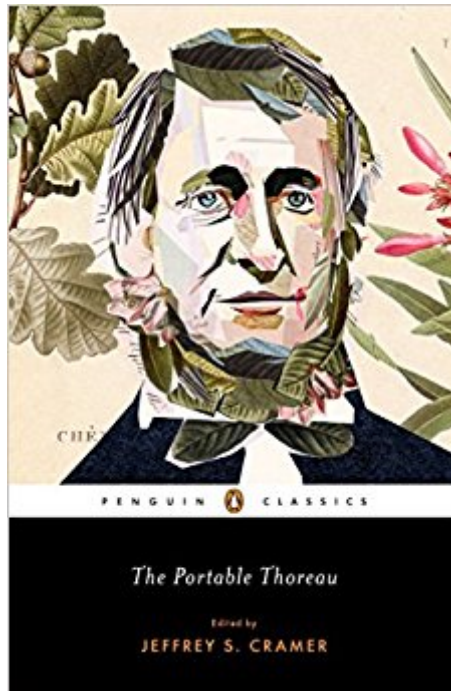




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The Portable Thoreau (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

An updated edition of Thoreau's most widely read works. Self-described as "a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot," Henry David Thoreau dedicated his life to preserving his freedom as a man and as an artist. Nature was the fountainhead of his inspiration and his refuge from what he considered the follies of society. Heedless of his friends' advice to live in a more orthodox manner, he determinedly pursued his own inner bent—that of a poet-philosopher—in prose and verse. Edited by noted Thoreau scholar Jeffrey S. Cramer, this edition promises to be the new standard for those interested in discovering the great thinker's influential ideas about everything from environmentalism to limited government. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

Henry David Thoreau was born in Concord, Massachusetts in 1817. He graduated from Harvard in 1837, the same year he began his lifelong Journal. Inspired by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau became a key member of the Transcendentalist movement that included Margaret Fuller and Bronson Alcott. The Transcendentalists' faith in nature was tested by Thoreau between 1845 and

1847 when he lived for twenty-six months in a homemade hut at Walden Pond. While living at Walden, Thoreau worked on the two books published during his lifetime: *Walden* (1854) and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849). Several of his other works, including *The Maine Woods*, *Cape Cod*, and *Excursions*, were published posthumously. Thoreau died in Concord, at the age of forty-four, in 1862. Jeffrey S. Cramer is the Curator of Collections at the Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods. He is the editor of the award-winning *Walden: A Fully Annotated Edition*, *The Quotable Thoreau*, among other books. He lives in Maynard, Massachusetts.

How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live! Methinks that the moment my legs begin to move, my thoughts begin to flow.

•THOREAU IN HIS JOURNAL, AUGUST 19, 1851

When Thoreau moved from Concord to New York in 1843, ostensibly to be the tutor for the children of Ralph Waldo Emerson's brother, William, he was situating himself in the center of the American publishing world. Although for various reasons, including an overwhelming sense of homesickness, he returned to Concord and remained there for the rest of his life, it is clear that at this point Thoreau was determined to be a writer. Whatever else he may have been—social reformer, naturalist, surveyor, pencil-maker, teacher—his work, as he would write in his journal on October 18, 1856, "is writing, and I do not hesitate, though I know that no subject is too trivial for me, tried by ordinary standards."

2 Henry David Thoreau was born David Henry Thoreau on July 12, 1817, in Concord, and he died in Concord on May 6, 1862. During his forty-four years, or, more precisely, during the twenty-four years when he was actively writing, he wrote works that have become classics of American literature.

•*Walden*, a book on deliberate and purposeful living; *Civil Disobedience*, a treatise on a person's rights and duties in relation to an unjust government; and *Walking*, a piece on man's place in Nature—in addition to writing a two-million-word journal.

Thoreau's success as a writer lies in the truth he utters. The questions he asks himself are the questions every individual, at his or her most attentive and sentient moments, asks. As he wrote, "These same questions that disturb and puzzle and confound us have in their turn occurred to all the wise men; not one has been omitted; and each has answered them, according to his ability, by his words and his life."

