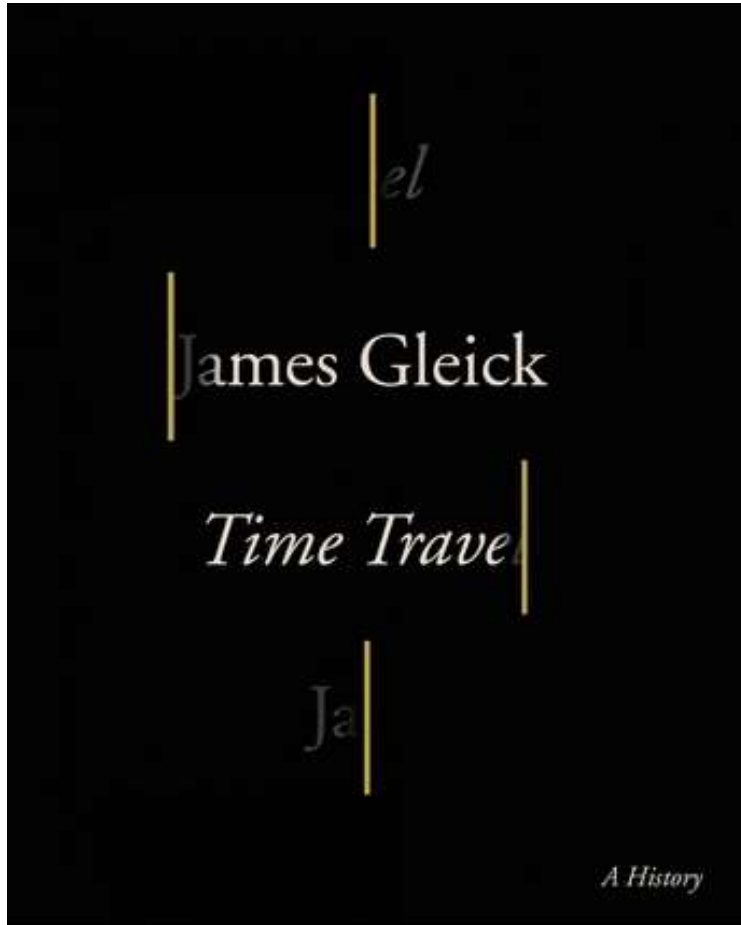


# Gleick makes you reflect on life's underlying assumptions

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*"Time Travel: A History"* by James Gleick. New York: Pantheon Books (an imprint of Penguin Random House), 2016, 336 pages, \$26.95.



“Can you, citizen of the 21st century, recall when you first heard of time travel?” James Gleick asks near the beginning of *“Time Travel: A History,”* his exhaustive treatment of a concept that has captured human imagination for more than a century. “I doubt it. Time travel is in the pop songs, the TV commercials, the wallpaper. From morning to night, children’s cartoons and adult fantasies invent and reinvent time machines, gates, doorways and windows, not to mention time ships and special closets, DeLoreans, and police boxes. No explanation is necessary. We’ve outgrown the need for professors expounding on the fourth dimension. What’s not to understand?”

Actually, quite a lot, at least according to Gleick.

“Time Travel” is comprised of 14 chapters that cover the entire spectrum of thought on the subject of time travel, from the publication of *“The Time Machine”* by H.G. Wells in 1895

through the contemporary musings of theoretical physicists such as Stephen Hawking and Kip Thorne. The language is lucid and engaging; Gleick’s storytelling prowess is on display on virtually every page. I requested this book for review after finishing *“Now: the Physics of Time”* by Richard A. Muller. Whereas Muller’s volume is more about the possibilities suggested by mathematics, physics and quantum mechanics, Gleick approaches the same basic subject matter from a cultural perspective. He spends considerably more time dissecting our attraction to the idea of time travel than he does arguing for its scientific or philosophical plausibility. In fact, Gleick makes it abundantly clear he believes time travel – as portrayed in the movies or as discussed by academics – is completely and unequivocally impossible.

Human beings have been fascinated by the notion of traveling through time since the concept was introduced in the earliest science fiction novels and short stories. But it was not until visual media began to capture the public imagination – first with movies and later with television – that the construct really started to become part of our collective consciousness. Shows such as *“The Twilight Zone”* and *“The Outer Limits”* routinely used the device to create and/or augment plot

lines. I remember being totally mesmerized when I went to see “The Final Countdown” at our local theater back in 1980. As many readers will recall, the story revolved around an aircraft carrier (the USS Nimitz) being transported back in time to just before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Although the mechanisms enabling this phenomenon vary greatly, the underlying question is fairly constant: What if we could “go back” and change history? As in, what if we could go back and assassinate Adolf Hitler before he rose to power?

A 1976 graduate of Harvard University, where he majored in English and linguistics, Gleick served as editor of the Harvard Crimson before moving to Minneapolis where he helped establish *Metropolis*, an alternative weekly newspaper. He then spent 10 years working for the New York Times as a reporter and editor. In 1993, he founded The Pipeline, one of the earliest internet service providers to offer a graphical user interface. His articles have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Slate* and *The Washington Post* and his previous books include “Chaos: Making a New Science,” “Genius: The Life and Science of Richard Feynman,” (one of the best biographies I have ever read), “Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything,” and “What Just Happened: A Chronicle from the Information Frontier.”

As is the case with everything he undertakes, Gleick explores his subject matter comprehensively and from a variety of angles. He looks at time travel as it has been depicted by science fiction writers and movie producers as well as scientists and philosophers. He shows how Einstein’s theory of relativity allows for traveling forward in time (with some qualifiers) and he dissects the various paradoxes that would inevitably arise if it were possible to travel backward in time. The author separates mathematical possibility from physical reality while simultaneously demonstrating how science fiction creates an aura of credibility by selectively referencing basic tenets of quantum mechanics. Shifting gears, he then proceeds into a fairly astute cultural critique about how advanced communication technologies, and the increasing interconnectedness of virtually everything, has distorted our sense of time and what that potentially means for our individual and collective futures. Hint: his prognosis is not all positive.

More than anything else, Gleick makes you reflect on the underlying assumptions most of us go through life never questioning or even thinking much about. I would speculate few readers would be able to get through “Time Travel” without seriously reconsidering some of their fundamental beliefs about how the world works. For example, very seldom do I stumble across a passage that literally jumps out at me from the page the way the following selection did from “Fin de Siècle,” the second chapter and one I found especially thought-provoking: “Have we spent the last century developing a lurid pipe dream? Have we lost touch with the simple truth about time? Or is it the other way around: perhaps the blinders have come off and we are finally evolving, as a species, an ability to understand the past and the future for what they are. We have learned a great deal about time, and only some of it from science.”

“Our conscious brains invent the concept of time over and over again, inferring it from memory and extrapolating from change,” Gleick explains near the end of the book. “And time is indispensable to our awareness of self. Just as an author does, we construct our own narrative, assemble the scenes in a plausible order, make inferences about cause and effect.”

In the final analysis, I was a little disappointed with “Time Travel.” I originally thought more pages would be devoted to the ongoing – and as yet unsettled depending upon whom you ask – argument about whether being able to travel backward in time will ever extend beyond the realm of science fiction writers and perhaps mystics. As a Christian, I certainly believe with God all things are possible. But we mortals obviously have limits; this may be one of them.

**Aaron W. Hughey**  
**Bowling Green**