

Jordan Peterson and His Enemies

Jordan B. Peterson has sold over half a million volumes of *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* since January, a staggering number of books. His yearlong “Antidote to Chaos” speaking tour is even more remarkable. In December, he will speak to an already sold out 2,000-seat Orpheum Theater in Los Angeles. His tickets are fetching up to \$900 each, prices comparable to Bruce Springsteen and *Hamilton*. Before that, he’ll speak to audiences in Europe from Helsinki to Stockholm.

A while back, I asked a former college president what she thought of Peterson. To my surprise she drew a blank. He was saying sensible things about hierarchy, gender, and coping with life’s limits, I explained. He was dispensing good advice, some of it aimed directly at feckless young men.

I brought up the lobsters. Lobsters have been doing status and power contests for 350 million years and are a theme in *12 Rules for Life*. Their neural systems are primitive analogues of our own. Just maybe, Peterson speculates, such status and power contests apply to more advanced animal behavior, to humans, to us. “They should rename my New York neighborhood Lobster Cove,” I laughed. She didn’t. For academics, social class, hierarchy, and status are touchy subjects, like sex and death in earlier times. Her ideological Geiger counter had started ticking. She looked uncomfortable, and we moved on.

Peterson’s freewheeling mindset, challenging academic follies, intrigued me from the start. His Jungian perspective is deeply persuasive, linking the present to history and age-old human dilemmas. Through archetypes, Peterson charts a life that is not miserable, supplicating, and unfulfilled, albeit one of tragic consciousness.

Practiced with wary, distrustful paranoiacs, the 56-year-old University of Toronto psychology professor stirs confidence even among skeptics and agnostics. He has an eye for the manipulative and false. Early in his book tour, Peterson stopped an obnoxious Channel 4 News television interviewer's feminist harangue cold, crisply and rather graciously. The exchange went viral and helped make his book a runaway bestseller. He has since drawn respectful profiles in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, and *Esquire*. His fans include two straight-talking social critics, Camille Paglia and Jonathan Haidt.

Caught in its own favored ideologies and *idées fixes*, the nation's thought establishment was late to grasp Peterson's phenomenal ascent. Using 21st-century media and the internet, he has built a worldwide platform that disputes progressive totems, ridiculing the invisible knapsack of white privilege, for example, and exposing postmodernism's subtexts and tyrannies. Five years ago, Peterson started uploading old classroom lectures to YouTube. More than 300 have been posted to date and he has over 1.5 million YouTube subscribers.

People like to listen to what Peterson has to say. Audiobooks are reportedly an unusually large share of his book sales. On YouTube videos and in stage appearances, he comes off by turns as breezy, blunt, witty, and profound. He wants to help, filling in listeners on how the cold, cruel world works and the malevolent possibilities contained in human shadows. Two admirers I know are older women, one a child psychiatrist who sees kids damaged by lax parenting and indiscipline, the other a Los Angeles therapist familiar with anguished young women choosing careers over motherhood.

I am a reader, not a watcher or listener, so all the YouTube lectures, podcasts, and \$900 tickets in the world won't help me. Until Google fired James Damore ignominiously in 2017 for his gender memo, I didn't know that Peterson's lectures had garnered a huge following. Damore chose Peterson to make his

case to in a memorable online exchange. That should suggest the caliber of his adherents.

I read *12 Rules for Life* in full only recently. It is more erudite and less cute than I'd anticipated, sometimes long-winded but deeply personal and even confessional, presented without guile or phony sunshine. As do Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* or Lord Chesterfield's advice to his son, it offers sharply drawn, aphoristic reflections on how the world works and how to play the life game well.

Peterson insists that limits, sacrifice, and suffering color all human experience. He gives advice on how to listen, see, think, pay attention, and be self-conscious. *12 Rules for Life* explores the opposing forces of chaos and order—and the gray scale in between. Humans like chaos, Peterson points out, and the novelty and promise of change. But order, not freedom, brings redemption from misery, even if it demands self-recognition of limits. In an era when youth are urged to dream crazy, Peterson gives levelheaded advice on how not to dream crazy—or at least keep crazy contained. What he writes is thus closer to the ancient moral treatises than contemporary self-help, with traces of the Tao and Seneca.

