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Will And Ariel Durant The Story Of Civilization

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Introduction: The Grandest Narrative Ever Told

In the vast landscape of historical writing, few works stand as monumental as **Will and Ariel Durant's The Story of Civilization**. This multi-volume series, spanning over four decades of dedicated research and writing, represents one of the most ambitious attempts ever made to capture the full sweep of human history. More than a dry recitation of dates and battles, it is a vivid, humanistic exploration of the ideas, arts, religions, and personalities that have shaped our world. For anyone seeking a deep, engaging, and beautifully written understanding of where we come from, the Durants' masterpiece remains an unparalleled treasure. In this article, we will explore the genesis of this epic work, its unique approach to history, the key themes across its eleven volumes, and why it continues to resonate with readers today.

Who Were Will and Ariel Durant?

To understand **The Story of Civilization**, one must first know the remarkable partnership behind it. Will Durant (1885–1981) was a philosopher, historian, and writer with a gift for making complex ideas accessible. Born in North Adams, Massachusetts, to French-Canadian immigrant parents, he was educated in the Catholic seminary before embracing a secular worldview. His early book, *The Story of Philosophy*(1926), became an unexpected bestseller, establishing his reputation as a popularizer of knowledge.

Ariel Durant (1898–1981) was born Chaya Kaufman in Ukraine and emigrated to the United States as a child. She met Will Durant when she was a teenager; he was her teacher at a progressive school. They married in 1913 and formed an intellectual and romantic partnership that lasted nearly seven decades. While Will initially wrote several volumes of **The Story of Civilization** alone, Ariel gradually became an indispensable collaborator. Starting with *Rousseau and Revolution*(1967), she was officially recognized as co-author. The couple worked side by side, often reading aloud to each other, debating interpretations, and painstakingly refining every sentence. Their deep mutual respect and shared passion for history infused the entire series with a rare warmth and clarity.

The Genesis of a Magnum Opus

Will Durant first conceived the idea of a comprehensive history of civilization in his twenties. He imagined a series of books that would not simply recount political events but would integrate all aspects of human achievement: philosophy, religion, science, literature, art, and daily life. After the success of *The Story of Philosophy*, his publisher suggested he attempt something similar for history. In 1935, the first volume, *Our Oriental Heritage*, was published. Will was then 49 years old. He planned to complete the series in five volumes over about a decade. Instead, the project grew, and he continued writing for the rest of his life.

The Durants were not academic historians in the narrow sense. They were humanists who believed that history should be told with narrative flair and moral insight. They traveled extensively, visited archaeological sites, and consulted primary sources, but they never claimed to be producing specialized scholarship for a handful of experts. Their goal was to educate and inspire the general reader. In an era

Will and Ariel Durant's **The Story of Civilization** became a bridge between the ivory tower and the living room.

An Overview of the Eleven Volumes

The series covers human history from ancient times to the early 19th century. Each volume focuses on a specific geographic or cultural epoch, weaving together political, economic, cultural, and intellectual threads. Here is a quick tour of the volumes:

1. Our Oriental Heritage (1935) – Explores the civilizations of the Near East, India, China, and Japan, up to about 500 CE.
2. The Life of Greece (1939) – A warm and detailed portrait of ancient Greek culture, from the Minoans to Alexander the Great.
3. Caesar and Christ (1944) – Covers Rome from its founding through the rise of Christianity.
4. The Age of Faith (1950) – Medieval civilization, including Byzantine, Islamic, and Western Christian worlds from Constantine to Dante.
5. The Renaissance (1953) – The flowering of art and thought in Italy and beyond, roughly 1300–1576.
6. The Reformation (1957) – Religious upheaval in Europe from Wycliffe to Calvin, with a focus on Luther and the Protestant break.
7. The Age of Reason Begins (1961) – The 16th and 17th centuries, covering the Scientific Revolution, Elizabethan England, and the rise of modern philosophy.
8. The Age of Louis XIV (1963) – The classical age of France and Europe, including the grandeur of Versailles and the intellectual currents of the Enlightenment.
9. The Age of Voltaire (1965) – Focuses on the 18th-century Enlightenment thinkers, especially Voltaire, and the cultural shift toward reason.
10. Rousseau and Revolution (1967) – Co-authored with Ariel, this volume covers the period leading up to the French Revolution and the Romantic reaction.
11. The Age of Napoleon (1975) – The final volume, examining Napoleon Bonaparte's impact on Europe and the world.

Will Durant had intended to write a twelfth volume covering the 19th and 20th centuries, but he died at the age of 96 before he could begin it. The existing eleven volumes, however, are a staggering achievement, exceeding 10,000 pages in total.

The Durants' Unique Philosophy of History

What sets **The Story of Civilization** apart from other comprehensive histories is its underlying philosophical framework. Will and Ariel Durant were not simply chroniclers; they were moralists and storytellers who believed that history could teach wisdom. They famously wrote in their little book *The Lessons of History*(1968): "The past is the present, and the present is the past." They saw patterns repeating across centuries: the rise and fall of empires, the tension between liberty and order, the conflict between religion and secularism.

