



The Vintage Mencken

H.L. Mencken , Alistair Cooke (Compiler)

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The anthology that spans an entire lifetime of writing by America's greatest curmudgeon, with a "flick of mischief on nearly every page."

The Vintage Mencken Details

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From Reader Review The Vintage Mencken for online ebook

Herb Hastings says

After the recent depressing and often illiterate election, it seemed a good time to read Mencken. With the recent candidates sounding like schoolyard bickerers it was a pleasure to read someone who could insult with such eloquence. Mencken was a voice of old style conservatism, before the meaning of that word was hijacked by the current crop. Agree with him or not, he is worth reading just to taste his joy in the magic of the American language. Sadly, a lot of his comments about the vacuous nature of political leadership in the 1920's still ring true as critiques of today. A sampling follows:

"The patriot is a bigot, and more often than not, a bounder and a poltroon. The man of physical bravery is often on a level, intellectually, with a Baptist clergyman."

"The Latin church, which I constantly find myself admiring, despite its frequent astounding imbecilities, has always kept clearly before it the fact that religion is not a syllogism, but a poem."

From his obituary of William Jennings Bryan..."He seemed only a poor clod like those around him, deluded by a childish theology, full of an almost pathological hatred of all learning, all human dignity, all beauty, all fine and noble things."

"The typical lawmaker of today is a man wholly devoid of principle- a mere counter in a grotesque and knavish game. If the right pressure could be applied to him he would be cheerfully in favor of polygamy, astrology or cannibalism."

This collection, edited by Alistair Cooke, of Masterpiece Theater fame, is a good place to start if you have not read Mencken before. Read, enjoy and envy that a man could affirm so much through gleeful hatred.

Anthony Buckley says

Not being American, I was not brought up hearing the name of H L Mencken. My first awareness of him came from epigrammatic gobbets that got into books of quotations. For example, there is the epitaph which (I discover) he wrote for himself in 1921, long before he died in 1956: "If, after I depart this vale, you ever remember me and have a thought to please my ghost, forgive some sinner and wink your eye at some homely girl". Or, "Conscience is the inner voice which warns us that someone may be looking." Many of these gems are found in the pages of Alistair Cooke's eclectic collection of his essays, but they do not, in truth, encapsulate the man.

Mencken's essays convey an aroma of whisky and cigars. One imagines him, when not actually writing, regaling friends with acid anecdotes. He is wildly opinionated, able to hold forth on any topic.

He has, for example, a disdain for adultery, condemning one Theodore Dreisden who believed that a "strong, successful man" would ordinarily have several women in tow. Mencken gives, in refutation, a list of "strong, successful men" who were monogamous.

Mencken writes with approval of George Washington who was a “land-grabber, a promoter of stock companies, and exploiter of mine and timber”. Washington was also a lover of whisky who today “would be ineligible for any office of honor or profit”.

Mencken praises the police, from whom he has learned “that sharp wits can lurk in unpolished skulls”. “Their one salient failing, taking them as a class, was their belief that any person who had been arrested, even on mere suspicion was unquestionably and ipso facto guilty.”

Permeating everything is his florid language. For example, his essay, “Star-Spangled Men” considers the chests of military men that bear glittering medals of “every hue in the rainbow, the spectroscope, the kaleidoscope – imperial purples, *sforzando* reds, wild Irish greens, romantic blues, loud yellows and oranges, rich maroons, sentimental pinks, all the half-tones from ultra-violet to infrared, all the vibrations from the impalpable to the unendurable”. The medals, he speculates, “tell of butcheries in foreign and domestic parts – mountains of dead Filipinos, Mexicans, Haitians, Dominicans, West Virginian miners, perhaps even Prussians”. As with the military, so with civilians. “Rank by rank, (Americans) became Knights of Phthias, Odd Fellows, Red Men, Nobles of the Mystic Shrine, Knights Templar, Patriarchs Militant, Elks, Moose, Woodmen of the World, Foresters, Hoo-hoos, Ku Kluxers – and in every new order there were thirty-two degrees, and for every degree there was a badge, and for every badge there was a yard of ribbon.” Thus the words pour out.

Though he had his causes, Mencken marched to his own drum. Cooke's selection does little to steer the reader to discover what might be his overarching views. One does not find here the same single-minded coherence that permeates the writing of his contemporary, George Orwell. Nevertheless, it seems appropriate that Mencken's final essay, written just before he fell sick, should oppose a “relic of Ku Kluxery”, an attempt to stop the black citizens of Maryland playing tennis with the white ones. “A free citizen in a free state,” he wrote, “has an inalienable right to play with whomsoever he will.” If a theme does emerge, therefore, it is Mencken's preference for tolerance and personal freedom, and his dislike of humbug.

