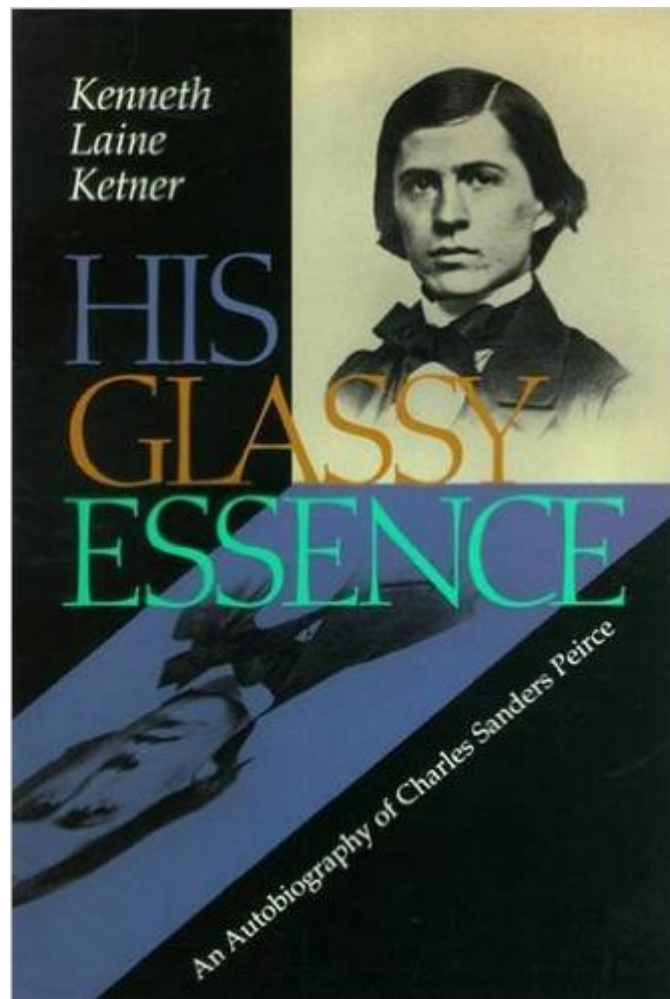


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His Glassy Essence: An Autobiography Of Charles Sanders Peirce (The Vanderbilt Library Of American Philosophy)



Synopsis

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), the most important and influential of the classical American philosophers, is credited as the inventor of the philosophical school of pragmatism. The scope and significance of his work have had a lasting effect not only in several fields of philosophy but also in mathematics, the history and philosophy of science, and the theory of signs, as well as in literary and cultural studies. Largely obscure until after his death, Peirce's life has long been a subject of interest and dispute. Unfortunately, previous biographies often confuse as much as they clarify crucial matters in Peirce's story. Ketner's new biographical project is remarkable not only for its entertaining aspects but also for its illuminating insights into Peirce's life, his thought, and the intellectual milieu in which he worked.

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Customer Reviews

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839 -1914) was an eccentric American genius and the founder of the philosophy generally known as pragmatism. A difficult, erratic, and sometimes violent man, he was denied in his attempts to secure an academic position and spent the last several years of his life in near isolation at his home, called Arisbe, near Milford, Pennsylvania. Peirce may be America's most significant philosopher. Yet he never produced a book. His reputation, insofar as it is based on his written work, is based on essays he wrote throughout his life and on large manuscripts which his admirers saw through to publication beginning shortly after his death. Professor Kenneth Ketner, the

author of this "autobiography" of Peirce, is an acknowledged authority on Peirce's life and thought. He calls this book, "His Glassy Essence" an "autobiography" because it is based in large part upon a selection of Peirce's writings and letters arranged to tell the story of his life. As Professor Ketner states, however, the book is also in part fiction. It includes three fictitious characters, the narrator, Ike, a writer of mysteries, his wife Betsey, a nurse, and Roy, a Harvard PhD in philosophy who allegedly knew and studied with Peirce. The story line involves Ike taking an interest in Peirce based upon an old box of Peirce's papers that Betsey has inherited. Roy comes into the story to provide information about Peirce and, not accidentally, some excellent discussions on the nature of philosophy. The mechanism creaks at times. The story line is artificial although Roy has many insightful things to say in commenting on Peirce.

For me the book, "His Glassy Essence," has been invaluable. Ketner has pulled together information about Peirce's early life that I could not possibly have gotten to on my own. Since I am not attached to any institution, I do not have access to any unpublished documents. I am not sure I would have been able to find the information Ketner has laid out in this book even if I had such access. He has pulled together a great deal of information from diverse sources and put these scattered pieces together in chronological and contextual order. This book has been immensely helpful to me for coming to understand the provenance of Peirce's pragmatism. Now, it is obvious to me that there was no abrupt beginning to the development of Peirce's pragmatic theory. Now that I know of his early exposure to qualitative discernment and aesthetics, I can identify these as central to the evolution of his theory of abduction-something I have suspected all along, but had been unable to nail down because of the lack of a chronological and contextual framework for Peirce's early life. The author did a fine job of referencing information, providing page by page notes at the end of the book. These references were noted in such a way that they do not interfere with the reading of the text-which unfolds in a story-like way, enabling me to see how Peirce fit within his context. The biographical and temperamental information concerning Peirce's father, for example, fleshed out the cultural and familial milieu in which he was raised-seemingly as a crown prince of the intellectual world for which his father was a sort of king.

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