

### Book Reviews

Storey, Benjamin and Jenna Silber Storey. *Why We Are Restless: On the Modern Quest for Contentment*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. Hardcover, 252 pp., \$27.95.

Review by Allen Mendenhall

Almost 2500 years ago, Aristotle posited that what distinguishes humans from the animals is not only our judgment and rationality, but also our unique capacity for love, affection, and bonding. The coronavirus pandemic is frustrating because, among other things, it forces us to suppress and neglect the very qualities that set humans apart from the rest of creation. Enforced isolation and social distancing deprive us of the opportunity to gather and fellowship, hug and touch, cultivate community and family. Alienation and quarantine are contrary to our nature as free and social beings.

For over a year I wondered whether I would embrace my 85-year-old grandmother again. She was confined to a nursing home just outside Atlanta; no family could visit her until recently. Restricting guests was for her own protection, but it didn't *feel* right or good. Because the coronavirus isn't sentient, doesn't possess moral properties or exercise an agency of its own, we can't get angry at it, punish it, argue with it, or condemn it as wrong or unfair. Hence our anxiety multiplies.

The pandemic only worsened an already pervasive problem, namely a growing sense of restlessness and unhappiness even as we in the United States enjoy widespread economic opportunity and astounding material prosperity. Benjamin and Jenna Storey, married professors who run the distinguished Tocqueville Forum at Furman University, diagnose this condition – societal malaise – in *Why We Are Restless*, the latest in a fascinating book series edited by Robert P. George and published under the imprint New Forum Books of Princeton University Press.

Their answer to this question about restlessness? It's complicated. Short-term thinkers might point to the opioid crisis, social media, political parties, climate change, work hours, around-the-clock news, police brutality, and so on to pinpoint root causes. These are merely *symptoms* of larger problems, however. Long-term thinking, an understanding of centuries of philosophical and historical trends, free inquiry, a willingness to adapt when new evidence presents itself, facility with foreign languages and difficult texts

from different times and traditions – these make for a rational and dispassionate examination of the social ills of our moment. Fortunately, the Storeys are adequately equipped and prepared for the task. They have selected four modern French intellectuals—Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), and Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) – to guide readers on a “quest” (the Storeys’ term) for contentment, which is, according to the Storeys, antithetical to restlessness or malaise.

The narrative goes something like this: Montaigne’s ponderous essays are, on the whole, about learning how to die, or coming to terms with the irrefutable reality of mortality. He developed the concept of “immanent contentment” to refer to the good life to which reasonable and thoughtful people should aspire. “Immanent contentment” involves “moderation through variation,” affirmation and friendship, and stability or equilibrium with some diversity of experience thrown in for good measure. Pascal came along to refute “immanent contentment,” suggesting that humans by their sinful nature are, unhappily, divorced from God. A proper life, in his paradigm, seeks reunion with the divine, or wholeness. Rousseau wasn’t much cheerier, acknowledging as he did the inevitable sadness of the human condition as well as the unavoidable futility of the relentless pursuit of happiness. His so-called “sentiment of existence,” however, posited ways we can enjoy the experience of being alive without despairing. Tocqueville, alas, located the industrious chase for immanent contentment within democracy and majoritarianism, social and political categories connected with labor and materialism. The Tocquevillian risks much suffering from the constant drive for happiness. Why? Because that drive makes the lack of contentment feel like failure, as if we tried but couldn’t succeed when in fact no amount of effort would have changed our lot.

So where does that leave us? Perhaps with an amalgamation of instructive perspectives. Montaigne teaches us “to learn to be at home within ourselves and within our world, and to cease measuring our lives against any transcendent goal or standard.” Pascal renders the “restless unhappiness at the core of the modern soul, sadly seeking to absorb itself in a form of contentment not capacious enough to meet the demands of its self-transcending nature.” Rousseau imparts that “we cannot quiet our restlessness by going to either extreme” – the “natural and solitary” on the one hand and the “social and artificial” on the other – because “both are only parts of what we are: human beings are as social as we are solitary, as historical as we are natural.” Studying Tocqueville, we discover that we’re “[g]eographically transient, and never knowing what to expect from others in a social world always in flux.” Moreover, we “crave the reassurance” of our “fellows’ approbation, which proves to be as allusive as their whereabouts.”

