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Up in smoke

by Andrew Roberts

A review of *Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of Civilization* by Nicholson Baker

On Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of Civilization by Nicholson Baker.

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



Nicholson Baker

Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of Civilization

Simon & Schuster, 576 pages, \$30.00

Was Sir Winston Churchill an oafish, bloodthirsty, sadistic, hypocritical, anti-Semitic alcoholic? The American novelist Nicholson Baker—whose previous works have been about phone sex and masturbation—certainly seems to think so, for *Human Smoke* is intended as nonfiction.¹

The book has been lauded by the Irish novelist Colm Tóibín in a *New York Times* review—“riveting and fascinating”—and even the normally sane Simon Winchester has described it as “a quite extraordinary book—impossible to put down, impossible to forget.” Yet once one works out the sly techniques by which the author tries to persuade the reader that Churchill was a foul warmonger, the book is anything but. It uses the technique of juxtaposing bald quotations, ripped out of...

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