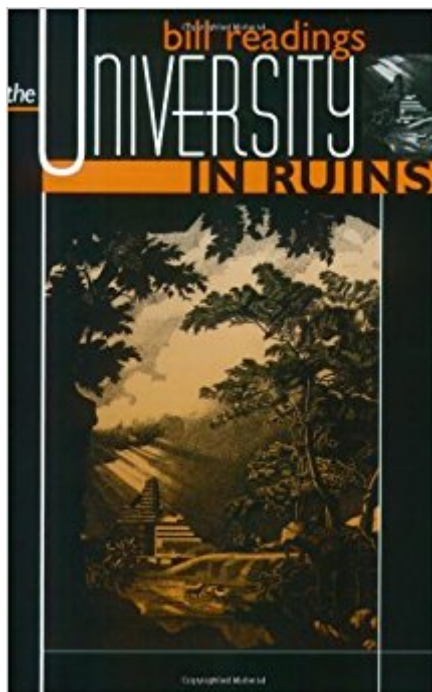


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# The University In Ruins



## Synopsis

It is no longer clear what role the University plays in society. The structure of the contemporary University is changing rapidly, and we have yet to understand what precisely these changes will mean. Is a new age dawning for the University, the renaissance of higher education under way? Or is the University in the twilight of its social function, the demise of higher education fast approaching? We can answer such questions only if we look carefully at the different roles the University has played historically and then imagine how it might be possible to live, and to think, amid the ruins of the University. Tracing the roots of the modern American University in German philosophy and in the work of British thinkers such as Newman and Arnold, Bill Readings argues that historically the integrity of the modern University has been linked to the nation-state, which it has served by promoting and protecting the idea of a national culture. But now the nation-state is in decline, and national culture no longer needs to be either promoted or protected. Increasingly, universities are turning into transnational corporations, and the idea of culture is being replaced by the discourse of "excellence." On the surface, this does not seem particularly pernicious. The author cautions, however, that we should not embrace this techno-bureaucratic appeal too quickly. The new University of Excellence is a corporation driven by market forces, and, as such, is more interested in profit margins than in thought. Readings urges us to imagine how to think, without concession to corporate excellence or recourse to romantic nostalgia within an institution in ruins. The result is a passionate appeal for a new community of thinkers.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Books on the future of higher education are a booming business these days. Readings situates his discussion of the modern university in the context of decades of debate over the role of education in the 20th century. He draws on Kantian ideals of the university as a unit dedicated to a single agenda to demonstrate how the modern university's pursuit of "excellence" is a meaningless search. In fact, the very idea of "excellence" is devoid of meaning, he argues, merely a rallying cry to unite the academic troops as bureaucratic administrations attempt to keep their universities financially sound. Once the university was the repository and defender of national culture, but now it is an institution whose decline coincides with the rise of postmodernism. How can universities teach truth and objectivity when the relation between subject and object is in doubt? Unfortunately, there are no new answers here. For decades, academicians have sounded the death knell for culture; Marxist critics long ago decried the corporatization of the university; and discussions of the aim of pedagogy, even those like Readings's that stress the importance of community and obligation, are easy to come by. Readings's proposal, which does not make its full appearance until the final 10 pages of the book, is that the university adopt a course of study that emphasizes how we think and how such thinking intersects with and affects the outside world, but it is incomplete and too optimistic and makes for a disappointing ending to a largely disappointing work. Copyright 1996 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Readings argues compellingly that the university has outlived its purpose--a purpose defined two centuries ago, when the nation-state and the modern notion of culture came together to make the university the guardian of national culture...What, Readings asks, "is the point of the University, if we realize that we are no longer to strive to realize a national identity, be it an ethnic essence or a republican will?" What happens when the culture the university was meant to preserve goes global and transnational along with everything else? This is an intriguing argument. And...it helps to explain much. From this perspective, for example, Readings is wonderfully insightful on the "culture wars" that have wracked universities and bewildered the public for two decades...Readings offers a call to arms to those of us who live and work in universities as well as to those on the outside--a call to better understand our position in a changing world, to come out of our professional shells, stop pining for a lost world, and actively seek to construct something different...[This is] a remarkable contribution. (David Harvey *The Atlantic*) The University is a ruined institution, forced to abandon its historical *raison d'être* and enmeshed in consumerist ideology...The task that substitutes for the pursuit of culture is the adherence to Excellence, which relegates the university to the treadmill of

