

American Philosophy: A Love Story

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The epic wisdom contained in a lost library helps the author turn his life around

John Kaag is a dispirited young philosopher at sea in his marriage and his career when he stumbles upon West Wind, a ruin of an estate in the hinterlands of New Hampshire that belonged to the eminent Harvard philosopher William Ernest Hocking. Hocking was one of the last true giants of American philosophy and a direct intellectual descendent of William James, the father of American philosophy and psychology, with whom Kaag feels a deep kinship. It is James's question "Is life worth living?" that guides this remarkable book.

The books Kaag discovers in the Hocking library are crawling with insects and full of mold. But he resolves to restore them, as he immediately recognizes their importance. Not only does the library at West Wind contain handwritten notes from Whitman and inscriptions from Frost, but there are startlingly rare first editions of Hobbes, Descartes, and Kant. As Kaag begins to catalog and read through these priceless volumes, he embarks on a thrilling journey that leads him to the life-affirming tenets of American philosophy—self-reliance, pragmatism, and transcendence—and to a brilliant young Kantian who joins him in the restoration of the Hocking books.

Part intellectual history, part memoir, *American Philosophy* is ultimately about love, freedom, and the role that wisdom can play in turning one's life around.

John Kaag is a professor of philosophy at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell. He is the author of *Idealism, Pragmatism, and Feminism* and *Thinking Through the Imagination*. His writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and many other publications. He lives outside Boston with his wife and daughter.
One of NPR's Best Books of 2016

A New York Times Editor's Choice

"The further you go on in the book, and the more of Kaag's skillful miniatures you take in, the deeper it becomes. You realize he is also making an unconventional argument for who was right, and who was wrong, in the classical tradition of American philosophy from about 1830 to 1930, in Transcendentalism and Pragmatism and Idealism and beyond. It is an argument strikingly suited to our time . . . *American Philosophy* succeeds, not as a textbook or survey, but a spirited lover's quarrel with the individualism and solipsism in our national thought." -Mark Greif, *The New York Times Book Review*

"John Kaag hits the sweet spot between intellectual history and personal memoir in this transcendently wonderful love song to philosophy . . . this is the most enthralling book of intellectual history I've read since David Edmonds' and John Eidinow's *Wittgenstein's Poker* . . . With its lucid, winning blend of autobiography, biography, and serious philosophical reflection, *American Philosophy* provides a magnificently accessible introduction to fundamental ideas about freedom and what makes life significant. It's an exhilarating read." -Heller McAlpin, NPR

"[Kaag] is as an admirably approachable teacher of the figures whose works he is cataloguing. He elucidates obscure philosophical matters. His history of American philosophy is lucid and compelling." -Priscilla Gilman, The Boston Globe

"Elegant . . . Describing these books enables Mr. Kaag to take us on a brisk tour from Hobbes and Locke to Kant and Coleridge and, most important, to rediscover the pragmatist work of American thinkers intent on mitigating the force of modern alienation." - Randal Fuller, The Wall Street Journal

"For anyone with a love of books, intellectual history, or just a good story of romance, Kaag delivers a treat . . . Kaag draws our attention to how philosophy can attempt, in Royce's words, to mend our broken world. If philosophy should be woven into the conduct of life, as the Transcendentalists argued, then Kaag's book is an example of how that might look." - Scott Bartlett, Philosopher's Magazine

"Not since Pirsig's Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance have I read such a mesmerizing confluence of personal experience and formal thought." -Robert Richardson, William James Studies

"In his deeper portraits, Kaag's sketches of philosophy as lived experiences are among the book's best achievements . . . I wanted to return to Royce and James, to find out more about Cabot, to read The Meaning of God after finishing the book. Maybe it will even do its part to slow the much feared dwindling of philosophy majors." -Kenyon Gradert, Open Letters Monthly

"Offers a unique combination of memoir and the history of American philosophy that is a joy to read. Kaag ably presents both subjects in a way that keeps readers engaged as he shows the value of developing a personal philosophy that can help individuals find meaning, or at least some guidance, in their lives." -Library Journal

"Philosophy not as mere academic concepts but as lived experience." -Booklist

"A compelling hybrid combining memoir, a dramatic narrative about saving an endangered rare book collection, and the intellectual history of philosophy . . . Throughout the book, the author deftly intertwines the narrative threads in a story perfect for book lovers and soul searchers alike. Kaag's lively prose, acute self-examination, unfolding romance, and instructive history of philosophy as a discipline make for a surprisingly absorbing book." -Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

"There is a strange daylight magic in this book. It is part memoir and part flyover of American Philosophy, which, says Kaag, "from Jonathan Edwards in the eighteenth century to Cornel West in this one, is about the possibilities of rebirth and renewal." The book is also clearly and beautifully written. I picked it up for a quick look and couldn't put it down. Not since Pirsig's Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance have I read such a mesmerizing confluence of personal experience and formal thought." -Robert Richardson, author of

Henry David Thoreau: The Life of A Mind

"John Kaag is the closest thing we have to William James: a breathtakingly good prose stylist; philosophically and psychologically courageous, inventive and inspiring; ruthlessly honest; unsparing about the difficulties of love, intimacy and experience; and above all, human, in the most valuable and moral sense of the word."-Clancy Martin

"John Kaag's *American Philosophy: A Love Story* is one of the most entertaining guides to philosophical inquiry to come along in decades. Stumbling on the library of a long-forgotten Harvard professor abandoned on the great man's country estate, John Kaag examines the trove and finds himself communing with the likes of William James, Josiah Royce, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Ideas may be Kaag's first love, but they bring him a flesh-and-blood Beatrice in this open-hearted account of a young man's second chance at a sentimental education."-Megan Marshall Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Margaret Fuller: A New American Life*

"Is life worth living?" This is the age-old but forever timely question at the center of this remarkable and daring memoir. Part history of American philosophy, part personal narrative, *American Philosophy: A Love Story*, takes us deeply into that 'epic love affair with wisdom' that is philosophy, but it does so through the wonderfully intimate lens of the author himself, a young and accomplished philosopher who has summoned the nerve to expose his flaws, his failures, his deepest doubts about it all, a rare act of creative courage and generosity that leads us to where the heart of true philosophy lies: to a deep and abiding sense of wonder. This is an absolutely stellar memoir." -Andre Dubus III

Other Books

Socrates in Love. An innovative and insightful exploration of the passionate early life of Socrates and the influences that led him to become the first and greatest of philosophers. Socrates: the philosopher whose questioning gave birth to the ideas of Western thought, and whose execution marked the end of the Athenian Golden Age. Yet despite his pre-eminence among the great thinkers of history, little of his life story is known. What we know tends to begin in his middle age and end with his trial and death. Our conception of Socrates has relied upon Plato and Xenophon - men who met him when he was in his fifties and a well-known figure in war-torn Athens. There is mystery at the heart of Socrates' story: what turned the young Socrates into a philosopher? What drove him to pursue with such persistence, at the cost of social acceptance and ultimately of his life, a whole new way of thinking about the meaning of existence? In this revisionist biography, Armand D'Angour draws on neglected sources to explore the passions and motivations of young Socrates, showing how love transformed him into the philosopher he was to become. What emerges is the figure of Socrates as never previously portrayed: a heroic warrior, an athletic wrestler and dancer - and a passionate lover. *Socrates in Love* sheds new light on the formative journey of the philosopher, finally revealing the identity of the woman who Socrates claimed inspired him to develop ideas that have captivated thinkers for 2,500 years.

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