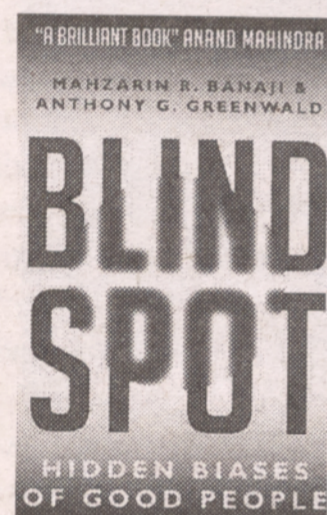


# A good read

## Books to ponder and pore over this holiday season — and beyond

**D**o you think you know your own mind? Do you imagine yourself able to make decisions and interact with others in a fair and balanced manner, unfettered by personal bias?

Think again. Authors Mahzarin Banaji and Anthony Greenwald contend that almost all of us base our daily interactions on personal biases, many of which we don't even realize we have. Like the dead zone in a car that



**Blindspot: Hidden biases of Good People**, By Mahzarin R. Banaji and Anthony G. Greenwald

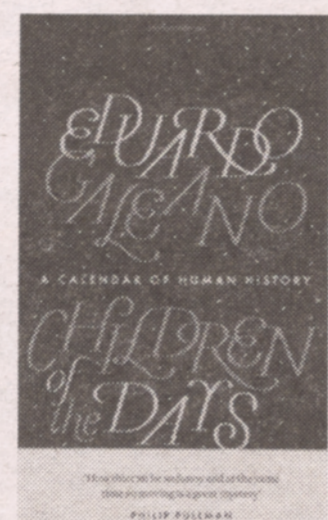
the rearview mirror doesn't cover, these biases exist behind our conscious thought in a personal "blindspot." For more than 30 years, the authors have researched and studied how the mind operates in social contexts. As collaborators — Banaji at Harvard University and Greenwald at the University of Washington — the pair have been working to find ways to identify people's true biases. By helping people identify hidden biases, they hope to allow others to make decisions in a more rational, thoughtful manner instead of the haphazard way most of us go about it. Many of the revelations in "Blindspot" are both surprising and profound.

"Blindspot" is a well-researched and well-written book. If you are looking for a provocative exploration into the science of human behavior — one that's chock full of insights that will make you question how you think — I highly recommend this book. If, however, you have no desire to explore your own behavior or that of others, if you are happy believing that you are totally impartial and unbiased, then by all means give it a pass. That's the thing about people, I guess. Some are content to go on believing that their rearview mirror gives them an adequate picture of life. While others turn their heads and look behind them ... just in case. — *Thomas Vincent*

**E**duardo Galeano, a Uruguayan poet, historian and master of the short anecdote, isn't about to let himself be constrained by the vagaries or indefiniteness of when or if something actually happened or by the issue of whether a story is history or myth. Instead, he sets out to open windows — one each day — as a way of seeing and using history and myth to understand the world we live in.

Books of days originated in religious practice as a way of lifting a believer out of ordinary time into an experience of the sacred. Historical books of days have a

somewhat different purpose, generally to commemorate important events and people. This book, though, falls somewhere in between. Galeano has something subversive in mind: to lift us out of our ordinary



**Children of the Days: A Calendar of Human History** by Eduardo Galeano, Translated by Mark Fried

understanding of history as a series of important events and people to the recognition that history happens in every moment, is carried forward by every person and is found as much in the stories we tell as in the real event. Galeano's humor can be pointed and sometimes ribald. I'll leave it to the reader to discover the punch line for "World Science Day," which reports that "the world invests five times as much in male sex stimulants and female silicone implants as in finding a cure for Alzheimer's." In another joke, reported from the Dominican Republic, he lampoons the cult of the "international expert" with his electronic equipment and his assumption that he can arrive without being asked, give advice that is unwanted and get paid for it. One ironic entry reports that after years of claiming that poverty was declining worldwide, experts found a flaw in their model and realized there were half a billion more poor people than they had thought. "The poor," Galeano writes, "already knew."

**A**uthor Jaron Lanier — the accomplished scientist, technologist, virtual reality pioneer and musician — wants people who aren't techies to understand the concept of singularity, which



**Who Owns the Future?** By Jaron Lanier

has mesmerized many of his Silicon Valley colleagues. In his new book "Who Owns the Future?" he writes, "One day in the not so distant future, the Internet will suddenly coalesce into a superintelligent AI (Artificial Intelligence), infinitely smarter than any of us individually and all of us combined; it will come alive in the blink of an eye, and take over the world before humans even realize what's happening."

As a down-to-earth humanist on the outer reaches of what graphic novelist Douglas Rushkoff referred to as "Cyberia," Lanier

often finds that his is a lonely voice. Instead of entertaining weirdly intoxicating visions of a post-human future, he argues that scientists and their techie brethren should focus on enhancing human life and bettering society. They should not compound the miserable lot of the global multitudes mired in abominable poverty. Human beings are worthy of a decent future. No genuine economy has any concrete meaning without people.

