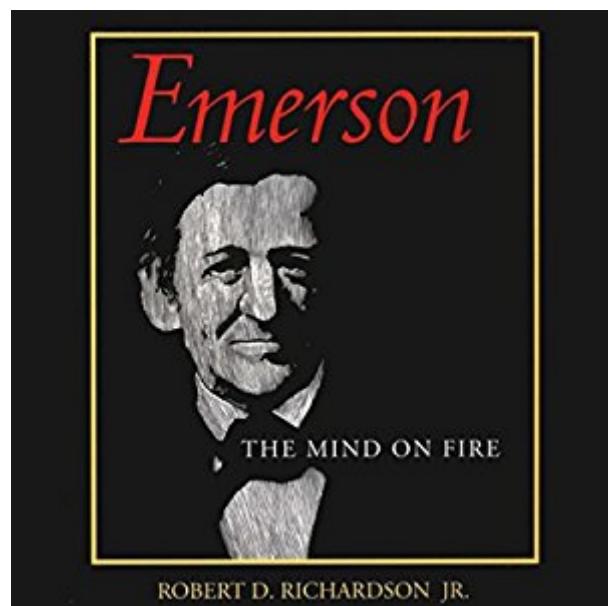


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Emerson: The Mind On Fire



Synopsis

Ralph Waldo Emerson is one of the most important figures in the history of American thought, religion, and literature. The vitality of his writings and the unsettling power of his example continue to influence us more than a hundred years after his death. Now Robert D. Richardson Jr. brings to life an Emerson very different from the old stereotype of the passionless Sage of Concord. Drawing on a vast amount of new material, including correspondence among the Emerson brothers, Richardson gives us a rewarding intellectual biography that is also a portrait of the whole man. These chapters present a young suitor, a grief-stricken widower, an affectionate father, and a man with an abiding genius for friendship. The great spokesman for individualism and self-reliance turns out to have been a good neighbor, an activist citizen, a loyal brother. Here is an Emerson who knew how to laugh, who was self-doubting as well as self-reliant, and who became the greatest intellectual adventurer of his age. Richardson has, as much as possible, let Emerson speak for himself through his published works, his many journals and notebooks, his letters, his reported conversations. This is not merely a study of Emerson's writing and his influence on others; it is Emerson's life as he experienced it. We see the failed minister, the struggling writer, the political reformer, the poetic liberator. The Emerson of this book not only influenced Thoreau, Fuller, Whitman, Dickinson, and Frost, he also inspired Nietzsche, William James, Baudelaire, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, and Jorge Luis Borges. Emerson's timeliness is persistent and striking: his insistence that literature and science are not separate cultures, his emphasis on the worth of every individual, his respect for nature. Richardson gives careful attention to the enormous range of Emerson's readings - from Persian poets to George Sand - and to his many friendships and personal encounters - from Mary Moody Emerson to the Cherokee chiefs in Boston - evoking both the man and the times in which he lived. Throughout this book, Emerson's unquenchable vitality reaches across the decades, and his hold on us endures.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Richardson has given us a profound biography of one of the world's most profound men. And in this case, I'm almost as impressed with the biographer as the man he reports. This book has 100 chapters, each one as full of outstanding ideas as some entire books I've read. I owe many wonderful evenings and mornings to Richardson who has given me the keenest insights into my favorite teacher and author. Richardson so accurately portrays Emerson's journey of a self-realized soul marching in his conviction of the final authority of the individual Self, that at times I felt I was making the same journey myself. In so many moments, something swelled within me while reading this book, and I thought perhaps even such a one as myself might grasp these elevated concepts Richardson so lucidly explains. Emerson himself said, "only that book is good which puts the reader in a working mood." While reading this book I have felt encouraged in my quest to do the work of unfolding my own nature with reverential awe--as Emerson admonishes us--by keeping a journal and studying to unify myself with the eternity at the core of my being. Richardson not only studied Emerson to write this book, he studied the books that Emerson studied, thereby showing Emerson's method, intellectual origins, and native genius that courageously broke with contemporary traditions to create a cohesive world-view so inspirational to many. Emerson, more than any other author I have read, believed in the grandeur of the soul--not just his own--but in each of us. He wrote in his journal, "When I look at the rainbow I find myself the center of its arch. But so are you; and so is the man who sees it a mile from both of us. So also the globe is round, and every man therefore stands on the top. King George, and the chimney sweep no less." If you are looking for a book to not only stretch your limits of understanding but help you realize the helping hand at the end of your own arm, enlighten yourself by studying Emerson with Richardson. You might also consider spending the extra few dollars and get the hardback . It'll last a lot longer under the wear you'll give it referring to it again and again.