This collection of essays was compiled by Alistair Cooke as a tribute by one great writer to another. It is worth a look.

Travissimo says

Mencken is an old timey sass-filled hoot. He's that guy you meet and think, "This guy does not like me, but he keeps talking at me as though he thinks I like him. Boy is he worked up about things." The greatest challenge to me is figuring out what Mencken would say if he were put in any time period other than his own. He was keyed in on his surroundings so perfectly, and had no problem shouting out what he thought. His opinions are harsh but funny, and brilliantly so. Love Mencken. Because he doesn't want you to.

Sonny says

Good Lord, this makes you want to WRITE! ...and laugh and sing and curse, but it makes you want to WRITE!

Frank says

Mencken, an erudite curmudgeon, is a sort of spiritual grandfather to Christopher Hitchens. A passable read, giving insight into the Zeitgeist of early 20th century USA, although I could have wished the editor would have selected the pieces more carefully. Some favourite quotes:

"The Latin Church, which I constantly find myself admiring, despite its frequent astounding imbecilities, has always kept clearly before it the fact that religion is not a syllogism, but a poem."

"I have the notion that the average auditor would guess that it (Wagner's Parsifal) was a musical setting for some lamentable fornication between a baritone seven feet in height and a soprano weighing three hundred pounds."

"-- the plutocracy in a democratic state, tends inevitably, .. to take the place of the missing aristocracy, and even to be mistaken for it. It is, of course, something quite different. It lacks all the essential character of a true aristocracy: a clean tradition, culture, public spirit, honesty, honor, courage.. It stands under no public duty; it is transient and lacks a goal. Its most puissant dignitaries of today came out of the mob only yesterday - and from the mob they bring all its peculiar ignobilities."

Anna says

With a rapier wit, H. L. Mencken captures the key moments and the everyday frustrations of early twentieth-century America. His sharp, elegant prose provides a portrait and running commentary of major and minor American figures, works, and occurrences. In this anthology Alistair Cooke claims to have gathered "the best of his [Mencken's:] work, putting the stress on the newspaper pieces that had outlived more pretentious stuff and on the memoirs in which emerged the beautiful, well-tempered, and funny style of his later years" (vii). Though these pieces may represent the best of Mencken's work, the collection lacks the cohesive structure and organization present in Mencken's self-directed works. The failings of this text, though minor, are purely that of its editor. Perhaps in an effort to maintain invisibility, Cooke supplies little editorial direction: the headnotes remain skeletal; omissions lack explanation; and there are no transitions between selections, attempts at chapters, or sense of direction chronologically or thematically. One could argue that The Vintage Mencken may be enjoyed best by dissection, rather than attempting a singular consolidation. Regardless, it stands worthy for a place on the shelf.

Daniel Polansky says

Yeah, I mean, he's funny and he's got some fabulous one liners but on balance he's a classic troll, cantankerous for its own sake and to prove his individuality, obsessed with personal vendettas which were likely pointless at the time and are now utterly opaque (how much do you know about the American political scene of say, 1926? Because it turns out I don't actually know anything either). It's sort of illegitimate to compare a newspaperman to a 'straight' writer, their primary obligation is to be constantly saying shit of some kind, but his record as revealed here is pretty weak and that's coming from someone essentially sympathetic to pre-WWII ideas of American isolationism. Will I Keep It: No.

Tiffany says

Quotes:

"The struggle of man, as he sees it, is more than impotent; it is gratuitous and purposeless. There is, to his eye, no grand ingenuity, no skillful adaptation of means to end, no moral (or even dramatic) plan in the order of the universe. He can get out of it only a sense of profound and inexplicable *disorder*. The waves which batter the cockleshells change their direction at every instant. Their navigation is a vast adventure, but intolerably fortuitous and inept - a voyage without chart, compass, sun or stars. . . . But to look into the blackness steadily, of course, is almost beyond the endurance of man. In the very moment that its impenetrability is grasped the imagination begins attacking it with pale beams of false light. All religions, I daresay, are thus projected from the questioning soul of man, and not only all religions, but also all great agnosticisms."

"The men the American people admire most extravagantly are the most daring liars; the men they detest most violently are those who try to tell them the truth. A Galileo could no more be elected President of the United States than he could be elected Pope of Rome. Both high posts are reserved for men favored by God with an extraordinary genius for swathing the bitter facts of life in bandages of soft illusion."

