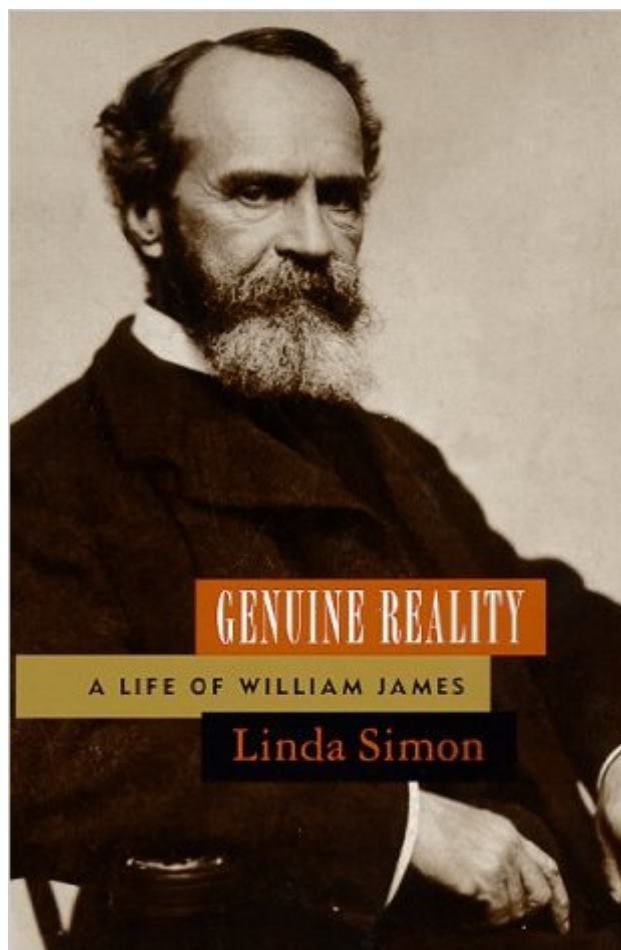


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Genuine Reality: A Life Of William James



Synopsis

Intellectual rebel, romantic pragmatist, aristocratic pluralist, William James was both a towering figure of the nineteenth century and a harbinger of the twentieth. Drawing on a wide range of sources, including 1,500 letters between James and his wife, acclaimed biographer Linda Simon creates an intimate portrait of this multifaceted and contradictory man. Exploring James's irrepressible family, his diverse friends, and the cultural and political forces to which he so energetically responded, Simon weaves the many threads of William James's life into a genuine, and vibrant, reality. "William James . . . has never seemed so vulnerably human as in Linda Simon's biography. . . . [S]he vivifies James in such a way that his life and thought come freshly alive for the modern reader." "David S. Reynolds, New York Times Book Review" "Superb. . . . Genuine Reality is recommended reading for all soul-searchers." "George Gurley, Chicago Tribune" "Ms. Simon . . . has provided an ideal pathway for James's striding. . . . [Y]ou become engaged in his struggles as if they were your own." "Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, New York Times" "[A]n excellent narrative biography at once sensitively told and lucidly written." "John Patrick Diggins, Wall Street Journal

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Customer Reviews

The truly great men in early American history, in my humble opinion, are as follows: Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain), William James. Because of their intense individualism, idealistic views, and unique personalities, their writings, thoughts and ideas continue to affect western civilization into the 21st century. Let me just say at the start - I'm not

proposing a forum for argument, debating the worth and influence of one historical figure against another - these are men who have shaped my life in lasting ways - particularly the psychologist, philosopher and teacher, William James. If you are interested in the works and life of this noble individual, ~Genuine Reality~ is a good place to begin. Linda Simon is an adept biographer and this book reflects her skill, understanding and love for the subject. It was refreshing to read a biography without the once fashionable 'psychoanalytical method' of interpreting history: inserting the Oedipus complex or hints of homoeroticism into the work. This method gets tedious and more reveals the biographer's mind than the subject. It is obvious that Simon wanted to approach James from a pragmatic perspective and she succeeded in showing James' life, warts and all, more specifically, however, his inspiring personality, compulsive curiosity and genuine love of life. Similar to most people of genius, James' life was indeed a contradiction, at times almost enigmatic. He realized early on, that to rivet one's thought or perspective to a single dogma, to close one's mind to the infinite possibilities of existence, was to commit intellectual and spiritual suicide. Thus his thoughts are mercurial, bouncing from one possible view to another, always searching, investigating with an incessant vigour of a child.

Linda Simon teaches English at Skidmore College and has also written/edited William James Remembered, The Biography of Alice B. Toklas, etc. She discusses James' theory of emotions, where "our emotions are generated by action in response to stimuli: we are sad because we cry, we fear because we run. To one correspondent who was not convinced, James explained, 'Of course my "theory" about the emotions is quite independent of what species of mental operation the emotion is consequent upon... once there, the emotion consists of a complex of feelings of bodily change... I don't wonder that the theory failed to convince you... the only ones to whom it seems plausible are the physiologists, and that is not necessarily a point in its favor.'" (Pg. 185) She observes, "Like many scientists of his time, James believed that scrupulous and rigorous investigation of psychic phenomena---mediums, thought transference, extrasensory perception, and even reported sightings of ghosts---might yield secrets that... as yet remained unpenetrable. For James, psychical research offered a way to explore human consciousness outside of 'classical' psychology... His conviction that it would be useful to investigate ... from a scientific perspective made him greatly sympathetic to the efforts of... the London Society for Psychical Research." (Pg. 189, 191) Later, she adds, "His own yearning for spiritual communion was satisfied by Leonora Piper, whose integrity he continued to defend..."

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