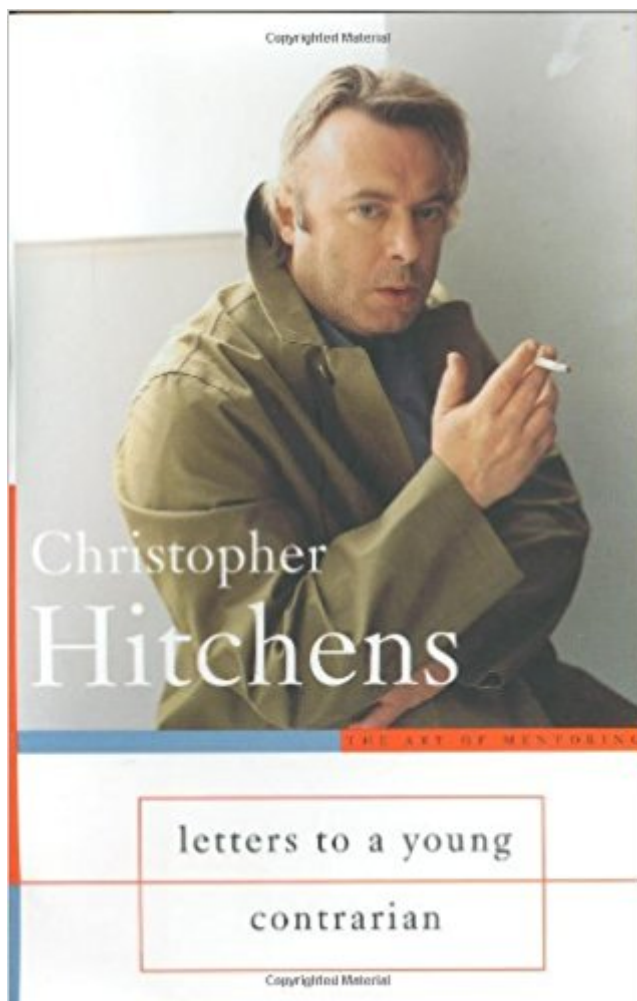


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# Letters To A Young Contrarian (Art Of Mentoring)



## Synopsis

"Art of Mentoring" series  
In the book that he was born to write, provocateur and best-selling author Christopher Hitchens inspires future generations of radicals, gadflies, mavericks, rebels, angry young (wo)men, and dissidents. Who better to speak to that person who finds him or herself in a contrarian position than Hitchens, who has made a career of disagreeing in profound and entertaining ways. This book explores the entire range of "contrary positions"-from noble dissident to gratuitous pain in the butt. In an age of overly polite debate bending over backward to reach a happy consensus within an increasingly centrist political dialogue, Hitchens pointedly pitches himself in contrast. He bemoans the loss of the skills of dialectical thinking evident in contemporary society. He understands the importance of disagreement-to personal integrity, to informed discussion, to true progress-heck, to democracy itself. Epigrammatic, spunky, witty, in your face, timeless and timely, this book is everything you would expect from a mentoring contrarian.

## Book Information

Series: Art of Mentoring

Hardcover: 160 pages

Publisher: Basic Books; 1st edition (October 17, 2001)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0465030327

ISBN-13: 978-0465030323

Product Dimensions: 8.3 x 5.2 x 0.7 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 160 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #79,149 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #48 in Books > Politics & Social

Sciences > Sociology > Social Theory #57 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Essays &

Correspondence > Letters #77 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government >

