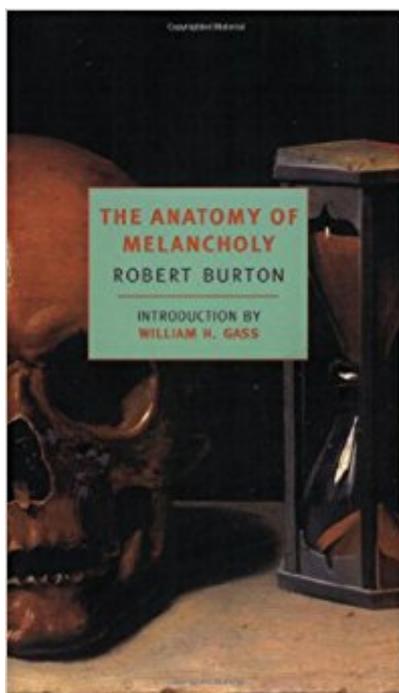


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The Anatomy Of Melancholy (New York Review Books Classics)



Synopsis

One of the major documents of modern European civilization, Robert Burton's astounding compendium, a survey of melancholy in all its myriad forms, has invited nothing but superlatives since its publication in the seventeenth century. Lewellyn Powys called it "the greatest work of prose of the greatest period of English prose-writing," while the celebrated surgeon William Osler declared it the greatest of medical treatises. And Dr. Johnson, Boswell reports, said it was the only book that he rose early in the morning to read with pleasure. In this surprisingly compact and elegant new edition, Burton's spectacular verbal labyrinth is sure to delight, instruct, and divert today's readers as much as it has those of the past four centuries.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

First of all, one has a very difficult problem in defining exactly what this compendium is. Is it a book, a poem, a history, an epic? Well, I think it is all of those and many more. The Anatomy of Melancholy is, without a doubt, the best book ever written, bar none. It was compiled from all the books of the 17th century and is not really about melancholy, per se. It is, rather, Robert Burton's view of mankind and mankind's condition. All mankind. And all conditions. It is about melancholia, sure, but it is about everything else as well. Melancholia was just Burton's excuse to write about everything under the sun in a strikingly original way and then have the nerve to remind us that there is nothing new under the sun. This is a book filled with both endless quotes and endless quotable material and, to the surprise of many, it is a comic masterpiece. Perhaps "the" comic masterpiece.

Burton chose to publish this book as having been written by "Democritus Junior," and if that doesn't give you a hint regarding the humor that follows, then not much will. If you like good literature, you'll love this book. If you like psychology, you'll love this book. If you want to seem pretentious, you need this book. Mostly, however, this is a book for people who love words. Burton may have seemed like a raving madman to some, but he was a man obsessed with a love for the English language...and it shows. *The Anatomy of Melancholy* wasn't meant to be read from the first page to the last; I have never met anyone who did that and one would have to be more than a little mad to even try. Just pick up the book. Open it to any page. You may find lists, digressions, bits of 17th century prose, quotes, much Latin.

Don't be misled by the title of this book, nor by what others may have told you about it. In the first place, it isn't so much a book about 'Melancholy' (or abnormal psychology, or depression, or whatever) as a book about Burton himself and, ultimately, about humankind. Secondly, it isn't so much a book for students of the history of English prose, as one for lovers of language who joy in the strong taste of English when it was at its most masculine and vigorous. Finally, it isn't so much a book for those interested in the renaissance, as for those interested in life. Burton is not a writer for fops and milquetoasts. He was a crusty old devil who used to go down to the river to listen to the bargemen cursing so that he could keep in touch with the true tongue of his race. Sometimes I think he might have been better off as the swashbuckling Captain of a pirate ship. But somehow he ended up as a scholar, and instead of watching the ocean satisfyingly swallowing up his victims, he himself became an ocean of learning swallowing up whole libraries. His book, in consequence, although it may have begun as a mere 'medical treatise,' soon exploded beyond its bounds to become, in the words of one of his editors, "a grand literary entertainment, as well as a rich mine of miscellaneous learning." Of his own book he has this to say : "... a rhapsody of rags gathered together from several dung-hills, excrements of authors, toys and fopperies confusedly tumbled out, without art, invention, judgement, wit, learning, harsh, raw, rude, phantastical, absurd, insolent, indiscreet, ill-composed, indigested, vain, scurrile, idle, dull, and dry; I confess all..." But don't believe him, he's in one of his irascible moods and exaggerating. In fact it's a marvelous book.

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