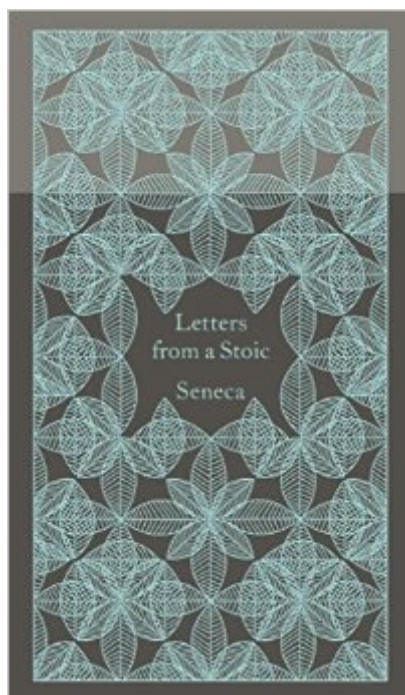


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Letters From A Stoic (A Penguin Classics Hardcover)



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A philosophy that saw self-possession as the key to an existence lived "in accordance with nature," Stoicism called for the restraint of animal instincts and the severing of emotional ties. These beliefs were formulated by the Athenian followers of Zeno in the fourth century BC, but it was in Seneca that the Stoics found their most eloquent advocate. Stoicism, as expressed in the Letters, helped ease pagan Rome's transition to Christianity, for it upholds upright ethical ideals and extols virtuous living, as well as expressing disgust for the harsh treatment of slaves and the inhumane slaughter witnessed in the Roman arenas. Seneca's major contribution to a seemingly unsympathetic creed was to transform it into a powerfully moving and inspiring declaration of the dignity of the individual mind.

Robin Campbell's distinguished translation captures Seneca's humour and concise, memorable aphorisms and his introduction discusses the tensions between Seneca's philosophy and his turbulent career as adviser to the tyrannical emperor Nero. For more than sixty-five years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,500 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

Stoicism has been much misunderstood, and the adjective "stoic," which loosely can be taken to mean bearing up under duress, is partly correct but does not do justice to one of the world's great philosophies. This Penguin volume presents a great selection from the letters of Seneca, which hits all the high points of the philosophy and captures Seneca's remarkable personality, which has made him a hit with the cognoscenti for 2,000 years. Few perhaps realize that the Stoics postulated a great commonwealth governed by law, or that they idealized democracy. Seneca mentions Solon the lawgiver as the creator of democracy and refers numerous times to the Roman Stoic saint, Cato, who strove mightily (and unsuccessfully) to preserve the Roman Republic. Seneca, like other Stoics, has a doctrine of nature that is remarkably close to that of Emerson or modern American environmentalists. The wise man (sapiens) will never be bored when contemplating the simple things of nature. The natural beauty of the countryside and the healthful action of the waves can have a calming effect (although there's a memorable passage in which a storm causes terrible sea sickness). He also believed in the simple and strenuous life and the avoidance of luxury and decadence, and there are numerous passages in these letters to his disciple, Lucilius, which decry the ostentatious, self indulgent practices of his contemporaries. These are sentiments and ideas adopted by many in the modern world, including President Theodore Roosevelt. Seneca has no patience for philosophy as a word game or a practice of engaging in hair-splitting arguments for their own sake. He rather sees it as a practice or way of life that all those who seek the good should investigate and adopt.

This will not be a review about Seneca. I suppose I will attempt that one day once I manage to go thru my library's Loeb Classical Library edition of Seneca's Epistles. The purpose of this review is to bellyache about the Penguin Classics' edition of this work. I come not to criticize this translation. I have no Latin. For all I know it is brilliant. What I am here to criticize is the decision to edit Seneca's work all to Tartarus and back. There are 124 Letters in Seneca's Epistles. Campbell gives you 40. Or just over 32%! Campbell's criteria as to which letters to present is a personal one. He evaluated their interest and whether or not they were repetitive. His is admittedly charming in his own defense

on this issue. He quotes Roger L'Estrange (another anthologist of Seneca's) from 1673 to the effect that anyone who complains about the selection is an unmannerly guest who eats at his host's table and then critiques the meal. I embrace this description. I may well use The Unmannerly Guest as my nom de plume for my reviews from now on. Here is my problem. All too often the editors or translators of the Penguin Classic editions decide that they know better than the ancient author what is valuable about the work for today's reader. Their Plutarch is one such travesty. Their edition of Polybius is another. What makes it more confusing is they can get it right sometime, as with their edition of Livy. I think they are really missing their chance here. The Penguin Classics series is the perfect publishing series for modern and complete editions of ancient authors presented in their original form as much as is possible. Let us look at how personal Campbell's choice is. I happen to be reading The Roman Stoics: Self, Responsibility, and Affection by Gretchen Reydam-Schils.

I tore this book to pieces. My copy is overflowing with tabbed pages and highlighted lines and notes in the margins. Seneca of course, is a fascinating figure. Gregory Hays once said about Marcus Aurelius that "not being a tyrant was something he had to work at one day at a time" and often, Seneca lost that battle. He was the Cardinal Richelieu behind Nero. He sat back and enjoyed the spoils of his student who had clearly lost his way--at least Aristotle didn't profit from Alexander's lust for power. However, there is some interesting evidence put forth in a paper titled - Seneca: The Case of the Opulent Stoic in which Lydia Motto presents that what we know of Seneca's reputation comes almost entirely from a single, less than objective source. And in fact, if we can trust the way in which Seneca faced his forced suicide there was not much difference between practice and philosophy. The book is profoundly insightful, it calls you to action, and it has that 'quit your whining--this is life' attitude that so defines the Roman Stoics. This is by no means an all inclusive list but is Seneca on some important topics: On doing more than consuming: He should be delivering himself of such sayings, not memorizing them. It is disgraceful that a man who is old or in sight of old age should have wisdom deriving solely from his notebook. 'Zeno said this.' And what have you said? 'Cleanthes said that.' What have you said? How much longer are you going to serve under others? Assume authority over yourself and utter something that may be handed down to posterity. Produce something from your own resources. On endurance: Life's no soft affair.

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