

How to Be an Intellectual: Essays on Criticism, Culture, and the University

By Jeffrey J. Williams

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How to Be an Intellectual: Essays on Criticism, Culture, and the University
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Over the past decade, Jeffrey J. Williams has been one of the most perceptive observers of contemporary literary and cultural studies. He has also been a shrewd analyst of the state of American higher education. How to Be an Intellectual brings together noted and new essays and exemplifies Williams's effort to bring criticism to a wider public

How to Be an Intellectual profiles a number of critics, drawing on a unique series of interviews that give an inside look at their work and careers. The book often looks at critical thought from surprising angles, examining, for instance, the history of modern American criticism in terms of its keywords as they morphed from sound to rigorous to smart. It also puts in plain language the political travesty of higher education policies that produce student debt, which, as Williams demonstrates, all too readily follow the model of colonial indenture, not just as a metaphor but in actual point of fact.

How to Be an Intellectual tells a story of intellectual life since the culture wars. Shedding academic obscurity and calling for a better critical writing, it reflects on what makes the critic and intellectual the accidents of careers, the trends in thought, the institutions that shape us, and politics. It also includes personal views of living and working with books.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Jeff Williams makes the case that the university, thanks in part to the dramatic loss of job security for faculty, is no longer marginal to American life, but central to it. His book is compulsively readable, lucid without being populist. It makes you see that while being an intellectual is hard in all sorts of ways, old and new, it's still worth giving it a try."-Bruce Robbins, Columbia University

"The scope of this book is astonishing, and Williams in one of the very few academic writers who could have pulled it off."--Frank Donoghue, The Ohio State University

"For more than twenty years, Jeff Williams has been one of the indispensable critics of the politics of American higher education, and one of the most reliable and perceptive commentators on the intellectual trajectory of cultural studies. Since taking over the minnesota review in the early 1990s (when he was what, maybe twenty years old?), he has also become something else: the most astute and rigorous interviewer in the business. No one has even attempted to perform the kind of interlocutor/archaeologist role Jeff has defined for himself and I am not sure anyone could. Every essay here, and every interview, offers an invaluable demonstration of how to be a responsible, engaged, and organic intellectual." -Michael Bérubé, Director, Institute for the Arts and Humanities, Pennsylvania State University

"The book's 32 essays cover a vast stretch of territory, from profiles of prominent critics to the impacts of student debt to an analysis of how universities are portrayed in film. . . The book thus draws connections between 'post-welfare state university' and everything from the importance of being 'smart' to the 'conceptual shrinkage' in literary theory." -InSide Higher Ed

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"'How to Be an Intellectual' can best be recommended because of Williams scathing and fact-filled indictment of colleges, in concert with the politicians, who have decided that the education biz is just that: a business." -RALPH & The Folio

"Jeffrey Williams has provided ample evidence here of a passionate and principled intellectual engagement with the political and financial interests that are combining forces to gut higher education. There could not be a better time for all of us working in the academy to follow his example."-iAcademer

"This is a book full of shrewd insights, illuminating and suggestive histories
of how the intellectual has been and could be. The criticism without footnotes approach helps bring the crucial questions into a much clearer and open light than is usual. In short, it helps to make its reader an intellectual. This is a vital and necessary book." Thomas Docherty, Left History: A Interdisciplinary Journal of Historical Inquiry and Debate

About the Author

Jeffrey J. Williams has published widely on the history of the novel, contemporary American fiction, the history of criticism, and the American university. He regularly publishes in magazines such as *Dissent* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, as well as academic journals. His most recent book is *The Critical Pulse: Thirty-six Credos by Contemporary Critics* (co-edited), and he is one of the editors of *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticis* (2001; 2nd ed. 2010). He also served as editor of the minnesota review from 1992 to 2010. Currently, he is Professor of English and of Literary and Cultural Studies at Carnegie Mellon University.

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