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The Forbidden Best-Sellers Of Pre-Revolutionary France



Synopsis

What causes revolutions? How does public opinion influence events? This work answers these questions by asking what the French people read in the 18th century. The answer lies only partially in the canon of the great Enlightenment philosophers: Voltaire, Diderot, Montesquieu, Rousseau. More popular than these works were other books bought and sold "under the cloak". Salacious, blasphemous, often pornographic and treasonous, these formed a libertine literature that undercut all the orthodox values of the old regime. This history of these books, and of the booksellers who sold them, presents an idiosyncratic guide to the ancien regime and its citizens.

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Customer Reviews

The study of literary and intellectual history often has tended to identify a canon, or core of classics, for each historical period and then study the broader corpus of works in relation to those classics. In accordance with this model, there also has been a tendency to identify such canonical works as the "cause" of historical events. Eighteenth century French history has not been an exception, many historians arguing, rightly or wrongly, that the Enlightenment writings of Voltaire, Montesquieu, Diderot, and Rousseau provided the ideological basis for the French Revolution. There are, of course, many problems with this approach. Among those problems, Robert Darnton suggests in his fascinating and carefully researched "The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France," is that, "if we put the issue that way, we are likely to distort it, first by reifying the Enlightenment as if it could be separated from everything else in eighteenth-century culture; then by injecting into it an

analysis of the Revolution, as if it could be traced through the events of 1789-1800 like a substance being monitored in the bloodstream."Moreover, as Darnton's book argues, any approach that focusses exclusively on the canonical literature of the Enlightenment necessarily misses the mark since there was a flourishing popular and illegal underground literature, the so-called "livres philosophiques" or "philosophical books," that exerted a powerful impact on eighteenth century French culture and politics. These were the books sold "under the cloak," illegal books forbidden by the French Monarchy because they undermined the authority of the king, the Church, or conventional morality. "By sampling them, the reader will be able to form his or her own impressions of the world of illegal literature.

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