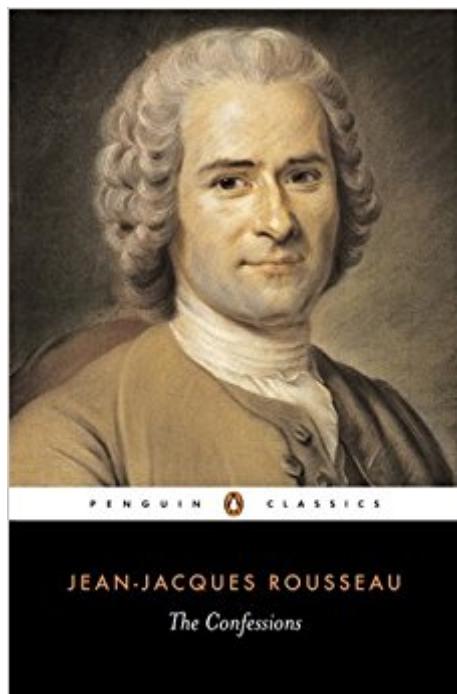


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The Confessions (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

Widely regarded as the first modern autobiography, *The Confessions* is an astonishing work of acute psychological insight. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) argued passionately against the inequality he believed to be intrinsic to civilized society. In his *Confessions* he relives the first fifty-three years of his radical life with vivid immediacy - from his earliest years, where we can see the source of his belief in the innocence of childhood, through the development of his philosophical and political ideas, his struggle against the French authorities and exile from France following the publication of *Emile*. Depicting a life of adventure, persecution, paranoia, and brilliant achievement, *The Confessions* is a landmark work by one of the greatest thinkers of the Enlightenment, which was a direct influence upon the work of Proust, Goethe and Tolstoy among others. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"(Narrator) Davidson's articulate and lightly vocalized rendering is an invaluable help to the listener . . . This audio may be savored over time, and is well worth the effort. Davidson's cultured, ironic tone

meshes well with Rousseau canny genius." --Kliatt --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Text: English (translation) Original Language: French --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Part I of Rousseau's "Confessions" is one of the greatest autobiographies I've read with the author plumbing the depths of his soul to recount his deepest desires, loves, emotions and disappointments. Unfortunately, I thought that much of Part II disintegrates into a mere gossipy retelling of his alienation from his friends and society and doesn't have the same force as the first part. I continue to think that Nabokov's "Speak Memory" is the greatest autobiography ever written (and I'm quite sure that he was inspired by Rousseau) but "Confessions" is a very close second. Incidentally, my other favorite autobiographies include: Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday* Elias Canetti, *The Tongue Set Free* Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* Abbie Hoffman, *Soon to be a Major Motion Picture* Edward Said, *Out of Place* Andre Aciman, *Out of Egypt*

The Confessions will not appeal to everyone, but if you are like me who likes to temper my everyday reading with history and historical figures you will do well to tackle this one by the great Jean-Jacques Rousseau. I say "tackle" because it is quite a formidable size and took me some weeks to complete, and I at some stage almost gave up! However I am glad I persevered because I can now claim to know something of this man and more importantly, something of this period. Published after Rousseau died, it was, like all of his works, written in the eighteenth century so it is a little difficult to grasp the vernacular of that period to begin with but once accustomed to the idiom it sings along and regardless of your opinion you DO get to know him with all his foibles. I liked him. I think he was a gentle genius albeit a little paranoid at times and certainly not always "timid of heart" as he continually professes to be. The upper echelons of European society were quite a "nasty" lot in the main. You were either accepted or not in that heady environment (and women had the most clout) which meant you were either accepted or perished. However Jean-Jacques was quite capable of throwing a few hand grenades into the mix when he so chose! In the beginning Jean-Jacques was feted and much loved but his downfall came with the printing of his *Emile* when he became reviled and refused residency in France and Geneva (his home state) and the book was either banned or ceremoniously burnt! His love life was interesting to say the least. I felt he had a mother complex as he was drawn to older women when he was still very young and in fact called

Mme. de Warens, his first (and greatest love of his life) Mamma! He later settles with Therese who was an illiterate seamstress and spends the rest of his days with her. I am puzzled about this relationship on a number of scores. For a man of such sensitivity and talent I can't imagine why this relationship should endure as they would have been on a completely different intellectual plane. To compound this unlikely connection, Jean-Jacques has five children with Therese and he insisted that all of them were handed over to the Foundling Hospital at birth. As a mother, I find this quite unforgivable on the part of Jean-Jacques as it appears he had no empathy towards his partner on this subject and surely she suffered terribly as a result. There is no doubt his genius and to think his works were being written around twenty years before the French Revolution one has to admire him. In fact his works were influential in the ideology of the French Revolution. So much to say about him and so little time, however I must make one more comment in defence of this complex man. He suffered with some anomaly of his renal system throughout his life which caused urinary retention which forced him to self catheterise. Hygiene in those days was in general poor and one can imagine his catheterisation being done under less than ideal conditions. As a result infection would have been a real risk which would have made his life hellish as he describes on many occasions. So, a complex man, but without doubt a mover and shaker of his time and he can look down from his "heaven" and be satisfied that he is remembered some two hundred years later as a great man and a national hero.

This book is a revelation as it seemed to me a portrait, or perhaps a mask, of the heightened sensibilities of the interior monologue of a genius. "Since my name is certain to live on among men, I do not want the reputation it transmits to be a false one." Indeed, his honesty is remarkable as he writes about the abandonment of his children, his relationship with lovers and his intimate proclivities. Rousseau's life was a fascinating study of an extraordinary and innovative mind. He dined "sometime with princes at noon and supped with peasants at night." Musically self-taught, he invented an alphabetical code for writing music and wrote an opera performed with it in "The Village Soothsayer." His "Social Contract" inspired constitutions in nations struggling with revolution against monarchies to become democracies which earned him threats of sedition and cruel acts of political scorn. His books were burned, the church sought to excommunicate him, his house was stoned and he escaped in exile en route to Berlin through the good graces of philosopher David Hume to England toward the end of his life. At times, often enough, he seems the narcissist subtly engrossed in his many virtues masked in false humility and yet the final, lasting impression is of a masterpiece forged from the crucible of a tormented soul bent upon the diligent and inspired study of the journey

of the maturing human heart. Like Voltaire toward the end of his life but before his exile, we find Rousseau living on a lake isle longing only to finish his life in the practice of avid gardening and intellectual pursuits. The translation here by Angela Scholar is richly, gorgeous prose which reminded me of Proust, who I'm confident must have been influenced by Rousseau. This book is, as Rousseau described it, the "most secret history of my soul" and ranks highly on my Top 25 Novels of All Time among the holy literary trinity of France's Proust in "The Remembrance of Lost Time" and Balzac's "Lost Illusions." I really can't urge you strongly enough to carve out the time to read this brilliantly conceived autobiography.

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