3 Because the answers change, however, not only from generation to generation but for each individual from year to year, his writings are works to which we return, texts constantly reflecting our own evolution.

To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit, Thoreau wrote in the *Reading* chapter of *Walden*, "is a noble exercise, and one that will task

the reader more than any exercise which the customs of the day esteem. It requires a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object. Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written.

•4 Reading in the way Thoreau meant, you will meet with a realization that many other readers will fail to achieve, which ultimately means that a good book must not only be written by a good writer but that it must be read by a good reader.

• One way to be a good reader is to understand the nature of an essay. Wendell Berry defined it best in writing about Edward Abbey's essay "Down the River with Henry Thoreau": "It is an essay in the literal sense: a trial. Mr. Abbey tries himself against Thoreau and Thoreau against himself; he tries himself and Thoreau against the river; he tries himself and Thoreau and the river against modern times, and vice versa.

•5 This is how a reader should approach any piece by Thoreau.

• Thoreau gave more than seventy lectures between his first in 1838 and his last in 1860. Sometimes he found members of his audience reading the newspaper. He once overheard one person say to another, "What does he lecture for?"

•6 But some reviews of his talks indicated a man who could move his audience. A talk on "Economy" in 1848 caused *The Salem Observer* to write that his lecture was "interspersed observations, speculations, and suggestions upon dress, fashions, food, dwellings, furniture, &c., &c., sufficiently queer to keep the audience in almost constant mirth, and sufficiently wise and new to afford many good practical hints and precepts.

•7 And *The Eastern Argus Semi-Weekly* of Portland, Maine, wrote the following year that his talk "was unique, original, comical, and high-falutin. It kept the audience wide awake, and pleasantly excited for nearly two hours.

•8 A decade later, *The Liberator* wrote of Thoreau's talk on John Brown that a "very large audience listened to this lecture, crowding the hall half an hour before the time of its commencement, and giving hearty applause to some of the most energetic expressions of the speaker.

•9 Thoreau wrote in his journal on December 6, 1854: "After lecturing twice this winter I feel that I am in danger of cheapening myself by trying to become a successful lecturer, i.e., to interest my audiences. I am disappointed to find that most that I am and value myself for is lost, or worse than lost, on my audience.

•10 The lyceum, however, served as a testing ground for much of his writing. Early versions of what would become essays or sections of his books were given as lectures, some multiple times in different locations with audiences of differing backgrounds. That much of his work was originally presented, at least in part, on the lecture circuit accounts for the directness with which Thoreau approached his readers. For Thoreau there was always an audience, not an imagined reader but a real man or woman sitting in the front

