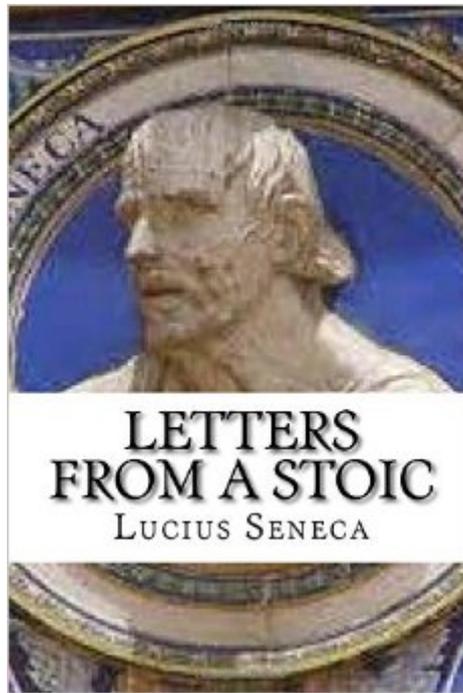


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Letters From A Stoic



Synopsis

Continue to act thus, my dear Lucilius – set yourself free for your own sake; gather and save your time, which till lately has been forced from you, or filched away, or has merely slipped from your hands. Make yourself believe the truth of my words, – that certain moments are torn from us, that some are gently removed, and that others glide beyond our reach. The most disgraceful kind of loss, however, is that due to carelessness. Furthermore, if you will pay close heed to the problem, you will find that the largest portion of our life passes while we are doing ill, a goodly share while we are doing nothing, and the whole while we are doing that which is not to the purpose. What man can you show me who places any value on his time, who reckons the worth of each day, who understands that he is dying daily? For we are mistaken when we look forward to death; the major portion of death has already passed. Whatever years be behind us are in death's hands. Therefore, Lucilius, do as you write me that you are doing: hold every hour in your grasp. Lay hold of to-day's task, and you will not need to depend so much upon to-morrow's. While we are postponing, life speeds by. Nothing, Lucilius, is ours, except time. We were entrusted by nature with the ownership of this single thing, so fleeting and slippery that anyone who will can oust us from possession. What fools these mortals be! They allow the cheapest and most useless things, which can easily be replaced, to be charged in the reckoning, after they have acquired them; but they never regard themselves as in debt when they have received some of that precious commodity, – time! And yet time is the one loan which even a grateful recipient cannot repay.

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Customer Reviews

The first time I read this book I was amazed and excited, and entering middle age. Seneca's

thoughts on the human condition seemed like they could have been written today. Except for some dated Roman references, here is a man trying to define how to live, in what we today would call "the secular society." The series of letters reads like a personal guidebook to ethics. It still speaks to us across the centuries. Seneca was privileged, ego centric, and all too aware of the fleeting nature of life. He was also a tutor of Nero, a dramatist, philosopher, slave owner, etc. But his essay-like letters - by turns glib and meditative - reveal a man struggling to make sense of a world of power, wealth and abundance, ostensibly ruled by reason, suffused with uncertainty and enveloped in paganism. He was also no doubt polishing his image for future generations. Nonetheless, he talks of god and spirituality, and the early Christians were said to have valued his wisdom. I've read this two or three times. Each time I've given it away to a friend. Once you read it, you'll go back to it again and again. His maxims are famous. His commonsense advice still rings true.