They did not shy away from making judgments. They celebrated the achievements of great individuals—Pericles, Leonardo, Voltaire—but also acknowledged the suffering and injustice embedded in civilization. Their writing is infused with a profound respect for human creativity, tempered by a realistic awareness of human folly. This balance gives the series a timeless appeal. Readers come for the facts but stay for the perspective.

Humanism as a Guiding Light

The Durants were avowed humanists. They valued reason, science, and art, but they also recognized the

The Story of Civilization portrays every culture—from the ancient Egyptians to the Aztecs—with respect, seeking to understand its internal logic rather than dismiss it as primitive. This empathetic approach makes the series a genuine **global history**, even if its later volumes center on Europe. The opening volume on **Oriental heritage** remains a remarkable attempt to give non-Western civilizations their due at a time when Eurocentrism was the norm.

The Literary Style of the Durants

One of the most praised aspects of **Will and Ariel Durant's The Story of Civilization** is its prose style. Will Durant was a gifted writer with a journalist's eye for a vivid anecdote and a poet's ear for rhythm. He could sum up a complex character in a single sentence. For example, describing the philosopher David Hume: "He was a man of immense intellect and immense common sense." The writing is lively, accessible, and often witty. The Durants did not believe history had to be boring. They used narrative techniques—scene-setting, dialogue, character sketches—to bring the past to life.

This approach has sometimes drawn criticism from academic historians who fault the series for oversimplification or for relying on secondary sources. But the Durants never pretended to be writing for specialists. They were synthesizers, not archivists. Their goal was to create a coherent and inspiring story that could be enjoyed and pondered by a wide audience. In that, they succeeded brilliantly. **The Story of Civilization** has been translated into many languages and sold millions of copies worldwide.

Key Themes Across the Series

Several major themes recur throughout the eleven volumes, giving the series a cohesive intellectual backbone.

- The Cyclical Nature of History: The Durants saw civilizations as organic entities that are born, grow, mature, decline, and fall. They explored why some cultures flourish and others wither, pointing to factors like overreach, moral decay, and climate change.
- The Role of Great Individuals: While aware of larger social forces, the Durants believed that exceptional men and women could alter the course of history. Their biographies of figures like Caesar, Michelangelo, and Napoleon are among the most memorable passages in the series.
- The Interplay of Economics and Ideas: They refused to reduce history to mere economic determinism. For the Durants, ideas mattered as much as material conditions. They paid careful attention to philosophy, art, and religion as driving forces in human affairs.
- The Tension Between Freedom and Order: The Durants recognized that civilization requires a delicate balance between individual liberty and social stability. They examined how societies strive to maintain this balance, often with mixed results.
- The Power of Love and Sex: Unlike many historians who ignore personal life, the Durants wrote freely about romantic relationships, sexuality, and family structures. They believed that the private sphere is essential to understanding any age.

The Cultural Impact and Legacy

When the first volumes appeared, **The Story of Civilization** was immediately hailed as a landmark. It won the Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction in 1968 (for *Rousseau and Revolution*) and the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1977. The Durants became household names, often appearing on television and in magazines. Their work inspired a generation of readers to take a broader view of history.

Today, in an age of sound bites and specialized micro-histories, the series remains a powerful antidote to fragmentation. Reading the Durants is like sitting down with a wise, generous, and enormously knowledgeable friend who can connect the dots between ancient Athens and modern democracy. While some of their conclusions may be dated—especially regarding race, gender, and colonialism—the overall spirit of their enterprise is still valuable. They remind us that history is not a collection of isolated events but a single, ongoing

conversation among all peoples.

Moreover, the Durants modeled intellectual collaboration. The partnership between Will and Ariel is an inspirational example of how two people can combine their talents to create something greater than either could alone. Ariel's contributions were essential, especially in the later volumes where she took a more active role in research and writing. Their love story is inseparable from their literary legacy.

Criticisms and Limitations

No great work is without its flaws. Some critics have pointed out that the Durants' coverage of Asia and Africa is relatively thin after the first volume. The series is overwhelmingly focused on the Western tradition, particularly Europe. Also, their reliance on secondary sources meant that sometimes they repeated errors or outdated interpretations. Feminist and postcolonial scholars have noted that the Durants' perspective is very much of their time—progressive but still constrained by the assumptions of mid-20th-century liberalism.

Yet even critics acknowledge the scope and readability of the project. The Durants were honest about their limitations. Will once said, "We are not writing for scholars; we are writing for our fellow human beings." In that spirit, the series remains an achievement of popular education.

How to Approach Reading The Story of Civilization Today

For those new to the series, the sheer length can be daunting. It is not necessary to read all eleven volumes straight through. Many readers start with a volume that covers a period they are already curious about—perhaps *The Life of Greece* or *The Age of Faith*. Others dip in and out, using the index to find specific topics. The books are written so that each volume stands alone reasonably well, though there are cross-references.

There is also an abridged edition, *The Lessons of History*, which distills some of the key insights from the series into a short, brilliant book. But the full experience is best enjoyed by reading at least one complete volume. The Durants' narrative voice is so engaging

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