I must confess that I don't understand the reader review below who found this biography of Emerson to be a difficult read. Although not quite a page-turner, I managed to read this in very little time at all. I must also confess that I do find Emerson himself incredibly difficult to read. But what I

find to be the case in Emerson himself, I did not find to be true in Richardson's biography. While I find that Emerson constructed one stunning sentence and aphorism after another, I generally find his essays to be slow going. Nonetheless, while I am not his biggest fan, he is unquestionably one of the four or five greatest figures in American intellectual history, and Richardson's biography does him great justice. The great merit of this biography is that at the end of it, you feel that you have gained considerable insight both into Emerson and New England intellectual life in the 19th century. I was especially intrigued with Richardson detailing of Emerson's reading. Emerson was, without any question, a great reader. Great readers rarely read books from cover to cover. Samuel Johnson, who was himself one of the most accomplished readers in the history of civilization, once said that we have more of a need to reread than to read. But he also once quipped, "What, you read books all the way to the end?" Emerson did not read books all the way to the end. But like Johnson and other great readers, he had a genius for picking out the most important points. What Boswell wrote of Johnson is true also of Emerson: "He had a peculiar facility in seizing at once what was valuable in any book, without submitting to the labour of perusing it from beginning to end." One comes away from the book also enormously impressed with Emerson's character. He seems by any standard to have been a remarkably good human being. He was both a man of high principle, and a man of powerful attachments to other human beings. I found the accounting of his various friendships, many to equally famous individuals, to be of the utmost interest. Also, he seems to have met virtually every important thinker and writer in the English-speaking world, from Coleridge to Carlyle to Melville. I heartily recommend this book to anyone who wants to gain a deeper knowledge of Emerson's life and work. By any standard, Emerson is one of the giants in American life. His influence on American thought is incalculable. Consider: not only was he the major influence on such American literary figures the magnitude of Thoreau and Whitman; he was a profound influence on artists such as Thomas Cole, Moran, and Bierstadt. America's deep-rooted environmentalism is steeped in Emersonian Transcendentalism. John Muir was a devoted reader of Emerson. One could make a case for Emerson having had perhaps more influence in the shaping of American thought than any other individual. This biography is an outstanding introduction to that person.

Once I started reading this book I could not stop for very long. It was so good I did not want it to end. This book traces Emerson's intellectual and spiritual path in such great detail that it enables the reader to further investigate Emerson's sources if he or she so chooses. The biographical information was quite complete as well. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in Emerson or Transcendentalism. I noticed that Richardson has also written a biography of Thoreau

and I will likely read it. This book represents a very high degree of scholarship and a great effort on the part of the author. I also greatly appreciated the photos of Emerson and the people close to him. Personally, I would have liked to have seen a few more photos of his second wife and his children. I would have also liked to have learned how his wife managed after Emerson died and perhaps some information regarding his descendants. However, these are my own personal preferences and are in no way meant to diminish the excellence of this book. The material is well structured into about 100 brief chapters which I thought made the reading easy. I never felt bogged down due to the length of the book. This is not a short book. I really came away from the book with a sense of the man and an appreciation of the events and societal pressures of his time. After reading this book I think anyone familiar with Emerson's writings would feel like sitting down with the man to have a discussion to clear up a point or two.

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