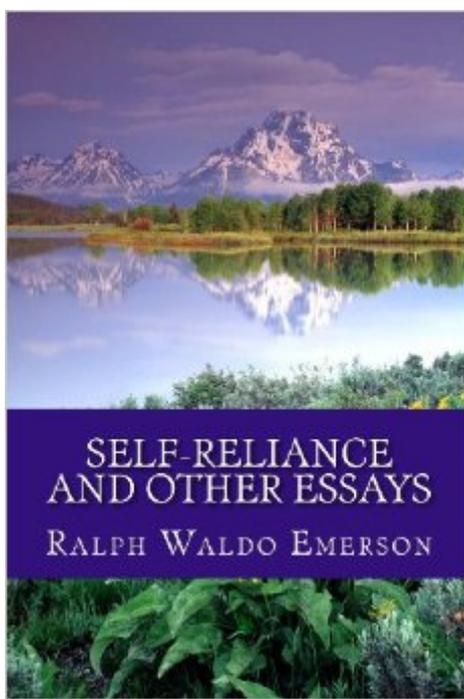


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Self-reliance And Other Essays



Synopsis

One of America's pre-eminent philosophers, Ralph Waldo Emerson was born into a long line of ministers and preachers. He attended Harvard at the tender age of 14, where he studied to fulfill his destiny and become a minister. Emerson eventually dropped out of this line of work, embarking on a career as a public speaker and serving as the intellectual center of a group called the Transcendentalist Club. This book contains some of Emerson's best-known essays, specifically "Self-Reliance," as well as his address to the Harvard Divinity School. Emerson's philosophy, although sometimes painfully explicated upon in his own writings, is best summed up by the word "individualism." To Emerson, it is the individual that should be the fulcrum point in all aspects of life. Emerson then took this philosophy and applied it to a myriad of subjects. "Self-Reliance," Emerson's masterwork, attempts to explain how man should retain his individualism in the face of society. It is society that stifles the individual, and the trick is to be true to yourself and your conscience. Law should not be, and is not, above the individual. Again, conscience should rule the day. Every man must follow his conscience even if doing so endangers his role in society. This tension between the individual and society Emerson enumerates continues to reverberate to this day. In his address to the Harvard Divinity School (which got Emerson banned from the school for years), he addresses individualism in the context of religion. Emerson, himself a trained minister who eventually resigned his pulpit, urges those about to embark on a career in the clergy to reach inside themselves when preaching. Don't rely on the same old tired formulas everyone else relies on, Emerson says, but see what the holy word means to you and then express what you find to your flock in your own way. Several other essays round out the collection, all of them utilizing Emerson's keen sense of the power of the individual. That Emerson is still in print today while some of his contemporaries are not is proof enough of the power and influence of his thought. Whether you agree with his arguments or not, there is no denying that he has been enormously influential to American thinkers of his time and those who have followed.

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Customer Reviews

The first time I read "Self-Reliance," I didn't. It was assigned summer reading before my senior year AP English class and I was too busy golfing and playing pick-up basketball to waste my summer on a book written by a dead guy with weird sideburns. At age 23, I read it the second time, printing out a public domain edition using a temp job's laser printer then plowing through it on my lunch break. This week was my third time to read it and by far the most valuable thanks to the Domino Project's beautiful new special edition. Stunning design by my friend Alex Miles Younger places all of Emerson's original text on the right side of the page in this slim 73 page volume, with notable pull-quotes from the book as well as complementary and supplementary quotes from famous people on the left side. OK, fine, it's a bit ironic that a book that preaches you needing to think for yourself highlights the lines that you SHOULD think are the most important. Except for the fact, those ARE the most important lines. They were to me at least. I somewhat always dismissed and ignored Emerson because I thought he was like his friend Thoreau, who I kind of hate. But, whether it was because of my age or this special edition, "Self-Reliance"--finally!--resonated with me on this third read like few books have ever before. (It could be a fitting companion to my beloved Meditations (Modern Library) even.) "Self-Reliance" is truly a book about artistic confidence and belief in one's own genius: "To believe your own thoughts, to believe what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, that is genius.

Get ready for a different reading experience. I mean, actually thinking while you're reading, because you'll see different kinds of words and they'll be in a strange order than what you're used to. This book wasn't written yesterday. You're in a different time and place when you read this one. And that's what makes it so much more meaningful. You're reading poetry (what else would you expect from Emerson?) which means that every word was carefully chosen, and each sentence has a deep meaning. You'll feel different after reading this book, as if you've been traveling through time and finding treasures of wisdom that have been preserved for us today. I appreciate the layout of this book where each left page (as the book is open faced) contains large red print of a key quote that is

also highlighted in red on the right page where it is placed among the rest of the text. This actually helped me read it and glean the main points. The other reading help from the publisher (The Domino Project) was a quote on every other page from a variety of notable individuals that correlated somewhat with the message Emerson was conveying, except it was in language easier to digest. This helped clarify the message and made it sink in better for me. I shouldn't start quoting the book because I could go on and on, but here's one to give you a taste: "Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life's cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another, you have only an extemporaneous, half possession." By just typing that sentence, I understood it better. Every sentence is like that. It's not a long book, 73 pages, and half of those contain the Emerson text.

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