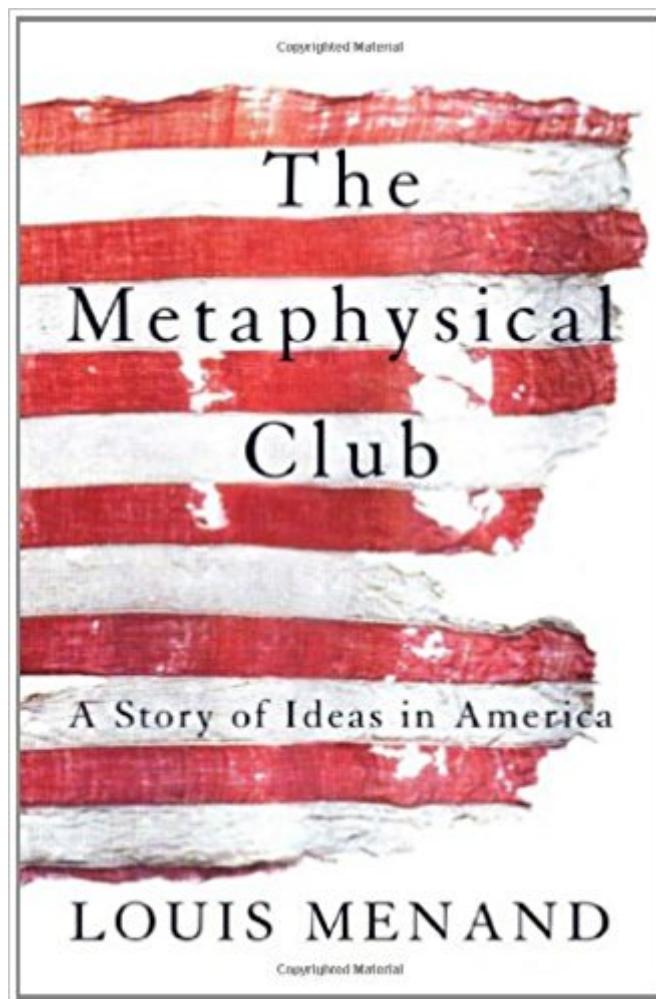


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# The Metaphysical Club: A Story Of Ideas In America



## Synopsis

The Metaphysical Club is the 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

If past is prologue, then *The Metaphysical Club* by Louis Menand may suggest an intellectual course for the United States in the 21st century. At least Menand, a frequent contributor to *The New Yorker* and *The New York Review of Books*, thinks so. This enthralling study of Oliver Wendell Holmes, William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, and John Dewey shows how these four men developed a philosophy of pragmatism following the Civil War, a period Menand likens to post-cold-war times. Together, "they were more responsible than any other group for moving American thought into the modern world." Despite this potentially forbidding theme, *The Metaphysical Club* is not a dry tome for academics. Instead, it is a quadruple biography, a wonderfully told story of ideas that advances by turning these thinkers into characters and bringing them to life. Menand links them through the Metaphysical Club, a conversational club formed in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1872. It lasted but a few months, and references to it appear only in Peirce's writings (its real significance seems rather limited), though Holmes and James were both members. (Dewey was much younger than these three, and more an heir than a contemporary.) It is difficult to describe in a sentence or two what they accomplished, though Menand takes a stab at it: "They helped put an end to the idea that the universe is an idea, that beyond the mundane business of making our way as best we can in a world shot through with contingency, there exists some order, invisible to us, whose logic we transgress at our peril." Academic freedom and cultural pluralism are just two of their legacies, and they are linchpins of democracy in a nonideological age, says Menand. A book like this is necessarily idiosyncratic, yet at the same time this one is sweeping. It presents an accessible survey of intellectual life from roughly the end of the Civil War to the start of the cold war. Dozens of figures receive fascinating thumbnail sketches, from Ralph Waldo Emerson and Charles Darwin to Jane Addams and Eugene Debs. The result is a grand portrait of an age that will appeal to anyone with even a modest interest in the history of philosophy and ideas. --John Miller --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

The Metaphysical Club was an informal intellectual gathering of philosophers and academics that met in Cambridge, Mass., for only nine months in 1872. Menand, known for his contributions to the *New Yorker* and the *New York Review of Books*, follows the evolution of pragmatism as it emerged from the minds of four of the club's "members": Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, William James, Charles Sanders Peirce and John Dewey. *The Metaphysical Club* describes how

the lives of these great thinkers interconnect in an enjoyable, though sometimes complex, narrative. Leyva's reading is fluid and clean. His delivery, that of an enthusiastic yet slightly removed academic, transports the listener to a classroom seat, alert and ready to take notes. Unlike those audiobooks in which the enthralled listener cannot wait to listen to each subsequent tape in order to see what happens next, listeners may find themselves rewinding the tape to repeat bits here and there, or just turning it off from time to time to digest the thoughts introduced. This audiobook is stimulating for our nation today, as Menand stresses the important role of intellectuals in times of chaos (in this case, after the Civil War), when people's beliefs are put to the test. Based on the Farrar, Straus & Giroux hardcover (Forecasts, Mar. 12, 2001). (Sept.)nCopyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