Ideologies & Doctrines > Radicalism

## Customer Reviews

"Do justice, and let the skies fall." Christopher Hitchens borrows from Roman antiquity this touchstone for a career of confrontation, argument, and troublemaking. Part of the Art of Mentoring series, Letters to a Young Contrarian is a trim volume of about two dozen letters to an imaginary student of controversy. The letters are wonderfully engaging--Hitchens is an exceptional prose stylist--and from the outset they strike a self-reflective note. What Hitchens lionizes and illuminates

in this book is not any particular disagreement, but a way of being perpetually at odds with the mainstream. "Humanity is very much in debt to such people," he argues. Hitchens's style is incendiary and sometimes flamboyant. He relishes the role of provocateur and fancies himself a gadfly to the drowsy American republic. One of his main strengths is his erudition, allowing him to range over vast landscapes of the humanities and politics in a single breath. But he is also sometimes glib and self-satisfied, and his penchant for referencing everything in sight can be distracting. Nonetheless, his arguments are forceful and morally important--and if the reader feels otherwise, there are few more fitting compliments to a professional dissident than dissent. --Eric de Place

Hitchens, a columnist for the Nation and Vanity Fair, and author, most recently, of *The Trial of Henry Kissinger*, has made a career of disagreement and dissent, of being the thorn in search of a side. "Only an open conflict of ideas and principles can produce any clarity," he observes. Hitchens's views, also part of the *Art of Mentoring* series (see Dershowitz, above), unfold in the form of an ongoing correspondence with an imaginary mentee whom he advises on modes of thought, argument and self-determination, on how to "live at an angle to the safety and mediocrity of consensus." The threats to free will are many, some predictable: establishment powers, the media, religious edicts, the manipulation of language, polls, labels, people with answers. Less obvious corrosives: the Dalai Lama, harmony, the New York Times claim to publish "all the news that's fit to print" ("conceited" and "ensorious"). Indeed, the supply of enemies to rail against seems endless. Over a short span, Hitchens sounds off on a variety of topics irony, radicalism, anarchy, socialism, solitude, faith and humor, to name a few propelling readers through both time and space, from the Bible to Bosnia. At times, the argumentative positions seem offered up for their own sake which the author argues is justified and may inadvertently raise the question of how far we can define ourselves by what we are not. But this mini-manifesto, despite the somewhat mountainous terrain, should provide readers interested in current events and anti-establishment philosophy with a clearer view into one of today's more restless and provocative minds. (Oct.) Forecast: Basic figures there are as many budding contrarians out there as there are budding lawyers. The house is launching the new *Art of Mentoring* series with a 75,000-copy first printing of both books. With good media coverage (both authors will tour), Dershowitz's name and Hitchens's prickly reputation, both books should do well. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

Current events tell of many stories where the voices ( or votes) of the people are being hijacked by

the political parties. It so happens that people who don't further inquire into the political soundbytes that are spewed, are in effect disenfranchised from the political process and unwittingly conform to misinformation. In this book we find Christopher Hitchens engaged in a series of letters, written in earnest prose about the necessity of nonconformity for the survival of the modern liberal society. Each small chapter, acts as an addressed letter in an ongoing correspondence with an unnamed addressee, referred to as "X". The overall theme of this work is concerning the function of the "Radical" and the places in the world where political situations had called for the Radical to dissent from the collective instinct. To dissent is to remain independently minded and askew from where the collective instinct has become the insecure mob - blindly following an "infallible" leader. Hitchens doesn't hesitate to disclaim that the sources of irrationality and prejudice that stem from the mob populist consensus, are petty, private, archaic and primeval urges; "There is no limit to human anti-intellectualism so there must be no limit to reason." It must be noted somewhere in this review that Hitchens is an exceptional prose stylist and his letters are wonderfully engaging and nuanced from the outset, often striking a self-reflective note. Included in his letters are personal lessons that were learned firsthand while answering the call to investigate a Moral crisis. These investigations certainly ground his commentary when citing literary scholarship, ranging over vast landscapes of the humanities and politics. The first of Hitchens' letters begins clarifying the role of the radical or dissident, with examples of individual struggles against the collective instinct. For Hitchens, the dissident is to be earned rather than claimed. . . i.e. The ones who have earned to call themselves "dissident" were those who took a risk in going against "surreptitious conscription's" that are employed in order to exploit and control the masses. The radical dissident also maintains a commitment to explore the unconventional and contrary positions, which is shown to be a honorable commitment to personal integrity. This commitment is a "social contract" that is a prerequisite to democracy and to civilization, with Justice ideally taking precedence over corruption. Throughout the letters Hitchens repeatedly informs the reader on how the dissenter deals with the struggle of societal conflict, where tribal solidarity and the intolerance that arises from it can be led to militarism, where the Law suddenly serves the interests of the State first - and the People second. To be ever more clear and concise, Hitchens later provides important aspects of being a radical in contrast to merely being a "reactionary" among other pitfalls that the radical must avoid. For clarity and to avoid confusion, the radical dissident or contrarian does not rest solely in any particular disagreement, but uses dissent as a way of being perpetually at odds with the mainstream. Hitchens gives applicable advice about being eternally vigilant and persistent in the face of unrelenting opposition through his journalistic experience, coupled with his remarkable use of numerous literary examples. One cannot

