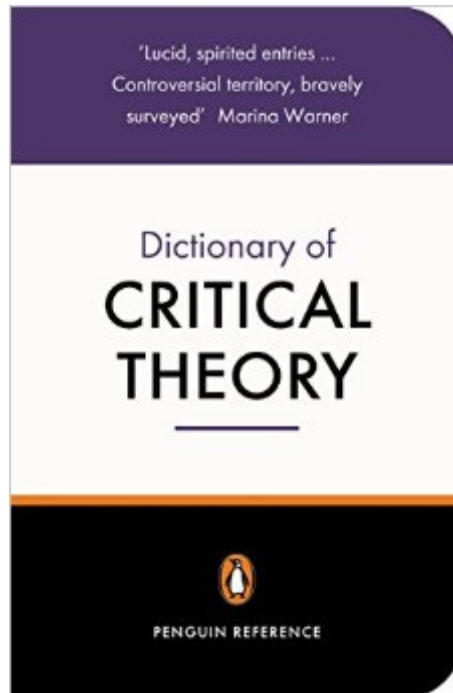


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The Penguin Dictionary Of Critical Theory (Penguin Reference Books)



Synopsis

Accessing the huge selection of critical theory can be an intimidating experience. This acclaimed dictionary is an invaluable introduction to the theories and theorists in the field and will prove an authoritative resource for all students.

Book Information

Series: Penguin Reference Books

Paperback: 496 pages

Publisher: Penguin Books; New Ed edition (July 30, 2002)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0140513698

ISBN-13: 978-0140513691

Product Dimensions: 5.1 x 0.9 x 7.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (10 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

Yes and no. For some time, I have referred to the Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy. This I have found to be particularly helpful. I thought I might find the same with the Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory. But first, what is critical theory? While there are several possible definitions, perhaps the following would make most sense. Scientific theory, in whatever field, uses "instrumental reason" for the purpose of "manipulating the external world". Critical theory might be said to be theory which examines the instrumental reason itself. The Dictionary of Critical Theory is strong from the point of view that it is broad in the information it provides. It sketches e.g. both the origins and the outcomes of metaphysics, or both the early and the late work of Jacques Derrida -- and it gives one a good feel for the mood among academics, and for caveats one should be aware of. It is strong from the point of view that it succeeds in reducing vast and complex subject matter to concise and manageable entries -- and it is generally up to date. It also has a very useful bibliography at the back (80 pages). I would consider it weak from the point of view that it is not as comprehensive as it might be. I looked up "systems theory". Nothing. I looked up "axioms", "coherentism", "Michael Polanyi". There was nothing -- where there might have been, at least, a single-line cross-reference. I

would also consider it weak from the point of view that it sometimes seems too technical to be useful. For instance, I looked up "metalanguage". This, it says, is "a technical or second-order language used to describe and analyse a natural or first-order language". A dictionary, surely, is intended to be more explicatory than that. The book is useful -- and I would rather have it than not. This is the first impression in paperback, and hopefully future editions would overcome some of the present shortcomings.

Compared to other Penguin dictionaries for academia, especially the dictionary of literary criticism and its terms, the critical theory dictionary is **severely** lacking. This is a severe drawback for a field of theory that is not only incredibly complex, where each scholar almost without fail offers a nuanced and sometimes completely new reading of a term or concept, but that is also filled with theoretical jargon (I do not mean this word as a negative evaluator, but in the strictly linguistic sense as a set of words/phrases used to convey specified meaning in a given field). As a graduate student, it would have been very helpful to have a dictionary that parses the dozens of usages of a single term, or that, in many cases, even has the damn terms. This can be especially frustrating for young critical theorists since the words (e.g. "field") are often common nouns with long, theoretically bound-up word histories, such that if you were to Google many of the terms, all you'd get is vague and unhelpful pages. Of course, in many cases, I found Penguin's dictionary of literary criticism even more useful for understanding critical theory than this dictionary. You can also turn to Oxford's "Very Short Introduction" series, for which "Critical Theory" is an excellent and helpful addition. No doubt someone will complain about my response and say I should just do the hard work of reading through hundreds of pages of theory and hopefully, one gloomy, rainy, over-read and too-much-caffeined day, suddenly and magically come to understand the terms and theories without any help or input. To that person I would say that they don't know academia well and that, if they feel that way, they shouldn't be looking at the page for a dictionary of critical theory.

A DICTIONARY OF CRITICAL THEORY by David Macey is one of those books that ought to be held in one hand while the other holds another text on literary theory. It is no easy task to succinctly summarize let alone analyze an imposingly long list of terms, writers, movements, and schools of critical thought, but Macey has come close. Assume that a reader is about to try to plow his way through the denseness that is the thought of Lacan. As a preliminary, that reader would be wise first to read the general background to Lacanian thought before navigating a way between Lacan's distinctions between the Real and the Imaginary stages of infantile growth. Or perhaps that reader

feels a lack of understanding of Freud's oedipal issues. Macey is where to begin. Macey's text is arranged alphabetically, as any proper dictionary should be, but this text is more encyclopedia than dictionary. Part of the not-so-obvious problem I have with Macey is the same that I have with any author who seeks to encapsulate all the knowledge of the world on one issue in one book. The question of authorial bias manifests itself not only in what is included or excluded, but also in the even-handedness of its treatment. Macey tends to smooth over any areas of political controversy that arise all too often in a discourse that is fraught with potential conflict. For example, as I was reading the entry on Noam Chomsky, the MIT linguist who has for years been an outspoken critic of both the United States and Israel, hardly anything was written that might cast an aspersion on Chomsky's own biases. What was presented was a rather technical explanation of Chomsky's linguistic theories, a matter of concern only to other linguists. I was surprised by Macey's omission of Frederick Jameson, one of the most outspoken Marxist critics of this century. Still, Macey's text is an indispensable tool for those who wish to learn how words affect ideas.

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