



The Skeptic: A Life of H. L. Mencken

Terry Teachout

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When H. L. Mencken talked, everyone listened -- like it or not. In the Roaring Twenties, he was the one critic who mattered, the champion of a generation of plain-speaking writers who redefined the American novel, and the ax-swinging scourge of the know-nothing, go-getting middle-class philistines whom he dubbed the "booboisie." Some loved him, others loathed him, but everybody read him. Now Terry Teachout takes on the man Edmund Wilson called "our greatest practicing literary journalist," brilliantly capturing all of Mercken's energy and erudition, passion and paradoxes, in a masterful biography of this iconoclastic figure and the world he shaped.

From his carefree days as a teenage cub reporter in turn-of-the-century Baltimore to his noisy tenure as founding editor of the *American Mercury*, the most influential magazine of the twenties, Mencken distinguished himself with a contrary spirit, a razor-sharp wit (he coined the term "Bible Belt"), and a keen eye for such up-and-coming authors as Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Willa Cather, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. He covered everything, from the Scopes evolution trial to the 1948 presidential elections, in the pages of the *Baltimore Sun*. He wrote bestselling books about the failure of democracy, the foibles of the female sex, and what he memorably called "the American language." But his favorite topic was the one he saw wherever he looked: the sterile, life-denying strain of puritanism that he believed was strangling the culture of his native land.

No modern writer has been more controversial than H. L. Mencken. His fans saw him as the fearless leader of the endless battle against ignorance and hypocrisy, while his enemies dismissed him as a cantankerous, self-righteous ideologue. The surging popularity of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the politician he hated most, eventually caused his star to fade, but the unsparing vigor of his critique of American life and letters -- and the raucously colloquial prose style in which he blasted the Babbitts -- retains its freshness and relevance to this day.

Himself an accomplished critic and journalist, Terry Teachout has combed through reams of Mencken's private papers, including the searingly candid autobiographical manuscripts sealed after his death in 1956. Out of this material he has fashioned a portrait of the artist as intellectual gadfly, working newspaperman, devoted husband, and faithless lover. Meticulously researched, elegantly written, and completely absorbing, *The Skeptic* vividly evokes the life and legacy of a true American legend.

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