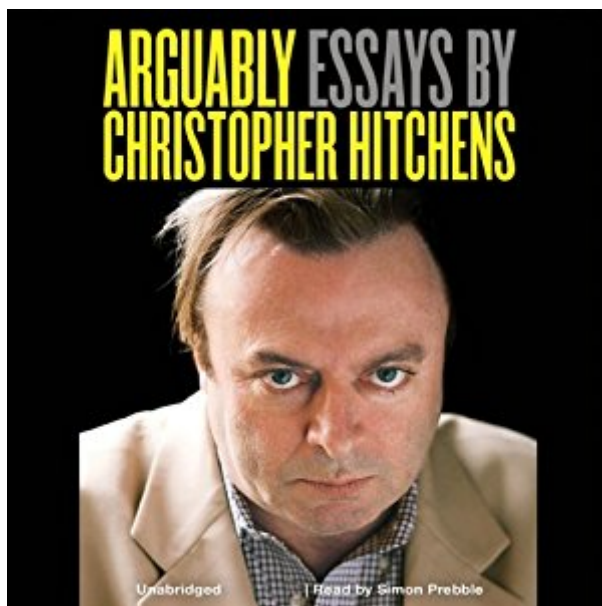


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Arguably: Essays By Christopher Hitchens



Synopsis

The first new collection of essays by Christopher Hitchens since 2004, *Arguably* offers an indispensable key to understanding the passionate and skeptical spirit of one of our most dazzling writers, widely admired for the clarity of his style, a result of his disciplined and candid thinking. Topics range from ruminations on why Charles Dickens was among the best of writers and the worst of men to the haunting science fiction of J.G. Ballard; from the enduring legacies of Thomas Jefferson and George Orwell to the persistent agonies of anti-Semitism and jihad. Hitchens even looks at the recent financial crisis and argues for the enduring relevance of Karl Marx. The book forms a bridge between the two parallel enterprises of culture and politics. It reveals how politics justifies itself by culture, and how the latter prompts the former. In this fashion, *Arguably* burnishes Christopher Hitchens' credentials as - to quote Christopher Buckley - our "greatest living essayist in the English language."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I should begin by admitting that I just received this book today; however, as a longtime fan of Hitchens' work, I've already read the majority of these essays, so I feel confident in writing this review now. I pre-ordered this book months ago, but until today I didn't know which of his essays would be included. I'm absolutely thrilled by the final product. To begin with, it's massive - at nearly 800 pages, it's larger than "God Is Not Great" and "Hitch-22" combined. The essays are sorted into 6 sections, and I'll cover each of them in some detail below. "All American" focuses on the history,

policies, and distinguished figures of the United States. It appears to be sorted chronologically; beginning with essays on Jefferson and Franklin, continuing through subjects like John Brown and Lincoln, JFK, John Updike, and Gore Vidal, and then closing with essays on modern issues like capital punishment and atheism in the modern military. "Eclectic Affinities" includes Hitchens' best essays on notable literary figures. There are about 30 essays here, covering everything from Karl Marx, to Graham Greene, to George Orwell, to JK Rowling. "Amusements, Annoyances, and Disappointments" is relatively short, with only 8 essays. However, these are some of Hitch's most famous and controversial personal remarks, including the infamous "Why Women Aren't Funny" and his charming "New Commandments". "Offshore Accounts" primarily deals with modern political conflicts. It includes his experience with waterboarding, his admiration for Kurdistan, and his encyclopedic knowledge of current politics. This is probably the most notable section of the book, and also one of the longest. "Legacies of Totalitarianism" takes us back to earlier conflicts, focusing especially on the first half of the last century. The essays here are mostly based on specific people, and the legacies that endured long after they did. "Words' Worth" covers Hitchens' essays on language and culture. The earlier sections focused on Hitch as a political essayist, but this section closes the book with Hitch as a charming raconteur. More than the other sections, it allows Hitch to be more personal and candid, and that allows his inimitable writing style and witty humor to take center stage. Over the past several years, Hitchens has been famous primarily for his antitheism. But as powerful and important as that is, I think it tends to downplay just how broad his career has been. I actually consider this book a great companion piece to his memoirs. As you look over the comprehensive nature of the combined essays, you can't help but admire the life Hitchens has led. As he puts it, he "burned the candle at both ends, and it gave a lovely light." This book, almost as much as "Hitch-22", is evidence of that. My one small disappointment is that the book focuses almost exclusively on essays written relatively recently. I'm guessing this has a lot to do with copyright entanglements, but I would like to have seen more of his older works. His recent essays are all easily available online, and I was hoping for a bit more from past archives. Having said that, I can also see the benefit of relying on the recent works, as they give a very fresh, updated look at the world. In fact, this book has instantly become my "go to" recommendation for people saying they want to be more involved in current events. It's long enough to be comprehensive, but the essay format allows it to be concise as well. And even though most of this material is available free online, it's definitely worth owning this archive of his most notable short works. I love the structure and layout of the essays, and the index is marvelous. It's a wonderful book for any fan of Christopher Hitchens, as well as anyone interested in politics, history, and culture.