row looking in *his* eyes and listening to *his* words. *“I take it for granted, when I am invited to lecture anywhere that there is a desire to hear what I think on some subject, though I may be the greatest fool in the country,”* he wrote in *Life Without Principle*, resolving *“that I will give them a strong dose of myself. They have sent for me, and engaged to pay for me, and I am determined that they shall have me, though I bore them beyond all precedent.”*¹¹ *“I would rather write books than lectures,”*¹² Thoreau confessed in his journal. *“How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book,”* Thoreau wrote in *Walden*, perhaps understanding at this point the type of work he was trying to present. *“The book exists for us, perchance,”* he went on to say, *“which will explain our miracles and reveal new ones. The at present unutterable things we may find somewhere uttered.”*¹³ With wisdom we also learn not to do desperate things such as his neighbors, living their *“lives of quiet desperation,”*¹⁴ were doing. It was important *“so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically.”*¹⁵ It was pivotal to Thoreau’s philosophy that action follow thought. *“What I began by reading,”* he wrote in 1841, *“I must finish by acting.”*¹⁶ Although Thoreau wrote that *“the writer must to some extent inspire himself,”*¹⁷ no discussion of Thoreau can ignore the influence of Emerson. Although some tend to downplay the influence of Emerson over the young Thoreau, it is impossible to think of Thoreau without hearing echoes of Emerson. This in no way diminishes Thoreau but adds to an understanding of him. Emerson himself knew that it was *“easy to see that the debt is immense to past thought. None escapes it. The originals are not original. There is imitation, model and suggestion, to the very archangels, if we knew their history.”*¹⁸ Emerson was one of the leading men of letters of his day and the center of the transcendental circle as well as a mentor and eventual friend to the younger author. That Emerson was an influence on Thoreau, and a strong one, was as it should be. That Thoreau could take that influence and adapt it without being overwhelmed by it was the key to his strength and individuality. He was a master at absorbing what had come before him and turning it uniquely into his own. Emerson wrote that a *“great man”* fills what he quotes *“with his own voice and humor, and the whole cyclopaedia of his table-talk is presently believed to be his own.”*¹⁹ Emerson, in 1837, presented his oration, *“The American Scholar,”* to Thoreau’s graduating class at Harvard. It is unclear whether Thoreau heard it at that time, but if he hadn’t, he would certainly have read it later in its pamphlet form at the Emerson home. In

this highly charged essay, Emerson wrote of the unfulfilled potential of young Americans in these words: "Young men of the fairest promise, who begin life upon our shores, inflated by the mountain winds, shined upon by all the stars of God, find the earth below not in unison with these, but are hindered from action by the disgust which the principles on which business is managed inspire, and turn drudges, or die of disgust, or some of them suicides. What is the remedy? They did not yet see, and thousands of young men as hopeful now crowding to the barriers for the career do not yet see, that if the single man plant himself indomitably on his instincts, and there abide, the huge world will come round to him. Patience; patience; with the shades of all the good and great for company; and for solace the perspective of your own infinite life; and for work the study and the communication of principles, the making those instincts prevalent, the conversion of the world. Is it not the chief disgrace in the world, not to be an unit; not to be reckoned one character; not to yield that peculiar fruit which each man was created to bear. We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds."²⁰

Imagine the power of those words on a young Thoreau, on anyone, who was searching, trying to find out who he was, what he was about; imagine the power of those words as a call to arms, a clarion call, or a call like the crowing of chanticleer waking his neighbors up.

When Emerson wrote in the same essay that "the ancient precept, 'Know thyself,' and the modern precept, 'Study nature,' become at last one maxim,"²¹ the idea was substantiated that understanding nature was parallel to understanding yourself; that through a close examination of the exterior life you could discern the interior life. Thoreau would be able to put this principle into practice, merging self-examination and the study of nature into one act.

A dozen years before Thoreau's Walden experiment, Emerson asked in his journal, "But would it not be cowardly to flee out of society & live in the woods?"²²

Thoreau's move, however, was no escape but only a temporary repositioning to adjust his angle of vision. The place from which one makes an observation is critical, as when he noted that the seashore of Cape Cod formed "neutral ground, a most advantageous point from which to contemplate this world,"²³ or when he wrote in 1852 that the "elevated position afforded by climbing a mountain allowed him to 'see an infinite variety far and near in their relation to each other, thus reduced to a single picture.'"²⁴

Walden Woods was not the place a Harvard graduate usually went to live. It had been home to former slaves, Irish immigrants working on the railroad, lurkers, alcoholics, and, in 1845, Henry David Thoreau. Unlike many of the others who resided in Walden Woods for whom it was less a matter of choice than necessity, Thoreau's move to the woods "to live

