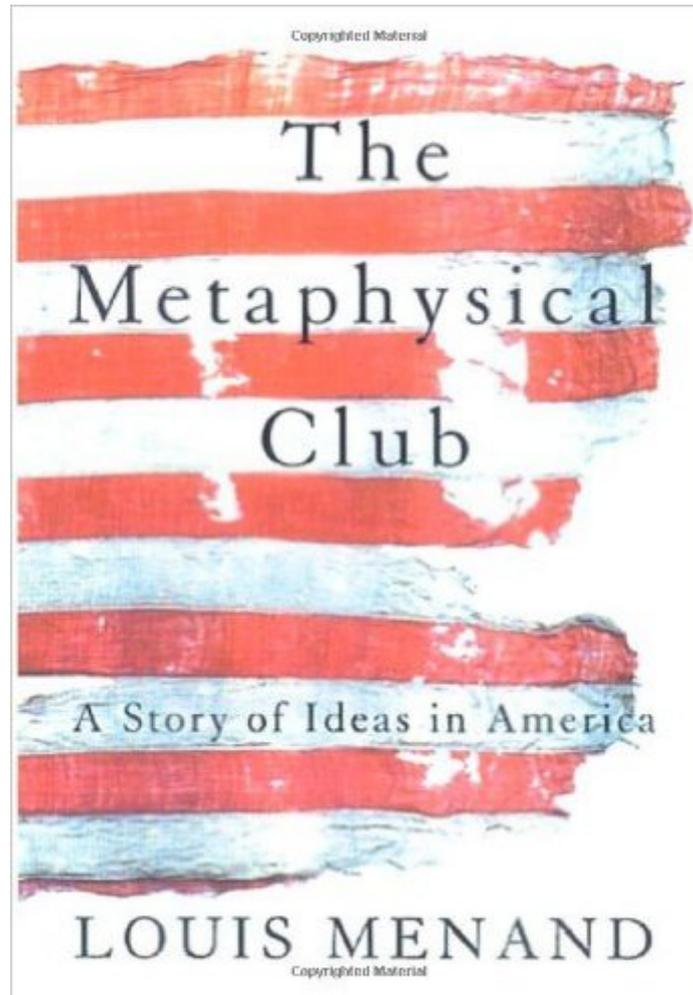


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The Metaphysical Club : A Story Of Ideas In America



Synopsis

Winner of the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for History A riveting, original book about the creation of modern American thought. The Metaphysical Club was an informal group that met in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1872, to talk about ideas. Its members included Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., future associate justice of the United States Supreme Court; William James, the father of modern American psychology; and Charles Sanders Peirce, logician, scientist, and the founder of semiotics. The Club was probably in existence for about nine months. No records were kept. The one thing we know that came out of it was an idea -- an idea about ideas. This book is the story of that idea. Holmes, James, and Peirce all believed that ideas are not things "out there" waiting to be discovered but are tools people invent -- like knives and forks and microchips -- to make their way in the world. They thought that ideas are produced not by individuals, but by groups of individuals -- that ideas are social. They do not develop according to some inner logic of their own but are entirely dependent -- like germs -- on their human carriers and environment. And they thought that the survival of any idea depends not on its immutability but on its adaptability. The Metaphysical Club is written in the spirit of this idea about ideas. It is not a history of philosophy but an absorbing narrative about personalities and social history, a story about America. It begins with the Civil War and ends in 1919 with Justice Holmes's dissenting opinion in the case of *U.S. v. Abrams* -- the basis for the constitutional law of free speech. The first four sections of the book focus on Holmes, James, Peirce, and their intellectual heir, John Dewey. The last section discusses some of the fundamental twentieth-century ideas they are associated with. This is a book about a way of thinking that changed American life.

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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