Has American higher education become a dinosaur? Why do professors all tend to think alike? What makes it so hard for colleges to decide which subjects should be required? Why do teachers and scholars find it so difficult to transcend the limits of their disciplines? Why, in short, are problems that should be easy for universities to solve so intractable? The answer, Louis Menand argues, is that the institutional structure and the educational philosophy of higher education have remained the same for one hundred years, while faculties and student bodies have radically changed and technology has drastically transformed the way people produce and disseminate knowledge. At a time when competition to get into and succeed in college has never been more intense, universities are providing a less-useful education. Sparking a long-overdue debate about the future of American education, The Marketplace of Ideas examines what professors and students—and all the rest of us—might be better off without, while assessing what it is worth saving in our traditional university institutions.

My Personal Review:
Louis Menand makes a powerful argument in this book that the bright line separating the education and research within the academic disciplines from the world outside the ivory tower is very much blurrier than most academics believe. He offers a fascinating history of the modern university as a series of compromises and maneuvers that from their very start were negotiated across that line while trying to patrol and enforce its boundary. The four long chapters of this slim volume trace this topic and its implications through arguments over general education (ch. 1), the (re)evolution in the humanities (ch. 2), the fetishizing of interdisciplinarity (ch. 3), and the socialization of the professoriate (ch. 4). Some readers may recognize parts of ch. 2, which appeared in an earlier version in "The New York Review of Books."

While Menand refrains from making many specific recommendations (his goal is to describe the paradoxes and anxieties of the liberal arts academy rather than to advocate for a particular response), one gets the strong
sense that he thinks academics should make their peace with the university's inevitable role in the world and stop trying so hard to tilt against it. Such a conclusion is implicit in pithy statements like the following: "To the extent that this system [American higher education, with its roots in the 19th century] still determines the possibilities for producing and disseminating knowledge, trying to reform the contemporary university is like trying to get on the Internet with a typewriter, or like riding a horse to the mall" (17). These are the words of a reformer; though exactly what reforms Menand wants remain unclear, it seems obvious that they will involve higher education embracing its role in the world more self-consciously and vigorously.

In that sense, he forms a kind of mirror image to another prolific writer on the higher education scene, Stanley Fish, who also focuses on the fragility of the wall that divides the independent and disinterested quest for knowledge from the yearning many in the contemporary world feel to tear down that wall. Fish, though, is for shoring up the divide (hence, his book "Save the World on Your Own Time"), while Menand accepts that the wall must come down.

Menand is a brisk and persuasive writer, and one wants to agree with him. He seems to be on the side of history (and though an English professor, he is also truly interdisciplinary in being a Pulitzer prize-winning historian too). One thing, ironically, that he leaves out of his argument for change, however, is the long historical view. Although the modern American university began in the 19th century, universities existed far earlier than that (going back to the 12th century), and their constituencies are not just present-day students, faculty, politicians, etc. They also serve to link the distant past with the unforeseen future. Universities are thus conservative in the root meaning of that word. Too much attention to the contemporary marketplace of ideas, to which Menand is so sensitive, could be very destructive to the mission of preserving and transmitting cultural traditions like those that belong to the classical past or the Middle Ages. Though Menand acknowledges that his analysis could be considered "presentist," he doesn't really address the full challenge that this accusation represents.

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