
This is history written with the pace and freshness of a novel. Menand deals with a topic that will be very familiar to historians of American philosophers: the rise and influence of pragmatism in the United States from the Civil War to the First World War. The title might have an exotic allure to general audiences, but students of pragmatism will instantly recognize the discussion group that first gave rise to pragmatist theories in the early 1870s. Three of Menand's main characters are Oliver Wendell Holmes, Junior, William James, and Charles Sanders Peirce; he stays well within conventional wisdom to include John Dewey in his group biography. The book's main argument is that in the late nineteenth century, in reaction to the Civil War and against antebellum idealism, these pragmatists "mov[ed] American thought into the modern world" (x-xi), by maintaining that ideas are tools for coping with society, that they are produced in groups rather than by individuals, and that they endure only as they adapt to cultural change. But the main point of the book is not its argument, but its stories, and these are abundant and colorful. And so, he weaves into his presentation of the evolution of ideas a dazzling array of social and political history ranging from the Pullman strike (that fueled Dewey's anti-absolutist and radical sentiments) to Hetty Green the miserly moneylender who became the "witch of Wall Street" (and whose initial, contested inheritance was supported by Peirce's application of the law of errors to the determination of signature authenticity).

Menand's style bridges the worlds of scholarship and of general-audience readers because he combines thorough (primary source) documentation with engaging expressions that capture human interest and the broad implications of the ideas he scrutinizes. This public intellectual approach has not been used much by recent historians, and in general, Menand's lively narrative is a reminder of the work of Henry Steele Commager and Ralph Henry Gabriel, although he is at once more meticulous in his references and bolder in his interpretive judgments. Perhaps in this age of specialization it takes a non-historian to write...
such a history book: Menand is a professor of English at the City University of New York, a staff writer for The New Yorker, and a Contributing Editor of The New York Review of Books. For years, Menand has been a prolific essayist of American cultural and intellectual life. In this book, he is still an essayist, now presenting his major statement about how America became modern. In sweep and force of judgment, Menand's book is a reminder of Sir Kenneth Clark's Civilisation: a Personal View (1969). The cover of The Metaphysical Club does not have the title or even images or words about his subject; it is simply branded with Menand's initials.

Specialists in pragmatism or the work of the four main characters will find little new material here, but there is a literary flair and boldness of expression that all readers can appreciate. Menand gives full and accurate accounts of the intellectual history, and he adds tangy expressions, laced with humor and irreverence, for example: in Kant's philosophy, the mind comes "accessorized with certain 'categories'" (263); "Quetelet fell in love with a curve" the bell curve-(187); and pragmatism is well suited to modern culture with its "Rubik's Cube of possibilities" (407). Surprisingly, for all his vigor and directness, Menand focuses strictly on historical interpretation with very little philosophical judgment. While he clearly admires the pragmatists, it is mostly because of their influence. With his stylistic elegance, it is difficult to know if his account of the impact of this new "idea about ideas" (xi), this new "philosophical utensil" (471), is designed to critique or praise. His judgments about the worth of pragmatism are confined to a brief Epilogue. There he proposes that the need to stand on principle during the Cold War brought an erosion in the appeal of pragmatism however, in making this argument, he leaves out the methodological appeal of pragmatism in the human sciences, the tacit pragmatism in Daniel Bell's influential End of Ideology, and the revival of pragmatism among philosophers and theorists since the early 1960s. Continuing to be coy about the worth or future prospects of his main subject, Menand concludes with a brief and ambiguous prediction that in our own time, after the Cold War and with our "skepticism about the finality of any particular set of beliefs" (441), pragmatism may begin to appeal again. But such forecasting or theoretical interpretation is not Menand's main purpose. Instead, he is telling the history of pragmatism's rise.
Menand's portraits of his four main players include cameo sketches of a host of related figures. For example, he includes an extended account of Louis Agassiz's scientific hopes and racial stereotypes in contrast with James's emerging ideas, a thorough evaluation of Dewey's debt to the applied social science of Jane Addams, and an insightful account of Alain Locke and Horace Kallen attending James's "Pluralistic Universe" lectures before developing their own theories of cultural pluralism. And in his constant mentioning of previously discussed figures, Menand shows a deft ability to show the interrelation of the parts of his story. Even with all his wonderful stories, Menand's narrative is very selective. This is pragmatism that is heavily weighted toward Holmes, especially in the Civil War origins and with the legal applications of pragmatism, and toward Dewey, with the emphasis on social and political instrumentalism. There is little attention to the religious links that were so important to James and Peirce The Varieties of Religious Experience and "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God" are not even mentioned. And this account leans heavily toward the skeptical sides of pragmatism with little discussion of James's radical empiricism and Peirce's logical realism in the long run. These are drawbacks of scholarship and of interpretation in which Menand shows little interest. He explains the relation of (significant strands of) pragmatism to modern American culture in a way that undergraduate students can understand and mature readers can appreciate. It is an impressive book, one with the power to bring these diverse audiences to warm to the drama of pragmatism's impact on American culture and on the modern world in general.

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Much (Justified) Ado About Knowing: Dewey's Logical Theory—New Studies and Interpretations

John Dewey’s theory of logic is an unjustly neglected part of his corpus. In part, this is because the seminal statement of it in Logic: The Theory of Inquiry is notoriously difficult, in some measure because of Dewey’s unorthodox use of language (which prompted Justice Holmes to remark that reading Dewey was like “swimming through