global capitalism. It turns out graduates as objects, not subjects, at so much per head, under the scrutiny of the state bureaucracy. That is the nub of Bill Readings's superbly argued pessimism...His essay provides an insight into contemporary vexation as experienced in every form of society and community obliged to exist in the new globalized economy. The university has always suggested an institution immune to wider trends, but Readings...argues very convincingly for its fragility. It is a microcosm caught in the coils of consumerism, and forced to act as a satrap in that kingdom...The dysfunction, as he envisages it, is very deeply pondered and rather brilliantly expounded. (Anthony Smith, President, Magdalen College, Oxford New Statesman and Society)Bill Readings...presents a comprehensible and intelligent interpretation of the status and meaning of the university today which draws inspiration for its ideas from paradigms as diverse as Jean-Paul Lyotard's seminal *The Postmodern Condition* and the cult movie of the late 1980s, *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*...Anyone who has been through the academic mill in the English-speaking world at any level in the last decade will certainly have no problem perceiving the truth of Readings's observation that corporate-style management has become part of the fabric of university administration. (Natasha Lehrer Jerusalem Post)[A] fiercely intelligent polemic about the contemporary university...Whether they're polishing off the latest bit of research or merely fishing in some desolate sound during the summer break, *The University in Ruins* is a book that's indispensable to everyone working in or attending post-secondary institutions. If they're not in ruins yet, they're certainly under siege. (Stan Persky Toronto Globe and Mail)[An] acerbic, often witty critique of the University...[Readings] would have made a formidable opponent in the debates that his book will surely occasion...[W]e should be thankful [for Readings' book] because it raises precisely the large theoretical questions that university types often prefer to ignore. (Sanford Pinsker The Georgia Review)Bill Readings' scholarly work *The University in Ruins* is one of the most challenging and critical books of this genre. He argues compellingly that there is a crisis of purpose in the modern university...Readings' arguments about the linkages between globalisation, corporatism, culture and the university provide an important insight into the malaise of the contemporary university...This highly intelligent and fiercely written book is a fine epitaph to a scholar of rare distinction. (Mal Logan Quadrant)*The University in Ruins* is both challenging and accessible. Readings can discuss the German Idealists and Macro-Economists, F. R. Leavis and Francois Lyotard, Beavis and Butt-Head, even Bill and Ted and (of course) their *Excellent Adventure*-all without obfuscation or condescension. His book offers acute assessments of higher education, its architects, and its critics. There is much material for reflection and debate here; that's the way Bill liked things and what he liked best about the university. (Stephen M. Buhler Journal of English and Germanic

Philology) Sadly, Readings died in a plane crash shortly after this acerbic, often witty critique of the University was completed. He would have made a formidable opponent in the debates that his book will surely occasion. But what we have is Readings' book, and for that we should be thankful because it raises precisely the large theoretical questions that university types often prefer to ignore. (Sanford Pinsker The Georgia Review)

Actually 4 and a half stars. What it is not is what the title implies: a culture-war polemic. This is a heavily theorized account of the state of higher education. Moving from Kant, through the German Idealists and Humboldt, Readings traces the notion of a university anchored in rationality to one anchored in culture, in particular the culture of the nation-state, which the university is to inculcate in its students. In Germany this happens through philosophy, in England through English literature. Now, with the decline of the nation-state because of the triumph of transnational capitalism, there is, in effect, no nation state with a culture to inculcate. Hence, we have the university of 'excellence', a nonreferential term that can mean anything. Since this 'excellence' subsumes everything previously considered counter-cultural, it turns all to a marketable commodity. (You want radical professors? You want radical cultural studies? Come to Old Siwash. Ours are Excellent. Just like our excellent dormitories and excellent exercise facilities.) Ultimately this is an assault on the technocratic/bureaucratized/commercialized modern university, which measures all with quantifiable 'metrics', accountability always being equatable with accounting, but what Readings offers in its place is somewhat vague, highly theoretical, unintelligible to bureaucrats and unlikely to ever happen: a community of 'dissensus' rather than a search (as with the Germans) for not just the truth but its underlying unity. The book is very provocative, deeply-considered and interesting. It is fair to say that it is most heavily tilted toward the German side of things rather than the English side of things (American higher education having been heavily influenced by both). It is also, as he acknowledges, heavily tilted toward the humanities. Life is very different in the physical sciences and engineering, e.g., though much of what he says with regard to 'excellence' is applicable to the ethos of professional schools. It is written from a leftist perspective. He is contemptuous of the arguments of all conservatives as well as actual liberals, such as Hirsch, and trivializes their arguments. He assumes, e.g., that core curricula are dead, never to return, that the historical method in the humanities is largely dead, never to return in anything like its former state, that black studies, women's studies, cultural studies, etc. are all a priori good, that the entry into the professoriate of individuals dodging the draft was a good thing and that high theory is a 'project' decidedly worth pursuing. In other words, the book is very much of the 1980's and 1990's. What is

