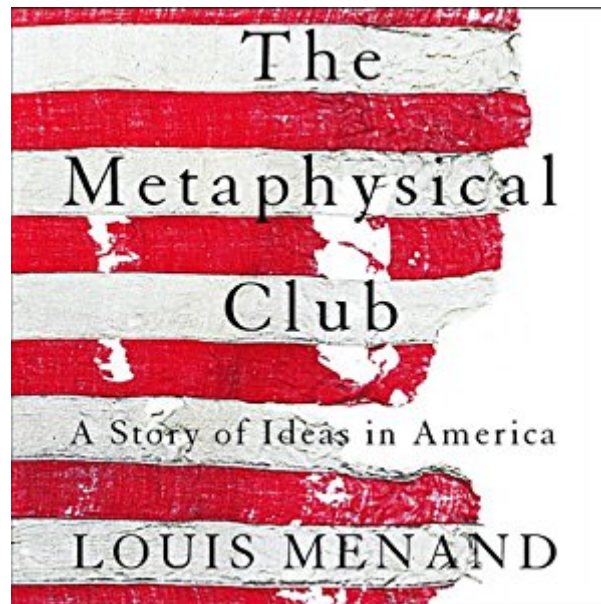




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The Metaphysical Club



Synopsis

Hardly a club in the conventional sense, the organization referred to in the title of this superb literary hybrid (part history, part biography, part philosophy) consisted of four members and probably existed for less than nine months. Yet its impact upon American intellectual life remains incalculable. Louis Menand masterfully weaves pivotal late 19th- and early 20th-century events, colorful biographical anecdotes, and abstract ideas into a narrative whole that both enthralls and enlightens.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"The Metaphysical Club" spent a whole lot of time on bestseller lists, and won a Pulitzer Prize for its author, Louis Menand. Its subtitle, "A Story of Ideas in America," gives some indication on what the book is about, but until you actually read the book you cannot begin to grasp its depth and sheer brilliance. The biggest surprise is Menand's credentials; he is a professor of English at the City University in New York. That an English professor wrote an amazing synthesis of philosophy, sociology, and history is worthy of some type of prize. This book involves the reader on so many different levels that a review is sure to leave lots of information untouched. In short (very short!), Menand argues that studying the philosophical works of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey will tell us about where America has been, and where it is now. Menand argues that these four people influenced the way we think and act today. Oliver Wendell Holmes fought in the Civil War as a young man. Later in life, he became one of America's leading legal theorists as a justice of the Supreme Court. The war deeply scarred Holmes, calling into

question his conceptions of life and truth. In his legal rulings and scholarly articles, Holmes subscribed to the view that "certitude leads to violence," which means those with absolute ideas (like abolitionists and pro-slavery forces) won't compromise their belief systems. The result of this unwillingness to compromise is often bloody violence. Many of Holmes's rulings and writings support the belief that ideas, no matter how repugnant, should find full expression in society regardless of how unworthy they may be.

Both the editorial review and many of the individual reviews have mentioned that this is a study of four principal figures of pragmatism: Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, and John Dewey. That depiction is, however, incomplete and misleading. THE METAPHYSICAL CLUB is, as the subtitle proclaims, a study of ideas in America. While it is true that these four individuals are the lynchpins around which much of the story revolves, Menand keeps in mind one of the main doctrines held by all these thinkers, that the social is more primary than the individual. This book is a study of the intellectual life of late nineteenth century America as a whole, and while Holmes, James, Sanders, and Dewey provide much of the focus, their individual stories do not exhaust the tale that Menand is trying to tell. Menand provides a brilliant portrait of the intellectual life of America in the post-Civil War era. The story is told from a generalist and not a specialist point of view. If one is interested in pragmatism, this provides the background and an outline of an introduction to the subject. As historical background, this book is unsurpassed. But it is crucial to keep in mind that it is background, not foreground. It does not begin to rival, for instance, such studies as Murry Murphy's tragically out of print study of Peirce's thought, or Gerald Myer's biography of James, or Bruce Kuklick's study of the development of American Philosophy. Apart from the works of the figures themselves, these are the secondary works to which one would go for greater depth on the subject. But none of these works provides Menand's delicious breadth. The number of subjects that Menand takes up is stunning.

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