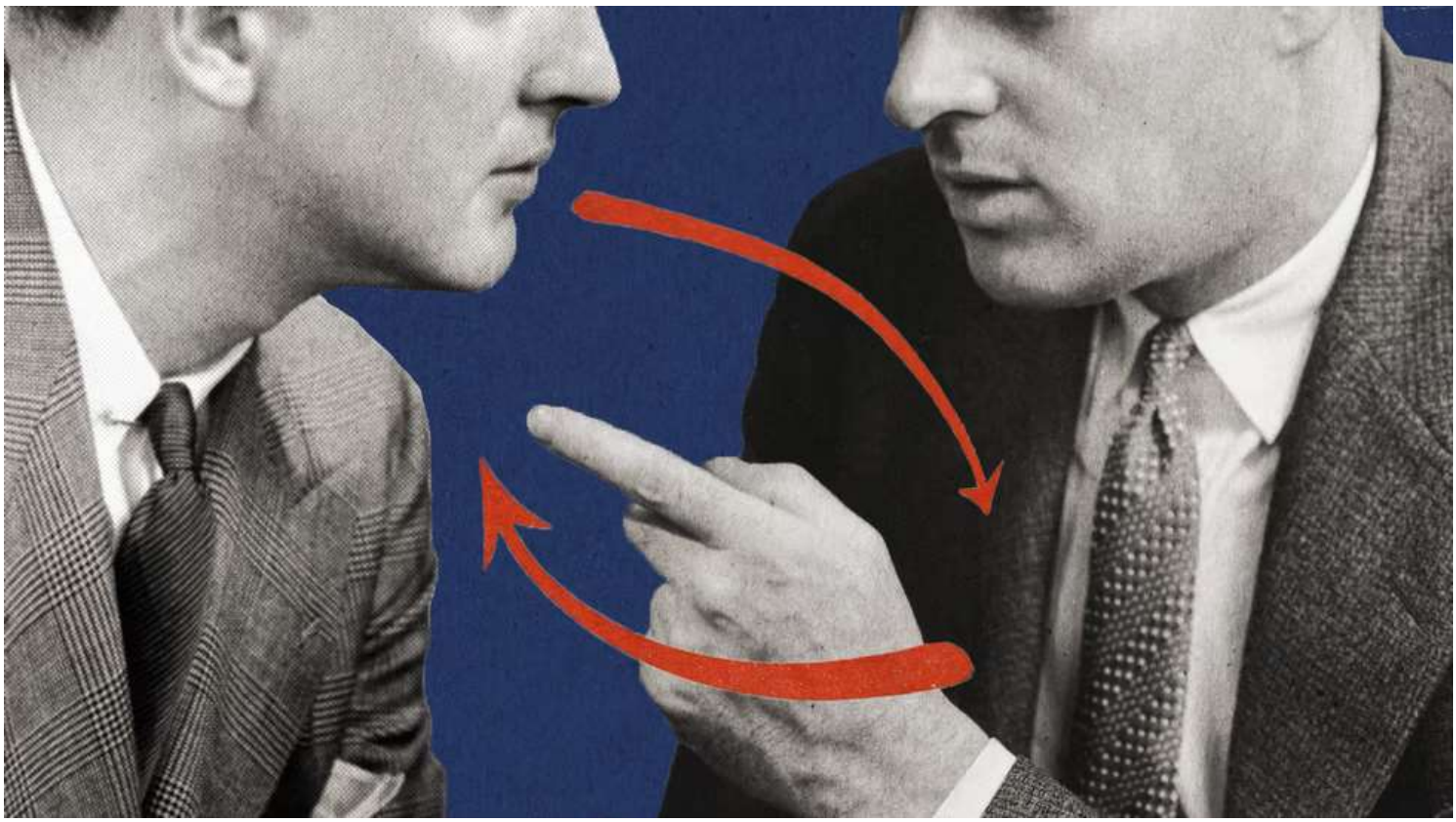
The Atlantic

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

The Books That Taught a Debate Champion How to Argue

Through reading, I learned that disagreement can be a source of good, not ill, even in our polarized age.

By Bo Seo



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JUNE 1, 2022, 3:02 PM ET

Less than a year after I read my first book in English, *The Magic Finger* by Roald Dahl, I joined my elementary school's debate team. I was a fifth grader and a recent immigrant to Australia, and the two milestones were closely related. As the language and culture of my new home became legible to me, I began to desire more than comprehension. I wanted to talk back and, in turn, be heard.