easily dismiss Hitchens as employing merely idealistic anecdotes which can't be used in "real" complex situations, when one perveys the numerous examples that grounds his arguments -especially when the arguments are recorded from people who experienced confrontations with the intolerant mobs and/or the State which sought to suffocate and extinguish the dissident voice of the disenfranchised minority. . . such as the abolitionist John Brown, Emile Zola, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandella to only name a few who regarded a compromise as a disgrace. Ever more helpful is Hitchens when further describing the mindset one needs in order to dissent when necessary. These descriptions further outline good tactics to use when in opposition, as when dissecting common arguments employed against those who oppose status quo's and further capitalizing by providing great rejoinders to those arguments. Hitchens highlights the use of irony to expose or to question - using methods of sarcasm while enduring an "As if" duration while criticizing the system - always a dissident from the status quo. This helps the dissident when engaging a non-violent political rebellion. Patiently embrace the struggle and make it your own. But the use of irony or sarcasm in a critical fashion something, Hitchens would characterize as "behaving literally and acting ironically". "Behaving literally and acting ironically" is opposed to a world of timidity where everyone is trying to be politically correct and where identities are constructed around one's "offendedness" to any sort of direct criticism. There are other concerns mentioned that are directed against the "concilliary" minded, who argue for the suppression of known facts by the following rationale that sometimes the truth cant or shouldn't be told at this time. For Hitchens this notion of the "concilliary minded" also promotes censorship of criticism, such as when the satirical questions the obvious. Although Hitchens jokes such a radical can be boring, he still takes time to suggest for the employment of different types of "wit" humor that has been employed in radical statements or criticisms in order to soften the cushion. All throughout these letters are references of the courageous determination of individual people and their spontaneous resistance to episodes of bullying or bigotry, or a challenging "pedagogical stupidity", somehow being effective enough to dishearten those whose courage was mob-derived. Hitchens providing his own observations and literary examples of the fact, that noble or moral reactions be shown as being innate - stressing that these reactions will continue to occur and without them being dependent for their occurrence upon the transmission of "morality tales". Indeed there can be shown where moral reactions take place spontaneously. The narration always includes many examples of different times and places where the role of the dissident or one who speaks out in the cause of morality, is not confined to the saintly or celebrity and is usually more genuine. These examples seem to be a valid argument against the claim that religious belief is necessary condition for moral