deliberately. 25 was a matter of consideration, aspiration, and, ultimately, consequence. Thoreau's going to Walden Pond was in part a personal, although not necessarily a private, response to the challenges suggested to him by the utopian communities springing up in the early 1840s, and in particular the two with which some of his friends were closely associated: Fruitlands and Brook Farm. George Ripley, one of the founders of Brook Farm, explained that they were trying to prepare "a society of liberal, intelligent, and cultivated persons, whose relations with each other would permit a more simple and wholesome life, than can be led amidst the pressure of our competitive institutions. If wisely executed, it will be a light over this country and this age." 26 Thoreau conducted the same experiments in living as these communities, but did so on a smaller scale and from a different direction. He was not trying to re-create society by reinventing how a community should work or by imposing a new constitution upon a self-created communal association, as Brook Farm had done. This was not the way society would be renewed. The failure of these and other similar efforts to fundamentally change the way people lived showed that Thoreau was correct in searching for another method to reform human culture. At Walden Pond Thoreau could question the individual's role and obligations, not only to society but to himself: how should he live, how should he interact with his neighbors, how should he obligate himself to the laws, not only of the society within which he lived, but to those laws that were higher than those of the land: moral or religious principles, or laws of conscience, that take precedence over the constitutions or statutes of society. These questions were paramount. Thoreau wrote in his journal, and repeated in his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, that autobiography is preferable to biography: "If I am not I, who will be?" 27 Or again, in his journal: "Is not the poet bound to write his own biography? Is there any other work for him but a good journal? We do not wish to know how his imaginary hero, but how he, the actual hero, lived from day to day." 28 It was the poet's business, he wrote, to be "continually watching the moods of his mind, as the astronomer watches the aspects of the heavens. What might we not expect from a long life faithfully spent in this wise?" As travellers go around the world and report natural objects and phenomena, so faithfully let another stay at home and report the phenomena of his own life. 29

This 700 page compendium of Thoreau's works contains a couple "must haves", in "Walden" and "Civil Disobedience". These two works by Thoreau have stood the test of time with their readability, influence and insight into the man and his philosophies. The other works in the book, including excerpts from his Journals, "A Yankee in Canada", "Walking" and his poetry provide the reader with

the breadth and intricate detail in Thoreau's writing style - especially as it pertained to his interactions with Nature. The brilliance of his descriptions bring the images to life, and allow the reader insights into a Massachusetts countryside of 175 years ago as if it were yesterday. The message is beautiful, timeless, and vivid. If you have never been exposed to Thoreau, the writings here are the critical introduction, and the editor's commentaries are excellent background and insights. A good addition to your reading list.

I ordered this collection, a bit apprehensive that somewhere they cut corners to all these Thoreau writings in one, affordable book. However, I was presently surprised that the binding, paper, print and font are all top quality. A great addition to one's library and a very quick way to add multiple Thoreau works without breaking the bank or giving up quality. Kudos to the publisher.

Really just wanted to turn back time to when I read Civil Disobedience and Waldens Pond back in high school. Wound up getting a wonderful anthology of Thoreau that has taken a prominent place in my life again. The "portable" part should come with a disclaimer; I can barely cram it into my coat pocket and it lQqks rather odd tucked into my waistband. He still makes so much sense, and yet, the mainstream folks will never buy into his straight forward sensibility. He threatens their power structure built on taxes and politics, so his ideas will never fly. Damn glad to have the book though! It's a keeper!

One of the Best books I could find of Henry David Thoreau's works. The Introduction is a must read! It not only gives a detailed account of Thoreau's life, but a rather remarkable explanation and examination of his writings.

I read Walden as a kid in the seventies, and it has instilled in me a streak of hippie that I cherish. As I get older and reread his works, I understand how much his ideas are a part of our American identity. He would be very comfortable in today's libertarian political environment, I think, with his "that government is best which governs least" beliefs. His love of nature is inspiring, and his faith in the power of determination has either empowered me or made me insufferable, depending on where you stand. I love Emerson, too, but Thoreau speaks to me.

I like the fact that it's designed light and you can carry it anywhere. Won't fit in your pocket, but it's small enough not to fit the "portable" designation. And it's Thoreau. Nuff said.

A lovely combination of writings by Thoreau. A great book for an introduction to Thoreau or someone who has loved him for years!

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