This is an absorbing, fascinating, complex, and obscure book all rolled into one. It is a kind of flowing narrative of ideas as they evolved, with succinct but frustratingly incomplete references to their substance, and the men and a few women who gave birth to them. It is also thick with historical context. Yet it is not intellectual history, not a philosophical argument, and not biography. As such, the book is an odd hybrid that did not quite constitute the full meal I was hoping to find. Menand begins with the Transcendentalists just prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, with the second great awakening of Evangelical Christianity as the backdrop. This was a time when intellectuals thought in absolutes, that there was some underlying truth to uncover that was compatible with a life of faith. It could be observed and known. In the case of the Transcendentalists, they were skeptical of groups and institutions, but still believed they could arrive at some individual truth that would mean something to others. I saw this as akin to a Platonic ideal merged with protestant theology, ideas which the world only dully reflected. The abolitionists were part of this, zealots who would drag the entire country into war in support of their mission; southern slave owners were similar, though with a diametrically opposed fanaticism of their own. An entire generation of youths went to their slaughter in the service of these ideals, marking the survivors as skeptics and doubters of such certainties for the rest of their lives. It affected budding philosophers, including William James, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and others. At the same time, these philosophers absorbed 2 crucially important scientific concepts: statistics and Darwin's theory of natural selection. Statistics taught that you could not count on exact results to prove a point, but an average of many separate observations; that meant that observers and individuals could not always be trusted to find or see the one "truth". Far more importantly, Darwin introduced an entirely new way to interpret the natural world: it incorporated not just chance as affecting outcomes, but challenged the notion that there was some discernable,

deterministic plan or end in accordance with God or whatever Platonic ideal you might choose. Menand explains these developments at great length, sometimes in too much detail, such as the chapter on a court case involving the comparison of signatures. These developments set them in opposition to the great scientists of their time, such as Agassiz, who was a Linnean creationist, willing to categorize organisms but without any theory to organize his observations beyond a vague theology. A new way was forged in an informal grouping (The Metaphysical Club) that met for just one year. From this, William James formulated his philosophy of pragmatism. Rather than seek set and unchanging truths, James concluded that one's ideas and ideals - one's personal truth - were chosen as useful to one's goals or aspirations. In other words, truth was instrumental, a means to an end. It was a kind of relativism in philosophy and psychology, James' domains as the leading American thinker of his age. Intellectual colleagues in others areas applied these ideas to their disciplines, Holmes in law - promoting free speech in new ways as part of the political process to arrive at better results, even when people are wrong - and Dewey in education, founding new kinds of schools to support individual development and helping to institutionalize academic freedom as a public good. However, if relativist, they believed in discipline, even sacrifice, in the service of social ideals. They were optimists, reformers of the existing systems rather than revolutionaries, and they embodied the new, democratic consensus that arose from the crushing of the confederate rebels. Their vision was tolerant and inclusive, though the rights of blacks were ignored for the sake of harmony. The end result was the establishment of related methods in all disciplines. In science, process became all-important, no longer yoked to pre-conceived notions but allowing whatever conclusions emerged from exhaustive observation and confirmed by professionals - there might be paradigms, but even they could fall, and the effort was collective, even social. In psychology, it meant that individual striving for truth and personal goals was paramount, though conforming to social purpose. Finally, in politics and law, the democratic process should allow the best ideas to emerge from the widest possible debate, a new kind of pluralism at the moment that immigrants were swamping the Anglo-Saxon ruling class. This consensus, relativist and naive as it was, lasted more or less until the Cold War, when either/or ideals again came to the fore in the fight between capitalism and communism, but also in the fight for civil rights, which was particularly unyielding and absolutist. It was then that the metaphysical club's ideals were overtaken by a new consensus. Interestingly, Menand argues that the current era may see a new relevance in tolerance and democratic process. This book is often a difficult read. Whenever I was well acquainted with the ideas, it was an excellent evocation of an intellectual confluence, but when I didn't know the ideas, it was hard to follow. To be sure, this is due to the holes in my own understanding - and it inspires me

to read in new areas - but it was a nagging frustration. On balance, it is worth the effort, though not as complete a portrait of an age as similar works, such as Ronald Steele's "Walter Lippmann and the American Century", which fully explained every intellectual movement of which he was a part. Of course, Menand is a peerless writer of prose, his ideas are always interesting, and I learned an immense amount. The biographical details are also very fun. Recommended with these caveats.

This book changed my life! I was a science geek and what could be called a "logical positivist." This book helped me accept others' viewpoints (pluralism, pragmatism). I credit the book with helping me function well in a management role I moved into right after I read the book.

This is mainly a history of how four great thinkers and their contemporaries molded our country's thinking from the time of the Civil War to the Cold War. It is eye opening and "thought provoking." Anyone who wishes to understand the America we now inhabit must read this book.

This personal and intimate, yet broad and comprehensive review and exploration of how Americans viewed themselves through this country's agonies, most especially the Civil War, will eat into your heart. When you turn the last page, you will miss Mr. Menand's intellectual and compassionate company.

This book is completely unlike standard intellectual histories or biographies. You don't just see the development of one person or even of the four main subjects (Holmes, James, Peirce, and Dewey); instead, you really get a feel for a whole messy terrain of intellectual life, in which hundreds of people are running in and out, influencing each other. It's challenging (actually, impossible) to remember everyone whose ideas are mentioned, but it's not really necessary. The point is to follow the ideas, as they combine and react over time. The book is also extremely surprising to read because many of the ideas are completely unexpected, from a modern perspective. Many individuals seem to fuse together 1) ideas we might agree with today, 2) ideas we are aware of and utterly reject, and 3) ideas that just seem outrageously unexpected, completely "outside-the-box" (such as the contention that the gravity was produced by evolution). All in all, it's an amazing read.

The Metaphysical Club functioned for me in two ways. First, by illustrating the conflicts surrounding certain ideas at their advent, elucidated the vital value differences that lead still to our conflict on certain issues, for example, evolution. I thought the book really opened up the doors for me to the

essential issues with perturbing cultures with novel ideas and how they react. The second major value I gleaned from this book was what I felt a more comprehensive knowledge of, if I wanted to introduce an idea, to change society for the better, how I would go about doing it and, more importantly, how I wouldn't go about doing it. Awesome book, especially for those who love learning.

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