actions - soon afterwards, Hitchens uses many examples to demonstrate how the argument of morality being dependent upon a mythic or religious transmission is a misapprehension of what really takes place. This comes to the letter that dissents from institutions, particularly religious institutions that actually ask that people to "check your intellect at the door" and listen to the "wise person" or "books of wisdom", further aspiring mental annihilation. This subtle imposed ignorance keeps the masses in a haze, but sufficiently free to do the bidding of its leaders, however harmful they may be. This quieting of the faculties of reason easily endangers people, making them more susceptible to being deluded by the current religious conformism, centrism or large consensus. One ever common example of the mental dangers of Non-judgement, are people becoming morally apathetic or being "non-critical" on positions which has often led to moral transgressions of those who decide to remain neutral in times of crisis - such as the Catholic German Priest's being conciliatory or somewhat accommodating to Hitler and his political purposes. It is in this context where Hitchens of his own term he likens, "anti-theism" as part of an ongoing criticism of Religion and its harmful applications. One notable criticism regarding Religion and its harmful applications, is of how the Christian claim of "vicarious redemption" is in fact, repulsive - with any sort of actual application rendered absurd ;For example Hitchens writes, "I would not throw my numberless sins onto a scapegoat and expect them to pass from me" It follows that you should not assume another's actual crimes as if they were your own;For one thing you really didn't commit them and might have died than instead of committing them - this impossible action of vicarious redemption robs people of individual responsibility. In short, this claim is not intellectually honest and is therefore adverse to grounded reasoning. This is certainly a thought provoking book that is enjoyable to read and useful to employ. Regardless of what one thinks of the arguments and positions put forth in these letters, Hitchens always puts forth sound rationale for why he thinks the way he does - ever provoking the rational salience of a fellow contrarian.

There is nothing I can say about Hitch, or his writing, that hasn't been said. It's an excellent work. I bought this to keep as a collectible, but I have a copy for reading, too. That's how good this book is to me. Hitch truly was one of the most brilliant minds of our time, and I wish he could have been with us longer.

I'm not finding myself so impressed with Hitchens as I used to think that I was. But he has many flashes of wit and learning, along with some not so flashes.

Hitchens inspires with his wisdom. The book reads like the Tao Te Ching at times- peppered with invaluable lessons reflecting a finely distilled insight and the illustrative articulation of a master.

`Letters' is dense with one liners, smart turns of phrase and memorable entreaties. This is what you expect to get from Hitchens and why he is an institution. This work, however, stands out at a higher level. While the views he argues may or may not appeal, it is in how Hitchens argues that the key lies. He shows the importance of perspective, the necessity that common views are challenged, the critical need to revisit and review evidence and, overall, the power of rational thought. Don't be fooled that `Letters' is a brief 141 pages, it will occupy your mind for a long time and is a highly readable benchmark for the appraisal of ideas. Hitchens acknowledges the struggle ahead for a contrarian thinker and bids us to "imagine a state of bliss and perpetual happiness and harmony, and you have summoned a vision of tedium and pointlessness and predictability". He trawls the work of others and collects arguments which form a manual for being a better thinker who will, in turn, contribute to a better society. `Letters' eponymously addresses the need for young adults to find a purpose, and Hitchens endorses all "to travel as much as you can, and to evolve yourself as an internationalist". Hitchens dismisses baser traits deftly, noting for example that "my parents were too intelligent to be encumbered by prejudice". Unlike many of his critics, Hitchens has shown the difference between thinking and moralising.

Christopher Hitchens has often said he cares less for WHAT someone thinks and more for HOW they think. In this book, readers are treated to the marvel of how Mr. Hitchens thinks. As a well versed and well travelled author, Hitchens blends both literary and personal accounts into the anatomy of this book to support his ideas. The book takes the shape of a series of correspondence letters addressed to the reader. While generally a fast read, at times it is far from an easy read. There are points where a reader can get bogged down but the author's language which often falls outside daily vernacular. Also, it may be easy to mistake Mr. Hitchen's tone for condensation. It's not so much that he is talking down at us. It's more likely he is speaking well above us as he references Emile Zola, Dante, Oscar Wilde, Occam or events outside mainstream consciousness to make his point. The reader is compelled at those times to do their own research on the references to fully grasp the author's meaning. Christopher Hitchens has written a prolific primer for any contrarian, young, old or some age in between. Be prepared to work a little to get the most out of this roadmap he has created.

The reader becomes familiar with the authors polemic through this relentless diatribe against injustice and irrationality. The individual seeking succor against the blatantly conformist culture of western civilization can be inspired and fortified to hold his ground and make his voice be heard.

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