Peterson asks his audience not to beat up on itself. Yet he demands it pull its oar with a minimum of self-pity. He restates perennial questions, what it means to be human and free. Roll with human experience, he advises, it's a good bet. "It is reasonable to do what other people have always done, unless we have a very good reason not to," he writes. "It is reasonable for people to become educated and work and find love and have a family. That is how a culture maintains itself." Such predispositions render Peterson a genuine conservative, concludes political philosopher Yoram Hazony in a [Wall Street Journal appraisal](#).

Men do big things, Peterson suggests, building houses and writing books, because they crave female approval. Women

inspire men. Collaterally, women seek capable, attentive, protective men. Men and women need each other. Men and women together love, build families and communities, and enforce rules and beliefs to secure order against chaos, and they fail when the rules and beliefs that undergird them collapse or prove unenforceable. Rules are not inhibiting, he reminds permissive parents terrified of being tyrants, and childhood creativity is “shockingly rare.”

Social symbols, heroes, languages, and shared folkways create coherent societies with agreed-upon mores. Contemporary cultures ignore behavior shaped by eons of biological adaptation at great peril. Peterson warns of the human proclivity towards payback and violence, often inflicted on the innocent and able. He challenges political power grabs disguised as moral imperatives.

The primordial emotions and relational skills that lead to order are rooted in prehistory and perhaps lobster-dom, certainly in centuries of experience. To preserve the culture that has afforded great numbers of people freedom and luxury—which much of the world envies and desires—we must forego fairyland hopes and dreams. “We are not equal in ability or outcomes and never will be,” Peterson declares. Gender is not a social construct. “This is not a debate,” he notes. “The data are in.”

Peterson’s enemies are eager to destroy his rising brand, tagging it as alt-right, deplorable, proto-fascistic—and dangerous. In their script, Peterson is an avatar of retrograde white male Christian supremacy. He’s a herald of the bad old days before intersectional power ruled the roost. “Is Jordan Peterson enabling Jew hatred?” The Forward asked in a particularly [scurrilous article](#) that labeled him a “public intellectual adored by white supremacists and conspiracy theorists.” The *New York Review of Books* [exclaimed](#), “Islamophobes will take heart,” and concluded that Peterson’s popularity constituted “a crisis that is at least as deep as

the one signified by Donald Trump's unexpected leadership of the free world."

To be sure, Peterson's project provokes "a religious sense of devotion" among some white, straight, college-educated men who are, as Tanner Greer [has observed](#), "heirs to a faith tradition they no longer believe in" yet exhorted all their lives to find "meaning." They are also deprived of traditional social institutions and courtship rituals. Peterson's biblical exegeses on YouTube are Christian-friendly. His devotees seek respect and solidity, not social supremacy. But they contest the diversity behemoth that continues to churn forward at their expense. They dispute campaigns to [illegitimize](#) "white" social norms and to refigure status by race, gender, religion, disability, and other categorical claims. Their ideological defection poses a deep threat to postmodernism's ascendant clerisy and power-hungry identity liberals.

Peterson is developing into one of the most elevating voices of his generation. It is an open question, however, whether he can yet resist the messianic impulses that come with the celebrity spotlight and *ex cathedra* Twitter commentary. In his celebrity, Peterson compares with Joseph Campbell, a different Jungian who advocated extreme self-expression in his celebrated 1988 PBS series on the power of myth. Like Campbell, Peterson is an academic entrepreneur and good at it. He might say, in contrast to Campbell, follow your bliss—but not into a trailer park or insane asylum.

As Peterson puts it, it is difficult to modify socially what is biologically determined. Nature wins in the end. We are lucky to live within social boundaries. In the future as in the past, humans will look for the best rock to live under where they can create communities and work and love and mate. As sentient animals, unlike lobsters, they can choose between the orderly and the chaotic. Take your pick, Peterson might say to his audience, lifting an eyebrow, pausing, and waiting

for an answer.

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