



Whittaker Chambers: A Biography

Sam Tanenhaus

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Whittaker Chambers is the first biography of this complex and enigmatic figure. Drawing on dozens of interviews and on materials from forty archives in the United States and abroad--including still-classified KGB dossiers--Tanenhaus traces the remarkable journey that led Chambers from a sleepy Long Island village to center stage in America's greatest political trial and then, in his last years, to a unique role as the godfather of post-war conservatism. This biography is rich in startling new information about Chambers's days as New York's "hottest literary Bolshevik"; his years as a Communist agent and then defector, hunted by the KGB; his conversion to Quakerism; his secret sexual turmoil; his turbulent decade at Time magazine, where he rose from the obscurity of the book-review page to transform the magazine into an oracle of apocalyptic anti-Communism. But all this was a prelude to the memorable events that began in August 1948, when Chambers testified against Alger Hiss in the spy case that changed America. **Whittaker Chambers** goes far beyond all previous accounts of the Hiss case, re-creating its improbably twists and turns, and disentangling the motives that propelled a vivid cast of characters in unpredictable directions.

A rare conjunction of exacting scholarship and narrative art, **Whittaker Chambers** is a vivid tapestry of 20th century history.

Whittaker Chambers: A Biography Details

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From Reader Review Whittaker Chambers: A Biography for online ebook

David Simonetti says

This is well written and compelling. Whittaker Chambers is an American Hero who has the courage to expose an avowed communist who betrayed his country, yet the left continues to this very day to live in a world of denial about Alger Hiss. Soviet archives clearly established that he was a spy, but the NY Times, Eleanor Roosevelt and other hypocrites defended this scum. This is a great American story and well worth reading for anyone who is interested in learning about the McCarthy era and what was really at stake in terms of Communist infiltration of the US Government.

Kbrew says

Political conservative is radicalized at Columbia- Joins the Party, eventually is spy master for East Coast, is disenchanted by Stalin's coniving with Hitler, drops out of the party. Retas his cohorts out in the 40's. Riviting history of the Communist movement and activities during the 1920's 30's period. Peoples motivation for joining, quiting or sticking it out. The effect it had on US politics in the 40's and 50's.

ALLEN says

An intriguing public figure deserves an excellent biography, and in Sam Tanenhaus's WHITTAKER CHAMBERS (1997), we are in the realm of the very best. With massive documentation and succinct yet elegant prose, Tanenhaus profiles the famous writer-turned-Soviet-spy-turned-informer with all his warts and wrinkles, but with a real understanding of the mid-Twentieth Century and Whittaker Chambers' role in it. Just yesterday I read a book about HIGH NOON the movie and its role in the Hollywood Blacklist, in which Chamber's friend-turned-nemesis Alger Hiss pops up not once, but six times. These times deserve a sympathetic reading of Chambers' WITNESS (1952) and the update and more thorough understanding that Tanenhaus' biography affords. It is best to read both.

Witness

Charles Kerns says

Tanenhaus shows Chambers to be a mess, but he does so sympathetically in the beginning and then, as the book proceeds to the trial and beyond, heroically. Nixon comes off as only he could and Hiss as someone who could have avoided it all if only he had followed John Foster Dulles advice.

If you are upset about the rants going on in the 2010s, then this book puts the US fight between raving righters and liberals into perspective. It hints at the lure of commies in the '20s, it shows the infighting between true believers, but it dwells on the HUAC days.

A good history read if you are young and need background to understand today's US politics. Also, if you do not believe that the world is run by the arrogant, self-serving, and ruthless, this is a good antidote to your naïveté.

David says

Really good biography -- very even-handed, even detached, although still perhaps sympathetic to Chambers, but not an apologist. Detected no bias here, although some lefties might call it "pro-Chambers."

Read following Chambers's book "Witness." Much, much more ground covered here than in "Witness," and myriad sources make for a thorough examination of the Hiss cases and the tenor of the times. Extremely fast-moving and clear writing. Would highly recommend.

Lee Ann says

Wow. This is a book to re-read. It is thorough, slow and in-depth. ST covers not just the facts but the implications of WC's life. I have read Witness and was blown away. It has been called the greatest autobiography of the 20th century and deservedly so. ST highlighted several aspects of Witness that I had overlooked, such as how heavily WC's thought was influenced by the great Russian novelists. ST also develops WC's political philosophy, showing how WC always maintained a European rather than American mentality. WC saw the world through a class-based Marxist dialectic. His rejection of Communism developed from the same philosophy that first led to his rejection of capitalism. It's easy to see why WC never really felt at home in the conservative movement. Then again, it is telling that it was the conservative movement that made a place for someone like WC to write and think as he pleased while the progressive movement could not. WC was too cultured to be much interested in commerce and the economically oriented conservative movement did not sit well with his quietist humanism.

ST's book also provides a kind of parallel biography of mid-century liberalism. The progressive movement became more rigid and more class based as it became the default setting for the intellectual classes. Anti-anti-communism became more about distinguishing oneself from the goatherds as it was about principles. The liberal establishment rejected WC mainly for being a fat working-class slob. Admitting Hiss' guilt would be to admit that the enemy was not the Other but was one of the progressives themselves. Worse, they'd have to admit that the Right was right. A pathological denial of Hiss' guilt was better than admitting that the hoi polloi got it right.

