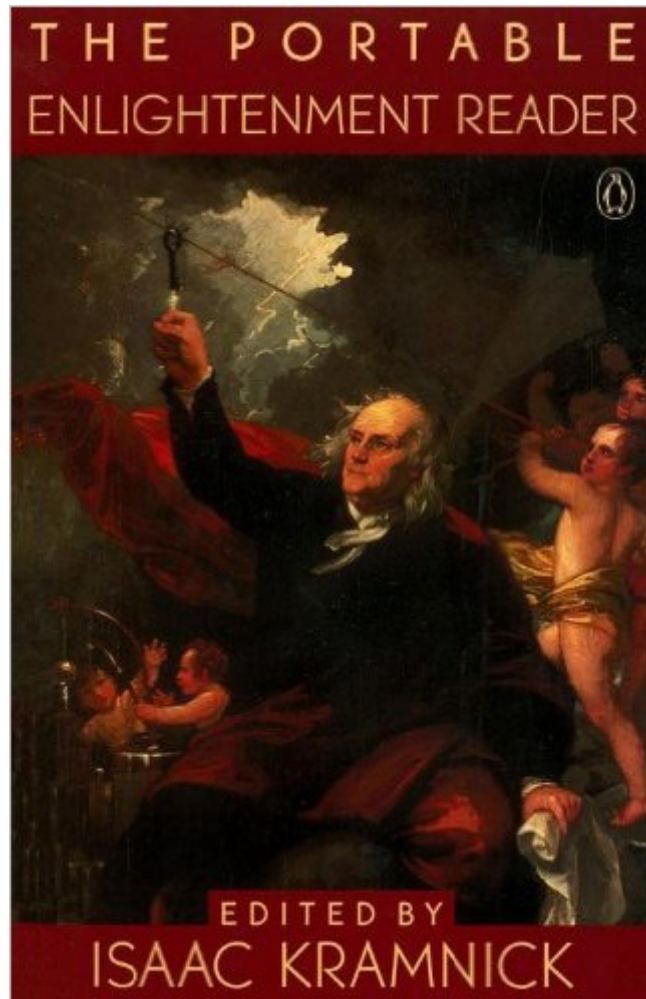


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The Portable Enlightenment Reader (Portable Library)



Synopsis

The Age of Enlightenment of the 18th century, also called the Age of Reason, was so named for an intellectual movement that shook the foundations of Western civilization. In championing radical ideas such as individual liberty and an empirical appraisal of the universe through rational inquiry and natural experience, Enlightenment philosophers in Europe and America planted the seeds for modern liberalism, cultural humanism, science and technology, and laissez-faire Capitalism. This volume brings together works from this era, with more than 100 selections from a range of sources. It includes examples by Kant, Diderot, Voltaire, Newton, Rousseau, Locke, Franklin, Jefferson, Madison, and Paine that demonstrate the pervasive impact of Enlightenment views on philosophy and epistemology as well as on political, social, and economic institutions.

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Customer Reviews

More than forty years ago, when I was a college undergraduate, I ran across several lists of books that were recommended reading for anyone who wanted to be truly educated. Those lists invariably included books such as Rousseau's "The Social Contract," The Federalist Papers, Voltaire's "Candide," and many other writings from the Enlightenment era (as well, of course, as other time periods). I dutifully noted the titles, and, wanting to consider myself an educated person, fully intended to read all of them. Well now I'm 62, and it's time for me to admit that I'm almost certainly never going to read "The Social Contract." This volume is for me and others like me, who are suffering from the "So Many Books, So Little Time" syndrome. The book contains a broad selection

of writings from the major thinkers of the Enlightenment, which the editor defines roughly from the 1680's to the 1790's. What a marvelous time it must have been to be an intellectual! The barriers erected by the authority of the kings, priests, and classical writers were being shattered. The ability to ask new questions and propose new answers produced an almost intoxicating sense of infinite possibilities for the improvement - even the perfection - of human society. Some of the pieces in this book will seem hopelessly naive to our modern cynical minds; on the other hand, some of the points being made so excitedly and even belligerently are now taken for granted - and we are likely to read them and say, "What's the big deal? Everyone knows that." And then there are the debates about the most fundamental questions - such as the source of knowledge - that have yet to be resolved, and probably never will be.

Editor Isaac Kramnick describes the Enlightenment as "an age when intellectuals eagerly wrote for the wider audience of new readers, not yet having become alienated from the philistine public in a posture of romantic weariness." This book offers many of the most influential Enlightenment texts. It is a pleasure to read the earnest, excited, hopeful and well-intended thoughts the Enlightenment directly from their original source. The book has substantial drawbacks, but it is well worth reading. First a look at the positive. Most of the writings selected in this book are important, and editor Isaac Kramnick's introduction is insightful, albeit with a narrow focus (more on that below). The selections are grouped non-chronologically by theme and include on average four-page citations from the more influential writings of a given author, allowing the reader to get some feeling for the author without having to read the entirety of the original sources. Kramnick starts each selection with two sentences about its origin, date and significance. The original texts are probably all available free on the internet, but then the reader would have to find the juicy bits by him or herself, so it would be much more work to get an overview. The selections of materials offer much to learn. The reader comes directly to the text where John Locke calls for the separation of Church and State or where Adam Smith invokes the invisible hand. It is fascinating to read seminal texts, such as Kant's reasoning leading to his categorical imperative.

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