The Storeys’ analysis of these four Frenchmen doesn’t lead inexorably

to any one political platform or position. Conservatives and liberals, right and left, are equally wrong, reductive, and simplistic, according to the Storeys, because human complexities defy crude caricature. “Conservatives,” they tell us, “see liberals not as people earnestly if misguidedly working to alleviate entrenched injustice but as insular cultural elites signaling their virtue; liberals see conservatives not as people sincerely if mistakenly working to preserve traditional morality but as rich white men perpetuating their privilege.” Elsewhere the Storeys state, “The case our right makes for free-market economics assumes that perpetual economic growth is self-evidently good, an assumption little challenged by human beings accustomed to thinking of happiness in terms of immanent contentment, to which an ever-proliferating variety of goods and services is useful.” By contrast, “[w]hen our left argues for the redistribution of the same kind of resources, its position often rests on similar assumptions about the kind of flourishing our political arrangements should support.” The Storeys add that “the social aim of unmediated approbation frequently underlies both the celebrations of familiar intimacy dear to the right and the defenses of free erotic connection dear to the left.”

The Storeys’ copious endnotes are a store of knowledge and wisdom. One could spend an entire decade following the numerous lines of inquiry drawn here. That’s *before* one exhausts the extensive bibliography that rounds out this handsome hardback.

There are no throwaway lines in *Why We Are Restless*. In fact, this book is difficult to review because each of its sentences is carefully crafted, and each of its chapters contains memorable axioms and nuggets of insight. For instance, from the chapter on Montaigne: “The human problem lies not in our failure to cultivate our distinctly human faculties but in our misbegotten and doomed attempts to rise above ourselves.”

From the chapter on Pascal: “Modern human beings can follow their passions and pleasures, indulge idle or even voyeuristic curiosities, accumulate wealth and achieve ambitions with less shame or need for apology than their forbears. But doing so seems only to add to the mounting pile of evidence that the decisive obstacles to immanent contentment do not lie in the laws and moral norms modern peoples so relentlessly critique and overturn. The unhappiness that remains when such liberations have succeeded must have its source not in our laws but in ourselves.”

From the chapter on Rousseau: “Man’s fall is an accident of history; indeed, it is the accident that brings history into being. Our misery is of our own making; we are wicked only because we have adulterated ourselves. And yet we knew not what we did.”

From the chapter on Tocqueville: “The very hold the sentiment of human resemblance has over democratic human beings often prevents them from noticing just how remarkable it is. Human difference, after all, is more visible than human resemblance: our eyes see big human beings and small

human beings, males and females, dark-skinned and light-skinned, the fine tailoring of wealth and the dishevelment of poverty. We never see a human being simply, which is an abstraction; we always see *this* or *that* human being, who has qualities that differentiate him or her from others.”

Some of these lines are summaries of the subject author’s texts or claims but articulated in the Storeys’ unique voice and vocabulary. That these passages are unoriginal – restating established sagacity – does not make them any less profound.

If you’re looking for self-help therapy, specialized research, pop-psychology, or easy-step prescriptions for success, grab another book. The contentment that is the Storeys’ subject is elusive, achievable only through difficult work, deliberate solitude, serious contemplation, deep learning in the liberal arts, and the kind of hard-won discernment that enables one to make good choices.

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Austin, Emily P. *Grief and the Hero: The Futility of Longing in the Iliad*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2021. Hardcover, 202 pp., \$70.00.

Reviewed by Sean C. Hadley

Homer’s place in the canon of Western literature has recently come under fire. Educators at the secondary and post-secondary level find themselves having to answer the question: why teach Homer? While the question may come as a reaction to current conversations, and rejoinders might come from both ends of the cultural spectrum, teachers would be wise to consider their own response. The question suggests an answer of sorts; Homer’s place in the imagination of humanity implies that his work has been a foregone conclusion for some time. “We’re no longer a people of warfare,” some well-intentioned instructor might think, “Homer only offers us a window into the lives of an ancient people, with whom we have nothing in common.” Such thinking suggests that a modern novel or and academic monograph will help us understand our place in this world far better than an archaic poem. What is there in Homer that makes his stories *worth reading*?

Emily P. Austin, an Assistant Professor of Classics at the University of Chicago, has attempted an answer to this question. While such is not the stated goal of her book, *Grief and the Hero: The Futility of Longing in the Iliad* demonstrates precisely why Homer remains of vital interest some 2800 years after his works came into being. Austin’s work embodies both the personal and