Here is ST on the liberal failure to see past political labels: "This failure, suggested by one shrewd analyst, the literary critic Leslie Field, grew out of 'the implicit dogma of American liberalism,' which inflexibly assumed that in any political drama 'the liberal per se is the hero.' For Hiss's supporters to admit his guilt also meant admitting 'that mere liberal principle is not in itself a guarantee against evil; that the wrongdoer is not always the other -- "they" and not "us"; that there is no magic in the words 'left' or 'progressive' or 'socialist' that can prevent deceit and abuse of power.'" This is a brilliant work and is highly, highly recommended.

Dave Summers says

Solid biography of one of the most truly unusual and yet important historic figures of modern times. Whittaker Chambers was a human node, around which the multiple gears of US/Soviet post-war tension, the birth and death of McCarthyist paranoia, and most importantly, the trial of Alger Hiss, spun hard and fast. Highly recommended.

Brent Thomas says

This book is a great complement to the magnificent masterpiece, *Witness*. *Witness*, of course, was one man's fairly honest take on his own life, the great Hiss case, and defining conflict of our time: communism versus freedom, a conflict that continues to this very day. It fills in a lot of gaps with the less varnished, ugly truth along with some important and uplifting insights. Here was a flawed and yet brilliant man, whose motives were not always pure but who honestly tried to do the right thing. And man, could he write!! Tanenhaus takes the proper level to analyze Chambers and mainly sticks to the facts, leaving me with more empathy for the man who broke open the mantle of righteous indignation the left was using to hide its treachery and justified the Republican search for traitors in government.

Nathan says

An amazing and intimate account of a man's journey into and out of Communism, as a spy, as a political philosophy, as a life. He not only leaves Communism but then finds the courage to expose and fight it.

Monica Perez says

Excellent, fair, thorough biography of Whittaker Chambers, a fascinating character. I would still read Chambers' *Witness* first--it's essentially the same story but first hand.

Neal says

By tracing the arc of Whittaker Chambers's seduction and disillusionment with Communism, and then conversion into one of the leading voices of the conservative movement in the United States, Sam Tanenhaus illuminates the attraction of Communism to young intellectuals in the interwar years. Tanenhaus's writing is clear, even-headed and exciting. This last adjective is no exaggeration. As a young reader who has grown up after the end of the Cold War, I found the biography explained why talented individuals would devote their lives to a political struggle, and what the personal costs of such devotion entails. Retrospectively, it's easy to dismiss Communism as one large lie; but it's insufficient to understanding why millions of citizens were drawn to it in real time.

Charles Lindsey says

Almost five stars; call it 4.75 stars. A deeply pleasurable read, thanks to Sam Tanenhaus' lean, propulsive prose. Rarely do I read a biography so full of facts that still refuses to get bogged down in them (even though this is of the genre that has the subject being born on the first page. Gimme context first!). A great grounding in a founding figure in postwar American anti-communism, one in which personality shines, if anything, even brighter than history. And Chambers' bizarre personality, and undeniable talents, are inextricable from his role.

My missing 0.25 stars are due only to lost opportunities. In my dreams, this book would have been a twice-as-fat dual biography of Alger Hiss and Whittaker Chambers. How they created themselves, how they met, how they diverged, how America judges them today. I can also imagine reading about how Chambers' closeted sexuality might have fit into his guilty repudiation of political subversion (or have I heard too many jokes about J. Edgar Hoover in drag?); Tanenhaus, however, devotes no more than a page to what seems like it should have been political dynamite in the 1950s. There also should have been a lot more photos. This was a highly visual book -- cinematic, really -- and I wanted to see Chambers' family, and the notorious pumpkin, and photostats of those incriminating scribbles. But the deep themes, such as Chambers' shifting messianism, his turning from one zealotry to another, how he inspired religious conservatives of my parents' generation to treat communism as not just America's enemy but God's, come through bright and clear.

I enjoyed reliving the ebb and flow of Americans' perception of the USSR and communism. Do kids today even know how infatuated intellectuals once were with Lenin and Stalin? How American communists had to pivot on their heels every time Uncle Joe did something like shake hands with Hitler, and then go to war against Hitler? How "Mission to Moscow" made it seem patriotic for Americans to work with Soviet communism? And how the postwar climate that tried to reckon with communism's ghastly reality slid into monotonous, mindless Red-baiting?

The best thing I can say about this biography is that it drives you straight to the Internet to look for the freshest take on the Venona intercepts and other clues about the extent of communist spying in that era. You want to read what Hiss's defenders insist upon. You want to ponder the difference between McCarthyism and reasonable national self-scrutiny. Can America still find room for people with subversive ideas (who may repent of them) if they refrain from subversive acts? How elastic can loyalty be?

Paul Leddy says

Another wonderful biography that gives a glimpse into the world that Whittaker Chambers lived in. The court proceedings surrounding the libel case against Alger Hiss (whom Chambers had stated was a communist spy) are particularly riveting.

Jeff says

The word that comes up more than any other in reviews of this book is "magisterial," and since that about sums it up I'll leave it at that.

FiveBooks says

Professor Harvey Klehr has chosen to discuss Sam Tanenhaus's *Whittaker Chambers*, on FiveBooks as one of the top five on his subject - Communism in America, saying that:

"Whittaker Chambers was a key figure in the first major post-World War II spy cases. He was a disillusioned communist who is a fascinating man, and one of the attractions of this book is that it really gives Chambers his due."

The full interview is available here: <http://thebrowser.com/books/interview...>