"No man ever quite believes in any other man. One may believe in an idea absolutely, but not in a man. In the highest confidence there is always a flavor of doubt - a feeling, half instinctive and half logical, that, after all, the scoundrel *may* have something up his sleeve. This doubt, it must be obvious, is always more than justified, for no man is worthy of unlimited reliance - his treason, at best, only waits for sufficient temptation."

"The special quality which makes an artist ... might almost be defined, indeed, as an extraordinary capacity for irritation, a pathological sensitiveness to environmental pricks and stings. He differs from the rest of us mainly because he reacts sharply and in uncommon manner to phenomena which leave the rest of us unmoved, or, at most, merely annoy us vaguely. He is, in brief, a more delicate fellow than we are, and hence less fitted to prosper and enjoy himself under the conditions of life which he and we must face alike. Therefore, he takes to artistic endeavor, which is at once a criticism of life and an attempt to escape from life."

"The weak spot in his reasoning, if I may presume to suggest such a thing, was his tacit assumption that the voice of the legislature was the voice of the people. There is, in fact, no reason for confusing the people and the legislature: the two, in these later years, are quite distinct. The legislature, like the executive, has ceased, save indirectly, to be even the creature of the people: it is the creature, in the main, of pressure groups, and most of them, it must be manifest, are of dubious wisdom and even more dubious honesty. Laws are no longer made by a rational process of public discussion; they are made by a process of blackmail and intimidation, and they are executed in the same manner. The typical lawmaker of today is a man wholly devoid of principle - a mere counter in a grotesque and knavish game."

Michael Tarm says

The curmudgeonly, incomparable Mencken is always a sheer delight to read _ a breath of fresh air amid so much writing that's so canned and predictable. Even when he's wrong about something, he's wonderfully, delightfully wrong _ and only wants to make you read more.

Jonathan Maas says

H.L. Mencken's brilliance shines through to the modern day

This book compiles wisdom written nearly a century ago.

And yet -

Some of it feels as if it was written by a modern-day humorist. Mencken's wit and talent are not in question - but some of the themes he take on are so broad that they are still on topic today.

Jerry says

In *The Vintage Mencken*, Alistair Cooke gathered “mainly to introduce to a generation that never read him a writer who more and more strikes me as the master craftsman of daily journalism in the twentieth century.” On the other hand, this could well be an “I compiled this not to praise Mencken but to bury him” sort of deal, only this time honestly. “Mencken’s thunder,” after all, “issued from an unmaterial mind, but also from a full stomach.”

This collection stresses “the newspaper pieces that had outlived more pretentious stuff”, and I’m not sure but I think Cooke means Mencken’s more pretentious stuff. For Mencken “was overrated in his day as a thinker” but “underrated as a humorist”.

Jeremy says

What can I say that critics haven’t been saying about him for a hundred years? Mencken lacerates more nonsense and makes more sense--common and uncommon--than everyone else that has lived or is to be born. Possibly the most respected journalist of all time. Father of muckraking, destroyer of popular myths, creator of unpopular truths. If you don’t like H.L.M. I probably won’t like you.

There, I bet no one said that before.

Allan MacDonell says

Looking for a primer in delivering an opinion -- or whole strings of opinions -- with caustic and seeming irrefutable logic? H. L. Mencken, up until *The Wire*, and arguably beyond, was the smartest source of social commentary ever to emanate from Baltimore, Maryland. Some of the long-revered newspaperman and editor's views may seem quaint (Mencken inexplicably devotes an essay to the unsightliness of the naked

female body), but his railing against demonizing of ethnic Americans during wartime (in this case native-born Germans during World War I) and against craven politics hiding behind false religious virtue are up-to-the-moment bites of outraged common sense. The cable news channels and online aggregates are crawling with loudmouths who match Mencken's fervor, but if you know of any reasoned voices that approach his honest-to-goodness pillorying of public- and private-sector jackassery, please leave a source link in comments.

Christen says

Very fine writing, particularly when he stays away from generic... well, *news* pieces. I'm more interested in his particular opinions and expression of them than some account of 1920s zeitgeist (the articles about fish prices and police etc etc? Oh god, kill me now.), so obviously that's coloring my view quite a bit, but still. Anthony Lane's reminiscent of him in some ways, though Mencken doesn't have his glee.

Michael says

Mencken was an opinionated newspaper writer in the 1920s and 30s. I suspect that many of his pieces were written for shock value. I would recommend this if you enjoy old-fashioned satire.