interesting about Readings' critique is the fact that he acknowledges that multiculturalism and postmodernism have helped to create the 'university of excellence'. They are causes as well as symptoms. There are many things which he does not consider: e.g. the growth in student populations and the changes in student demographics. Was the curriculum demolished because the 'new students' couldn't handle it? Or didn't want it? He notes that student passivity results from their feeling 'parked'; they are not being educated; they are being self-accredited through the collection of credits and the meeting of requirements. But what is the etiology of that? Global capitalism? Universities hungry for tuition revenue? Antinomian faculty? The belief that all should go to college (for professional advancement), but a consequent dumbing down of elementary, secondary, undergraduate and graduate education? Many more now 'go to college', but the credentials for professional advancement have been ratcheted up as the requirements for professional credentials have been ratcheted down. Students don't just feel 'parked'; they actually have been parked. His theory is very subtle and thoughtful, his historiography less so. All in all, this is a very interesting book. Tragically, Readings died in a plane crash just before it was completed. I wish he had survived and had decades more of experience with the 'university of excellence' so that he could write complementary books on the subject.

it's a stupid and banal thing to say that a book "changes" you, but readings' book has not only validated my own experience in many university classrooms in many different institutions -- private and public, in the northeast, middlewest, south and west of this country (a word one hesitates to use after reading readings) -- but it's a book that challenges me personally and politically and artistically to think beyond the boundaries of a situation that has no solution, towards something else in my own work as a teacher, scholar, actor, writer. one reviewer of this book objected to the emphasis on procedure and administration in Reading's critique of the university as yet another corporate bureaucracy. But anyone in the university knows that that's just about ALL the university is -- procedure and administration. what we DO with that, as educators, intellectuals and writers is another story, and in my opinion this book is daring and inspiring in its desire for those of us in the university to let go of certain illusions -- messianic, heroic, preservational and so on -- in order to get on with the work we can do -- inquire, dialogue and express/explore our obligations to students in an ongoing and unending discovery/problematization of thought/justice/freedom. i was blown away by this book, and i am grateful to the author for putting into words, what i have experienced on a subterranean "matrix" like level for years.

An otherwise terrible Tom Cruise movie introduced the maxim: "What is the answer to 99 out of 100 questions? Money." Bill Reading's Cormac-McCarthy-esque assessment of higher education, *The University in Ruins*, tries in vain to find that hundredth question. The domain of the university, ideally reserved for the kind of high-minded pondering that produces nuclear weapons and Nobel prizes, has become just another marketplace. The emphasis on bringing in grants and producing quantitative results in the form of dollar signs has become by far the most important task for members of the academy to tackle. As anyone who has spent a significant amount of time in an American college in the last ten years can tell you, Readings is not far off in his evaluation. Even universities that have long been safe havens for the type of study that Readings laments (let's face it--liberal arts colleges) have seen their English and philosophy departments wither away inside decades-old facilities, while the more tangible--and profitable--pursuits such as business and medicine receive the bulk of the prestige, and the bulk of the funding. This is bad for those liberal arts departments who find themselves receiving the short end of the stick, but what of society as a whole? While Readings pines for the tweed-jacket-with-leather-elbow-patches glory days, the President is on TV telling us that we need more vocational and technical training amongst the newest generation of college students. The solution, like Readings' depiction of the problem, is complicated. The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake is laudable, and its place (if it has one anymore) is rightly in the university. Readings makes a strong argument that society and academia are enriched just as much by the learning itself as by what the learning produces.

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