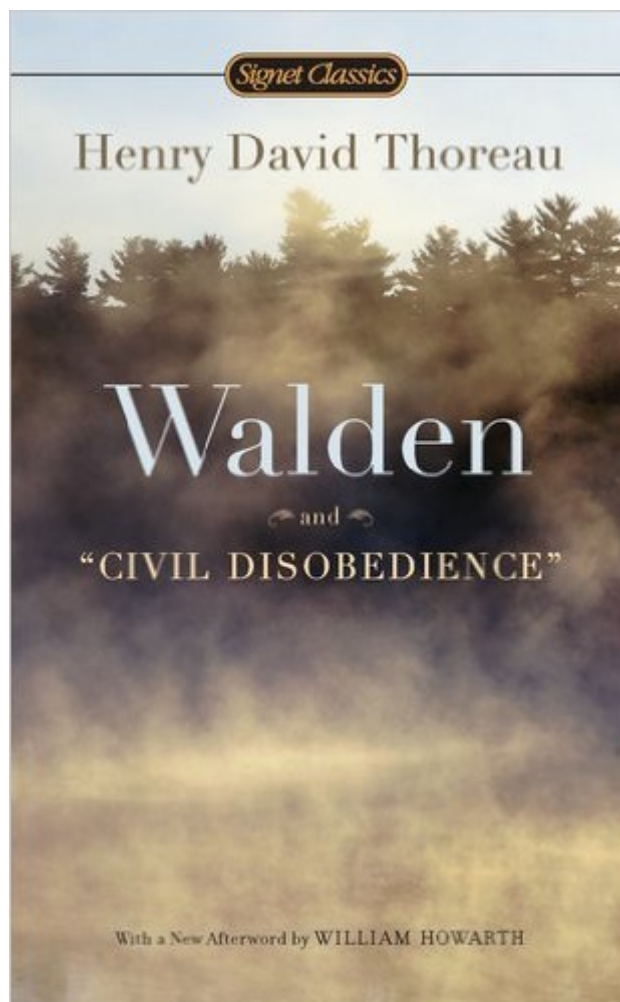


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Walden And Civil Disobedience



Synopsis

Henry David Thoreau's masterwork *Walden* is a collection of his reflections on life and society. In 1845, Thoreau moved to a cabin that he built with his own hands along the shores of Walden Pond in Massachusetts. Shedding the trivial ties that he felt bound much of humanity, Thoreau reaped from the land both physically and mentally, and pursued truth in the quiet of nature. In *Walden*, he explains how separating oneself from the world of men can truly awaken the sleeping self. Thoreau holds fast to the notion that you have not truly existed until you adopt such a lifestyle "and only then can you reenter society, as an enlightened being. These simple but profound musings as well as "Civil Disobedience," his protest against the government's interference with civil liberty "have inspired many to embrace his philosophy of individualism and love of nature. More than a century and a half later, his message is more timely than ever. With an Introduction by W.S. Merwin and an Afterword by Will Howarth

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Customer Reviews

This is one of the most influential books in American history. I picked it up for the first time in thirty years only to realize that Thoreau's philosophy had long ago permeated my being. I remember being blown away by my first reading more than half a century ago, but with each immersion new depths are achieved. Thoreau sought both authenticity and simplicity in his life. He never abandoned Concord and the real world but merely sought refuge at Walden to plumb the depths of his being. Serious introspection and brilliant writing show each of us the way to our own core. Can we

stand the examination? That is for each of us to determine. The Transcendentalists may never have been able to define their philosophy, but what remains of it more than a century after the movement's passing can be summed up in Thoreau's always upbeat outlook of "...if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet success unexpected in common hours." One cannot read *Walden* without gaining confidence in one's ability to change direction in life and optimism about the future. We do not have to live lives of conformity and quiet desperation. "In the long run men hit only what they aim at. Therefore, though they should fail immediately, they had better aim at something high." There has never been a book that better expresses American optimism, and there is no reason for us to lose confidence now. Simplify and be as close to authentic as you can be and all will turn out well. Oh, and while you're at it question authority. If there could be a six star book, this would be my candidate.

Walden, what is it? Is it a book on nature, a book on ecology, a book on human nature, a prescient description of the struggle between modern civilization and the land that nurtured it, a critique of mankind, a string of quotable gems, an account of a mind, or, like *Star Wars*, a way of slipping a deep and human spirituality into someone else's mind without their recognizing it? It depends on who is doing the reading and when. Read it for any of these purposes, and it will not disappoint. If you've never read it, read it. If you read it for class years ago and hated it, read it again. This may be the most subtle, multi-layered and carefully worked piece of literature you'll ever find. By keeping the down-to-earth tone (no doubt in reaction to the high-flying prose of his friend, R.W. Emerson) Thoreau pulls a Columbo, and fools us into thinking he's writing simply about observing nature, living in a cabin, or sounding a pond. Somehow by the end of *Walden*, however, you may find it is your self he has sounded. People have accused Thoreau of despising mankind, but read deeper and you will discover he loved people well enough to chide us, show us our faults (admitting he's as bad as the worst of us), and give to all of us this wonderful gift, a book you could base your life on. There is more day to dawn, he reminds us at the end: the sun is but a morning star.

As a professor of philosophy, I at one time regularly took classes of first year college students to Concord for a week-long intensive seminar on Emerson and Thoreau. I eventually abandoned the seminar, because I discovered that each class was progressively more hostile to what these two wonderful persons stood for. The reviews written by young people of this edition of *Walden* are, then, disconcertingly familiar to me. I obviously disagree with their evaluations of the book and of Thoreau's character. But what's interesting is why they have such a negative reaction to a book

written, as Thoreau says, for young people who haven't yet been corrupted by society. What is it about the culture in which we live that encourages such hostility to his eloquent plea for simplicity? It's too facile to suggest that the backlash is motivated only by resentful pique at what's seen as Thoreau's condemnation of contemporary lifestyles, although I suspect this is part of the explanation. I'd be interested in reading the thoughts here of other readers who are likewise puzzled and disturbed by "Generation Y's" negative response to Thoreau.

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