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Oscar Wilde



Synopsis

Winner of both the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize, Oscar Wilde is the definitive biography of the tortured poet and playwright and the last book by renowned biographer and literary critic Richard Ellmann. Ellmann dedicated two decades to the research and writing of this biography, resulting in a complex and richly detailed portrait of Oscar Wilde. Ellman captures the wit, creativity, and charm of the psychologically and sexually complicated writer, as well as the darker aspects of his personality and life. Covering everything from Wilde's rise as a young literary talent to his eventual imprisonment and death in exile with exquisite detail, Ellmann's fascinating account of Wilde's life and work is a resounding triumph.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Richard Ellmann capped an illustrious career in biography (his James Joyce is considered one of the masterpieces of the 20th century) with this life of Oscar Wilde, which won both the National Book Critics Circle Award and Pulitzer Prize on its original publication in 1988. Ellmann's account of Wilde's extravagantly operatic life as poet, playwright, aesthete, and martyr to sexual morality is notable not only for the full portrait it gives of Wilde, but also for Ellmann's assessment of his subject's literary greatness; both aims are served by a plethora of quotations from Wilde's own work and correspondence. Wilde straddled the line between the Victorian age and the modern world as he did everything in life ... with impeccable style.

The late Ellmann worked 20 years on this magisterial biography. He tells the fascinating story of Oscar Wilde and aesthete, poet and playwright, scapegrace and scapegoat more fully and irresistibly than it has ever been told before. Ellmann captures Wilde's charm and high spirits and also the darker side of his personality, which led to increasingly public homosexual affairs at a time when homosexuality was legally a crime. Ellmann skillfully marshals his material (some of it new), and he writes brilliantly but unobtrusively. A masterpiece to match Ellmann's *James Joyce* (1959), this work is certain to trigger renewed interest in Wilde. Keith Cushman, Univ. of North Carolina, Greensboro

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This book will tear your heart. The infamy of his prosecution, and persecution, is beyond words. He never savaged his detractors as they did him, primarily the execrable egotist, the tiny little man named Whistler but also Swinburne, so cowardly yet such an unforgettable poet. But at least Swinburne had an excuse since he was psychologically damaged. How many benefitted from his help or encouragement in his glory days, yet figuratively spat at him when a maniac (the Marquess of Queensberry) pursued him to his destruction. His magnificent Biblical drama *Salome* and the poems inspired by his prison stay will not be forgotten. Nor will Dorian Grey, the ultimate in the tracing of a descent into unspeakable depths. And somewhere down there in those depths can be discerned the ridiculous yet hideous spirit of Alfred Douglas, a man whose existence was totally pointless. Among the numberless acquaintances of this tragic figure I must pay tribute to Nellie Melba, rarely described as warm-hearted, but it was she who emptied her purse for him on a Paris street when, threadbare and penniless, he was forced to ask for money. That powerfully descriptive phrase "emptied her purse" is straight from the book, just one of many memorable phrases that make the history live for the reader. I believe there never was and never will be a superior biography of Oscar Wilde.

A real door-stop at 600 pages of 7-point type, but you'll want to read every word of it. It's a triumph of loving research. I would describe Ellmann's prose as more workmanlike than entertaining, but that's perfectly OK, because Oscar's life was so amazing that any biographer's vanity would only get in the way. If you have any humanity at all, you'll finish this book having fallen in love with Oscar and identifying with him. You will hate his persecutors, tormenters, and deserters, and especially you will loathe the rot and ugliness of class. You will finally feel drained, crushed, and utterly devastated. But you will come away wiser and strangely more sympathetic and loving toward all

humans, as Oscar was, not because they are lovable, but because you happen to be one.

Oscar Wilde's unconventional life is recorded in this book by Richard Ellmann. It is a great book in small font; however, the font does not detract from the page-turning account of this English writer whose life was ah, very interesting due to his personal life. Wilde was gay and happy, but went through trials, literally, and tribulations related to his sexuality. His literary work is irresistible and still read and his play, *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST* is still staged by amateur performers to the delight of theatre goers. Oscar Wilde led a fast and furious life and ended it sadly so youthfully. Litterati have his written works and this biography examines the myriad of tiles that made up the mosaic of Oscar Wilde.

Another wonderful book by Richard Ellman, who approaches Wilde as one approaches a noise in the night--with patience, caution, and carrying a big stick. Wildly readable and a real page-turner (virtually impossible in a biography), Ellman brings all of the delight and disappointments from being around Wilde to life. Highly recommended.

Its pretty dry, as the author reports every little move made by Wilde, but it is VERY VERY interesting. Its going to take a while to get through, but I'm 1/4 way and carrying it around to read in snippets. Unfortunately, because of how dry it is, it doesn't lend itself to binge reading but in this case I like that because it really delves deep into how he became who he was.

Ellmann's portrait of Wilde--the Irish scholar, poet, playwright, wit, aesthete, and "posing sodomite"--is a masterpiece. It won two awards upon its original publication in 1988, the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics' Circle Award. At 589 pages of text in the paperback edition (not including notes, bibliography, two appendices, and the index), this will stand as perhaps the most definitive biography of a quite colorful man who had the unhappy talent of taking like a moth to the flames of his Victorian era. He could chat up a room, dress to the nines, act camp, and deal in rough-trade dalliances with homosexual prostitutes when "gross indecency," homosexual acts not amounting to sodomy, were still considered a crime. Indeed, he was imprisoned for two years of hard labor (1895-97) when the father of his longtime but faithless lover decided to make a scapegoat of him. Today we might view him more as an Elton John or Brian Epstein, a successful man now able to enjoy society's gains in tolerance. Wilde's literary output was not vast, when compared to that of some others. As he himself boasted, "I put my genius into my life, and only my

talent into my works." Yet he is well remembered for his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and his 50,000-word *De Profundis* (the last of these a long letter of recrimination to his fickle lover, Lord Alfred Douglas). Wilde married Constance Lloyd in 1881 and had two sons with her, but he could not fairly be described as a family man and he ended his life apart from them. After he was released from prison he quickly left England for the continent, never to return, wandering the streets of Paris alone and spending what little money he had on alcohol. He died in 1900 at the age of 46, from spinal meningitis of uncertain etiology. Ellmann claims it was syphilitic in nature, but it also might have stemmed from an injury in jail that burst his right ear drum. After a nine-year burial elsewhere, Wilde's remains were transferred to the Père Lachaise Cemetery inside the Parisian city limits. This book contains many fine pictures of his life, including that of his tomb--adorned by a modernist angel whose male genitalia were vandalized, only to be replaced eventually by a silver prosthesis. Even more than a century after his death, Wilde still excites controversy.

Bought as a gift; recipient really liked it!

Not for anyone who does not have a lot of time to devote to reading this very very detailed biography. I actually got it for my grandson's grade 12 required reading list, and it downloaded onto all 3 of my kindles .

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