, an international sensation: *The Time Machine*. A host of forces were converging to transmute the human understanding of time, some philosophical and some technological - the electric telegraph, the steam railroad, the discovery of buried civilizations, and the perfection of clocks. Gleick tracks the evolution of time travel as an idea in the culture, from Marcel Proust to Doctor Who, from Woody Allen to Jorge Luis Borges. He explores the inevitable looping paradoxes and examines the porous boundary between pulp fiction and modern physics. Finally, he delves into a temporal shift that is unsettling our own moment: the instantaneous wired world, with its all-consuming present and vanishing future.

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Customer Reviews

As usual, Gleick writes about his subject, the cultural phenomenon of interest in time travel, in a insightful and engaging manner. Fans of Gleick's earlier works, however, should know that this book is very different from its predecessors. In *Chaos*, Gleick described a branch of science that only graduate physics would encounter and explained it to a wider audience. While his work on information science was more wide-ranging it followed a similar pattern. Gleick's biographies of Feynman and Newton explained their contributions to science to those without a technical

background. Time Travel, on the other hand, primarily focuses on answering the interesting question, "Why has time travel so consumed the interest of readers of literature since the late 19th century while before it appeared only in hints and scattered fragments?" To answer this, Gleick engages in a thorough review of time-travel literature but only dips his toes into the actual science of time. In other words, the book is more an exploration of a branch of literature than a non-technical introduction to a branch of science. Even so, Time Travel is a good read and I would recommend the book both to those familiar with Gleick's earlier work and those who have not have not enjoyed that particular pleasure.

As a teenager one of my favorite books was H.G. Wells' The Time Machine. I would have given anything to be able to hop onto that Victorian bicycle-type machine, screw on the levers, and roar off into the distant future or ancient past. As James Gleick makes clear in this fascinating book, countless others have shared my dream, both before and after Wells' own time. Time Travel: A History is not an easy book to categorize: it is part scientific treatise, part philosophical musing, and part literary review. It is, however, an easy book with which to fall in love, one of those special though hard to define volumes that makes its readers want to keep it close at hand, to be dipped into whenever the need for wonder is great. The fourteen chapters in Time Travel: A History run roughly, though not consistently, chronologically from the nineteenth century to the present. Of necessity there are a number of scientific and philosophical discussions on whether or not time travel is possible, how, if it should turn out to be possible it might be accomplished, and whether or not such travel would be advisable (the "kill-your-own-grandfather dilemma," for example.) The concepts here are deep, but accessible to an audience which may not have scientific training but does possess a lively sense of curiosity. I found the segments dealing with literary time travel the most interesting. It is rare to find within one volume discussions ranging from Proust to Wells to Heinlein to Le Guin to Finney to Twain to Sterne to Amis to Eliot to Asimov, but Gleick has accomplished it. As a devotee of J.R.R. Tolkien I kept hoping Gleick would include his unfinished time travel tale The Lost Road, but I suppose there have to be limits, even to time travel! (If that piqued your interest I'd recommend Verlyn Flieger's A Question of Time: J.R.R. Tolkien's Road to Faerie.) This is a book of less than 350 pages, including a lengthy bibliography which readers looking for more time wanderings will find invaluable, but it holds within it a wealth of knowledge and speculation. Time Travel: A History, is like the rest of James Gleick's work: a book to be read and reread and savored many times.

Time Travel was an enjoyable read. Gleick is one of my favorite writers and, stylistically, he doesn't disappoint here. But part of what I loved about Chaos and The Information was how densely packed they were with scientific research and history. As a reader, it was something of a discovery process. This was similar in a sense, but he traced the concept of Time Travel through literature and media rather than science. References to scientific conceptions of time were relatively fleeting. One big surprise and disappointment was that he never addressed the various iterations of Quantum Eraser Experiments. Work from researchers like Anton Zeilinger. I can't think of anything in physics that is more pertinent to the question of time than experiments that look like retro-causality! Gleick has previously dealt with quantum physics (Feynman), so why did he avoid it here?? I can't imagine he didn't consider it. As a reader, it felt like a huge void.

This book is less about the science behind the prospect of time travel than about how that concept entered and captured the common imagination. Gleick looks at the creation of the notion by H.G. Wells -- the few earlier attempts were indirect and polemical -- and explores why it took humanity so long to consider the possibility of free movement through the fourth dimension. As the book proceeds, he considers other literary and film stories about time travel while also dipping his toe into the scientific debate about its plausibility. This book will not satisfy those who are curious about the science, and even avocational readers of popular physics will find it slight. It is much more a work of cultural exploration. In that, the author succeeds with this relatively light but very thoughtful book.

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