I soon learned that reading served an urgent purpose in debate. Because the aim of the activity was to out-argue the other side, debaters had to stockpile information. My strategic Wikipedia searches grew, over time, into a homemade index of *The Economist* and reading lists of academic texts. The success that followed fixed the association in my mind: In debate, one read to win.

For 15 years, I debated. I won two world championships and coached the Australian and Harvard teams. In that time, I almost always carried a book, taking from it new ideas and inflections of voice, anything to give me an edge.

Nowadays, disagreement is out of fashion. It is seen as the root of our personal and political troubles. Debate, in making a sport out of argument, seems at once a trivial pursuit *and* a serious impediment to the kinds of conversation we want to cultivate. But in my first book, *Good Arguments*, I propose that the opposite is true. Students may train to win every disagreement, but they soon learn that this is impossible. Even the best lose most of the competitions they attend. What one can do is disagree better—be more convincing and tenacious, and argue in a manner that keeps others willing to come back for another round. In the end, the prize for all that training and effort is a good conversation.

Thinking back on reading in preparation for competitions, I don't focus on individual titles; instead, I recall the small library they form in my brain. There, books jostle against one another for prominence. Some are strident takedowns of the others. The chattering is cacophonous, but the internal dissent enlarges the collection rather than reduces it. All of the books fit on the same shelf.

I believe that arguments can be a source of good, and not ill, in our polarized age. Here are the books that show me why—and how.

W. W. Norton and Company

***Thinking in an Emergency*, by Elaine Scarry**

Scarry, one of my English professors at Harvard, is the rare scholar who can change how you move through the world. She has made a career of bringing language to the ineffable ends of human experience: pain and beauty. In *Thinking in an Emergency*, she places deliberation at the core of a democratic response to emergencies including natural disasters and nuclear war. Scarry argues that debate, both real-time and prospective, need not hinder action and can instead secure the resolve and coordination needed for rapid response. She warns against leaders who invoke catastrophes to demand that their populations stop thinking. In this era of calamities, natural and man-made, Scarry's wisdom is essential: "Whatever happens, keep talking."

Farrar, Straus, and Giroux

***The Topeka School*, by Ben Lerner**

Every debater learns to spot what some refer to as "must-hit" arguments that, left unaddressed, can sink his or her case. The poet and novelist Ben Lerner's treatment of the sport in this moody bildungsroman is a must-hit. Lerner, a former debate champion, portrays its participants as hostile, bullying, mendacious, glib, annoying, and practiced in a dark art. He turns the spread—a quirk of some American debate formats, where speakers speed through roughly 350 to 500 words a minute—into a potent symbol for speech intended to overwhelm, "disclosure … designed to conceal." The book forms the centerpiece of the anti-debate canon, along with Sally Rooney's wry 2015 reflection on the activity as "ritualized, abstract interpersonal aggression" in the *Dublin Review*. This canon is crucial, as it reminds us that the art derives its potency from mercurial elements—among them contest and performance—that must be carefully managed. As with any incisive critique, I found myself nodding along even as I prepared my rebuttal.

Scribe Publications

***Tell It to the World: An Indigenous Memoir*, by Stan Grant**

Grant, an Australian journalist, argues that progress lies in dialectic: One point of view clashes against another, giving rise to a third way that combines elements of both rather than defaulting to either one. In his memoir, Grant makes the point with grace, weaving in his personal history as an Indigenous man who also has European ancestors. His struggle for self-definition mirrors the journey of a nation to chart a course between the denial of history and the surrender to it. Grant's voice is wounded and fatigued, but it carries the spirit of conversation: "I love more easily than I can forgive. So we must learn who we are, and see ourselves as if for the first time." The original title in Australia, *Talking to My Country*, better captures that sense.

Read: The famous Baldwin-Buckley debate still matters today

Ballantine Books

***The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, by Malcolm X and Alex Haley**

Malcolm X learned to debate as a 20-something in what was then called Norfolk Prison Colony, a state prison founded on reformist ideals that fielded debate teams against local colleges such as Boston University. In his memoir, X describes the experience of finding one's voice and communing with an audience as a revelation: "I will tell you that, right there, in the prison, debating, speaking to a crowd, was as exhilarating to me as the discovery of knowledge through reading had been … once my feet got wet, I was gone on debating." For most people, debate is a pastime of school and university years. This memoir shows that one can make a career and a life from its lessons in fierce, courageous, and resolute disagreement.