But could the waves of homeless people rising in the United States and elsewhere in the world be the first inkling of a widening sociopolitical rupture exacerbated by refined technologies? Is the globalization of poverty the inevitable product of technological evolution rampant within hyper-capitalism? Without fundamental changes we are heading toward such a future.

Lanier is repelled by this dystopian prospect. In "Who Owns the Future?" he offers remedies that could establish a humane information economy capable of sustaining democracy and a vibrant middle class. Lanier hopes for a humane digital economy inclusive of people. He is a fascinating technophile whose passion for science and technology has not displaced his deep appreciation for the richness of humanity. A new world wrought by fantastic technological change is coming. If it is to have existential meaning, Lanier contends that human beings must be at the very center of the emerging cybertopia. — *Joe Martin*

**S**herman Alexie has to rank as the premier writer of the Pacific Northwest. This might be an odd statement to make about someone whose literary work is almost entirely populated by Native Americans — most of them from his own Spokane tribe — but the tension between the west-of-the-mountains cities and the east-of-the-mountains country, and between poor and working-class people and affluent high-tech professionals, is a theme that plays out in Alexie's stories and novels.

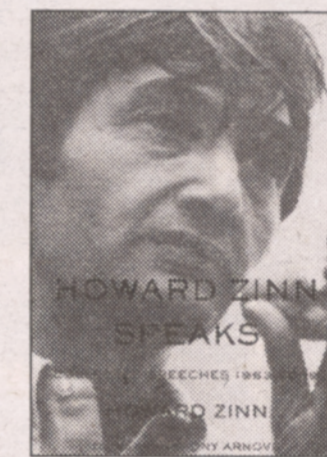
His stories almost always have to do with what is authentic, about whether the truth that hurts is preferable to the lie that sustains you.

"Blasphemy," Alexie's latest collection of stories, embodies these contradictions. It's a mixture of 15 previously published and 16 new stories, almost all having to do with how to be authentic in an inauthentic world: "Indians were obsessed with authenticity. Colonized, genocided, exiled, Indians formed their identity by questioning the identities of other Indians. Self-hating, self-doubting." He continues, "We are people exiled by other exiles. ... We who were once indigenous to this land must immigrate into its culture."

With the new stories, Alexie seems to be moving deeper into his meditation on being Indian — and human — in a society that has lost its connection with nature. Thus, the story hits hard with its evocation of a wind-powered future that, however green, still doesn't respect all life. In one of the longer

stories, "Cry Cry Cry," the narrator's cousin takes revenge on an abusive white man by shooting him. The narrator turns his cousin in to the police, but then he takes on the cousin's role doing war dances. "But I wasn't dancing for war. I was dancing for my soul and for the soul of my tribe. I was dancing for what we Indians used to be and who we might become again." — *Mike Wold*

**A** passionate historian, dedicated teacher and activist, the late Howard Zinn declared repeatedly that the study of history should never be a placid exploration of the past, and it should never be confined to academia. Indeed, a thorough grasp of history is an indispensable key to understanding urgent political and economic issues of the present. It is vital that this historical perspective incorporate the



**Howard Zinn Speaks: Collected Speeches, 1963-2009**, Edited by Anthony Arnove

vantage of the poor, the outcast, the marginalized and the working class. Historical awareness ensures that the bombast and platitudes of elected politicians and media pundits are never taken at face value. Too often such pronouncements are slick deviations from truth intended to mask ulterior motives of the upper class, the military or the corporate elite. A compliant populace can be persuaded to give consent to policies that serve the interests of the wealthy and powerful at the expense of everyone else. However, an informed citizenry capable of critical thought is not easily lulled. Says Zinn, "Without history, anybody in authority can get up before a microphone and say, 'We've got to go into this country for that reason and this reason, for liberty, for democracy, the threat.' Anybody can get up before a microphone and tell you anything. And if you have no history, you have no way of checking up on that."

Zinn wanted Americans to know that our nation's founders had more than noble ideals on their minds when they drew up the Constitution. That document is distinct from the Declaration of Independence, which preceded it. The ringing phrase "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" enshrined in the Declaration was altered slightly in 1787 to read "life, liberty and property." Drawn up by elite bond holders and slave holders at the Constitutional Convention, the document ensures that their economic interests were paramount. On the other hand, the Declaration is fired by a revolutionary fervor. Says Zinn, "The Declaration of Independence is a manifesto for civil disobedience."

Zinn died three years ago. His voice and message of peace live on in these vibrant pages. — *Joe Martin*

Excerpts reprinted from Street Roots' sister paper, Real Change, in Seattle, Wash.

Dignity  Poverty