Stoicism has been much misunderstood, and the adjective "stoic," which loosely can be taken to mean bearing up under duress, is partly correct but does not do justice to one of the world's great philosophies. This Penguin volume presents a great selection from the letters of Seneca, which hits all the high points of the philosophy and captures Seneca's remarkable personality, which has made him a hit with the cognoscenti for 2,000 years. Few perhaps realize that the Stoics postulated a great commonwealth governed by law, or that they idealized democracy. Seneca mentions Solon the lawgiver as the creator of democracy and refers numerous times to the Roman Stoic saint, Cato, who strove mightily (and unsuccessfully) to preserve the Roman Republic. Seneca, like other Stoics, has a doctrine of nature that is remarkably close to that of Emerson or modern American environmentalists. The wise man (*sapiens*) will never be bored when contemplating the simple things of nature. The natural beauty of the countryside and the healthful action of the waves can have a calming effect (although there's a memorable passage in which a storm causes terrible sea sickness). He also believed in the simple and strenuous life and the avoidance of luxury and decadence, and there are numerous passages in these letters to his disciple, Lucilius, which decry the ostentatious, self indulgent practices of his contemporaries. These are sentiments and ideas adopted by many in the modern world, including President Theodore Roosevelt. Seneca has no patience for philosophy as a word game or a practice of engaging in hair-splitting arguments for their own sake. He rather sees it as a practice or way of life that all those who seek the good should investigate and adopt. While the Stoics believed in democracy and republicanism, their doctrine of freedom is different from the modern idea of Liberty. Freedom was the ability to endure and pursue the good even under tyranny. While that may be admirable, modern commentators on liberty (such

as Isaiah Berlin) have pointed out that defining down the range of one's actions is not a satisfactory solution to the problem of the absence of liberty in society or the world. No stranger to power himself, Seneca virtually ruled Rome as tutor of the boy Nero--and yet he adopts a quite believable stance of simplicity and humility. It's a good bet these letters will still be found absorbing by readers for another 2,000 years.

This will not be a review about Seneca. I suppose I will attempt that one day once I manage to go thru my library's Loeb Classical Library edition of Seneca's Epistles. The purpose of this review is to bellyache about the Penguin Classics' edition of this work. I come not to criticize this translation. I have no Latin. For all I know it is brilliant. What I am here to criticize is the decision to edit Seneca's work all to Tartarus and back. There are 124 Letters in Seneca's Epistles. Campbell gives you 40. Or just over 32%! Campbell's criteria as to which letters to present is a personal one. He evaluated their interest and whether or not they were repetitive. His is admittedly charming in his own defense on this issue. He quotes Roger L'Estrange (another anthologist of Seneca's) from 1673 to the effect that anyone who complains about the selection is an unmannerly guest who eats at his host's table and then critiques the meal. I embrace this description. I may well use The Unmannerly Guest as my nom de plume for my reviews from now on. Here is my problem. All too often the editors or translators of the Penguin Classic editions decide that they know better than the ancient author what is valuable about the work for today's reader. Their Plutarch is one such travesty. Their edition of Polybius is another. What makes it more confusing is they can get it right sometime, as with their edition of Livy. I think they are really missing their chance here. The Penguin Classics series is the perfect publishing series for modern and complete editions of ancient authors presented in their original form as much as is possible. Let us look at how personal Campbell's choice is. I happen to be reading *The Roman Stoics: Self, Responsibility, and Affection* by Gretchen Reydams-Schils. She happens to cite 185 passages from Seneca's Epistles during the course of her book. Because I am The Unmannerly Guest, I took it upon myself to count up how many of those passages were not in Campbell's selection. 122 of the 185 or just over 65%. In other words, she made as much use of the letters Campbell did not publish as those he did. His choices were no more representative of Seneca's thought to Reydams-Schils than the letters he rejected. Here's another way to look at it. Seneca was writing about a philosophy to be lived. Not a system of thought but a guide to behavior. It is inevitable that such a guide would be repetitive. The same sort of issues, of temptations, of annoyances come up again day after day with slight variations (e.g., anyone trying to raise courteous children knows what I mean). Repetition in an author dealing with such a guide is to be

expected; indeed, it is to be appreciated as helpful. It takes time to learn how to live. I think we ought to take old Seneca and Plato and Augustine and Machiavelli and Locke and so on seriously. When we read them we should try to sink into their way of living not just their way of thinking about that life. Only then can we evaluate how much they speak to us. The Penguin Classics, accordingly to this Unmannerly Guest, do not help us in this endeavor. And the fact that they have chosen to present us with a highlighted tour of ancients like Seneca and Polybius is a betrayal of the original mission of the series which was to make the classics easily available to the masses. I speak for those masses as much as anyone. And I say, give me the whole damn book. Let me be the one to make the editing decisions.

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