Farrar, Straus, and Giroux

***Crowds and Power*, by Elias Canetti**

This strange study from 1960 comprises field notes on the appearance, characteristics, and behaviors of crowds. It mines the psychology of such groups—"one of the striking traits of the inner life of a crowd is the feeling of being persecuted"—and documents their behaviors: "The crowd needs a direction. It is in movement and it moves towards a goal." For Canetti, a Jewish intellectual displaced by the rise of Nazi Germany two decades prior to the text's publication, the interest in crowds is more than aesthetic—it's a survival tactic. Debate can negate groupthink by restoring the primacy of reason and fostering individual encounters between two people. For it to succeed, we have to understand the allure of crowds. I do not know a more vital resource for understanding "pack mentality" and its susceptibility to authoritarian rule.

Read: Five features of better arguments

Farrar, Straus, and Giroux

***A Small Place*, by Jamaica Kincaid**

When I read, as a freshman in college, Kincaid's second-person address to a visitor to the island of Antigua—"you are on your holiday; you are a tourist"—I knew I had been transformed. This slim book on the legacies of colonialism has been described variously as a jeremiad and a mock travel guide. For me, it is a masterpiece of rhetoric—one that grips the audience's attention through sheer craft. The author's language is biblical in its depth and passion. She demands nothing less than the expansion of the public conversation to accommodate the language, experience, and thought of a population repressed through violence. The best debate speeches tend to do the same: They pronounce a truth and ask us, the listeners, to catch up.

W. W. Norton and Company

***When Should Law Forgive?*, by Martha Minow**

One question I struggle with in *Good Arguments* is when we should stop debating. Minow, a former dean of Harvard Law School, provides here a model of humane consideration on the limits of the adversarial ethic. Hers is an argument for

accommodating forgiveness—the "letting go of justified grievances"—in the legal system. She builds the book as one would a spacious house, each area of the law—juvenile justice, debt, amnesties and pardons—a separate chapter in which readers are invited to stay and reflect awhile. Martha Nussbaum is illuminating on related topics in her critique of anger in *Anger and Forgiveness*, which elicited rebuttal from Myisha Cherry in *The Case for Rage*, an argument for the emotion's usefulness in conditions of resistance. The need to balance dispute and conciliation, accountability and grace, cannot be transcended, only better managed.

Viking

Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know, by Adam Grant

I had originally intended my book to be a short manual written for competitive debaters, but reading Grant, the Wharton professor and author, changed my ambition. In his latest work, dedicated to the power of rethinking one's beliefs to arrive closer to the truth, he analyzes the arguments between Harish Natarajan, a champion debater, and IBM's artificial-intelligence system Project Debater. He draws from the matchup and from other professionals a series of lessons for arguing more

persuasively in everyday situations. One piece of advice comes from Natarajan: Rebut the strongest, and not the weakest, version of an opposing argument; steel man, don't straw man. The lessons—whether pressure-testing ideas or asking better questions—are taut and memorable, and demand that readers reconsider their priors.

Read: Changing your mind can make you less anxious

Picador

***From the Ruins of Empire: The Revolt Against the West and the Remaking of Asia*, by Pankaj Mishra**

Mishra tells a rich and erudite story that highlights the contributions of three intellectuals—Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Liang Qichao, and Rabindranath Tagore—to the rise of modern Asia. Each of them responded to the same basic challenge—Western imperialism—but their thinking refracted through the vagaries of personal temperament and circumstance. (The cosmopolitan Bengali poet, Tagore, also stars in Amartya Sen's *The Argumentative Indian*, a history of pluralism in Indian politics and

culture that reads as an ode to its "long tradition of public arguments.") In their resulting array of arguments, written and spoken, Mishra identifies the development of ideas that continue to shape the world, among them pan-Islamism and Chinese nationalism. Any given conflict lasts only a short while, but it can echo through the generations.

Riverhead

***Checkout 19*, by Claire-Louise Bennett**

For years, I have been on the lookout for a book that captures the moment when a person finds his or her voice for the first time. Bennett's novel is that title. In it, a working-class girl explores the ever-shifting boundaries of her mind, often in conversation with what she's reading. Her voice is incantatory, obsessive: "Just one book. Yes. And in fact as far as we were concerned nobody else had this book apart from us. Nobody. Nobody. Not a single soul," she thinks. The narrator puts forward ideas, then revises them; each iterative step lays the path for new discoveries and disclosures. A person's journey toward self-knowledge, and the ability to share that

knowledge, is a common interest of authors and debaters. It enables the conversation to continue, enriched at each turn by the inclusion of another voice.