A masterful collection. Here is Hitchens as dream dinner party guest, slightly sloshed, louche but animated still, a couple of buttons down on the shirt, perspiring, smiling. His hands move as he makes his point. You have forgotten already about dessert. This Hitchens is still alive and well on the many "Hitch-slapped" compilations put up on YouTube. A large book, to be dipped into when, as Durant said of Nietzsche, you need "a bracing wind across a courtyard after a long and stuffy service in Church". Here is Hitchens on the Kennedy's: "A new volume by Ed Klein, portentously titled "The Kennedy Curse", revealed the brief marriage of John Kennedy Jr. to Carolyn Bessemer to have been a cauldron of low-level misery, infidelity and addiction": JFK: In Sickness and By Stealth, Times Literary Supplement 2003. . It's the "low-level" that twists the knife here. The essay on JFK, a review of JFK: An Unfinished Life ("a title portentous and platitudinous at the same time") by Robert Dallek, is undoubtedly the standout star of Part 1 All American, which slightly bizarrely has Hitchens, an Oxbridge educated English privileged public schoolboy and former champagne socialist, writing on historical American figures such as Jefferson, Franklin and Lincoln. Part 2 has Hitchens on more local ground writing on early and later 20th century English literary figures such as PG Wodehouse, Anthony Powell, Philip Larkin and Evelyn Waugh. Amusingly it's titled "Eclectic", presumably because the editor decided that the American reader might have little idea or care who those people were. The final review here is actually of the final Harry Potter book, where Hitchens, whilst generally kind and acknowledging that these books get young people to read, still skewers Rowling: "The repeated tactic of deus ex machina has a deplorable effect on both plot and dialogue". Part 3 contains perhaps the most controversial (bizarrely) of all the writings "Why women aren't funny", written for an unimaginative, publicity seeking editor of Vanity Fair. Still managing to quote an interesting Kipling poem this disappointing rushed hack piece feels authored by a less talented Hitchens ghostwriter from GQ magazine. Definitely not disappointing in this section is Hitchens on Prince Charles: "A hereditary head of state, as Thomas Paine so crisply phrased it, is as absurd a proposition as a hereditary physician. To this innate absurdity, Prince Charles manages to bring fatuities that are entirely his own". Charles, Prince of Piffle. Slate, June 14, 2010. Part 4 is Offshore Accounts. Disraeli said in Tancred "the East is a career" and Hitchens partly took this to heart, writing extensively on politics, Islamism and Orientalism in the Middle East. It is on religion that Hitchens has shown much of his intellectual rigor and bravery. The reader may find in his review of Orientalism and It's Discontents by Robert Irwin in The Atlantic, March 2007 a description of a certain key religious figure as "a sex-craved brigand whose preachments were either plagiarized or falsified". This reader does not quite share the same fascination with this area of the

world but one of the best essays in the book is here, a review of Edward Said's Orientalism, from the Atlantic, September 2003 - a book that was de rigor to be on your bookshelf when I was an MSc student in the late 1990s. Hitchens is quite fair to Said, although still slices him open with his accusation of membership of the "post-Foucault academy". Part 5, Legacies of Totalitarianism, ups the intellectual and moral ante. It is worth remembering that Hitchens was once a committed socialist, as documented in his entertaining memoir Hitch 22. Heavy reviews here include Churchill, Hitler and Unnecessary War by Pat Buchanan - a book I have reviewed on - Human Smoke by Nicholson Baker, and Klemperer's I Will Bear Witness (Klemperer was a Jew married to an Aryan who survived the war. This is sobering stuff and a reminder of the madness that could be inflicted on the world again by extremism and total war. Hitchens' quote from Sebald on the aftermath of the fire bombings of Dresden by the 'good guys' says it all: "In the altmarkt in Dresden, where 6,865 corpses were burned on pyres in February 1945 by an SS detachment which had gained its experience in Treblinka". On the Natural History of Destruction by W.G. Sebald.

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