

The Book of Dead Philosophers

By Simon Critchley

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In this collection of brief lives (and deaths) of nearly two hundred of the world's greatest thinkers, noted philosopher Simon Critchley creates a register of mortality that is tragic, amusing, absurd, and exemplary. From the self-mocking haikus of Zen masters on their deathbeds to the last words of Christian saints and modern-day sages, this irresistible book contains much to inspire both amusement and reflection.

Informed by Critchley's acute insight, scholarly intelligence, and sprightly wit, each entry tells its own tale, but collected together they add up to a profound and moving investigation of meaning and the possibility of happiness for us all.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review
Amazon Best of the Month, February 2009: For professor Simon Critchely, how we die is possibly more important than how we lived. In *The Book of Dead Philosophers*, Critchley presents a lineup of nearly 200 famous (and not so famous) philosophers and explores how, through their deaths, one might be inspired to lead a richer life. From a few words to a few pages, each great thinker's death is examined in an enlightening and entertaining manner as the author waxes on the often brutal (and odd) ways they left this mortal coil. And along with natural causes, murders, and suicides, you'll discover what dark departures from suffocating in cow dung, indigestion, and lethal insect stings have to do with how we live today. At times the "sobering power of the philosophical death" might seem more like a morbidly ironic punchline to the life each philosopher led, but Critchley writes, "My hope is that, if read from beginning to end, a cumulative series of themes will emerge that will add up to a specific argument about how philosophy might teach one how to die, and by implication, how to live." --*Brad Thomas Parsons*

From Publishers Weekly
According to Cicero, to philosophize is to learn how to die. Critchley (*Infinitely Demanding*) illustrates this claim in his portraits of the deaths of more than 190 philosophers from the ancients to the analytics of the mid–20th century. A primer on just about every notable philosophical figure in history, this book challenges readers to learn from the philosophers' conduct in life and the circumstances of their deaths. Confucius believed that mourning underscored the value of life; accordingly, his followers grieved his death for at least three years. Thoreau, Emerson and John Stuart Mill died of ordinary ailments while relishing the natural world. Aquinas found serenity contemplating the bough of a tree, fitting consolation for the philosopher who preached the interconnectedness of nature and the soul. Dionysius spent the second half of his life rejecting Stoicism and embracing hedonism yet committed a protracted suicide by voluntary starvation. David Hume proved that atheists could die happy. The book offers an interpretation of death's potential as a final artistic and intellectual endeavor; it is a witty and generous gift that will leave readers perhaps a little less afraid of death and more appreciative of life. *(Feb.)*
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From Booklist
Starred Review Dismayed by the devolution of philosophy into a dry academic specialty, Critchley reconnects his discipline with the most universal of human concerns. For it is in pondering death that serious thinkers have discovered the wellsprings of wisdom. Seneca is thus voicing a persistent philosophical motif when he insists, “He will live badly who does not know how to die well.” However, because death refuses to shrink into a tidy intellectual construct, Critchley scrutinizes not only what prominent philosophers have thought about the subject but also how they have actually died. Readers thus contemplate the dying Augustine reading the Hebrew psalms in tears; the doomed Nietzsche rushing into the street to embrace a horse, so signaling a final descent into syphilitic madness; the heroic Bergson contracting his fatal illness by voluntarily joining fellow Jews forced into the bitter cold of midwinter to register with Nazi authorities. Scholars may complain about the scrapbook style of (dis)organization, as the deaths and death thoughts of almost 200 philosophers pass in quick review. But most readers will recognize the aptness of the rapid-fire summary, each entry a piquant reminder of the brevity of life and a forceful rejection of the illusions of intellectual progress. A work that makes philosophy matter again. --Bryce Christensen

Users Review

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Joshua Shaw:

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