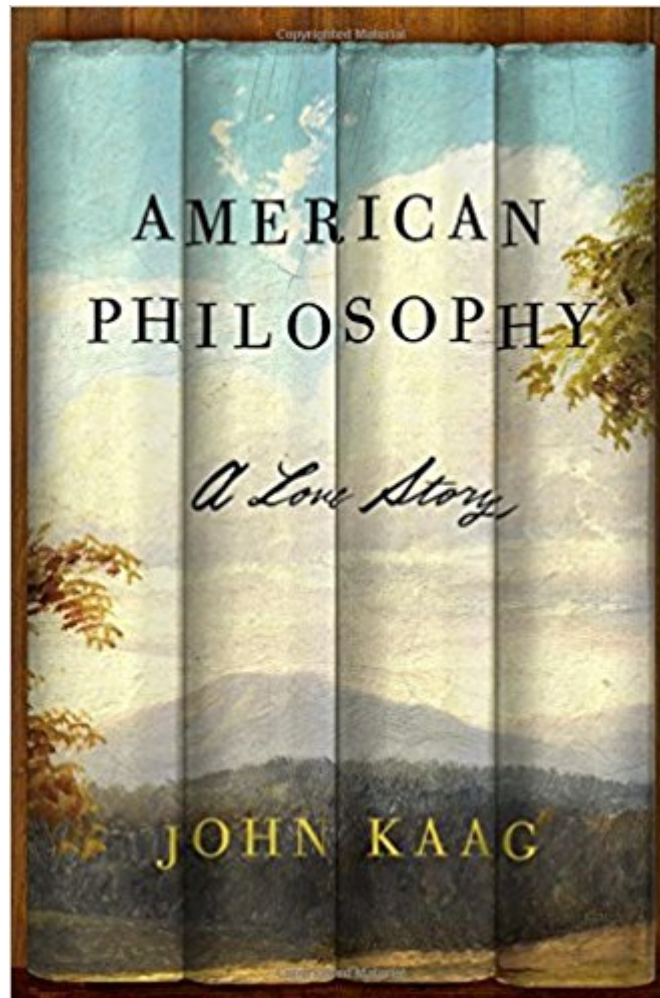




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American Philosophy: A Love Story



Synopsis

The epic wisdom contained in a lost library helps the author turn his life around. John Kaag is a dispirited young philosopher at sea in his marriage and his career when he stumbles upon West Wind, a ruin of an estate in the hinterlands of New Hampshire that belonged to the eminent Harvard philosopher William Ernest Hocking. Hocking was one of the last true giants of American philosophy and a direct intellectual descendent of William James, the father of American philosophy and psychology, with whom Kaag feels a deep kinship. It is James's question "Is life worth living?" that guides this remarkable book. The books Kaag discovers in the Hocking library are crawling with insects and full of mold. But he resolves to restore them, as he immediately recognizes their importance. Not only does the library at West Wind contain handwritten notes from Whitman and inscriptions from Frost, but there are startlingly rare first editions of Hobbes, Descartes, and Kant. As Kaag begins to catalog and read through these priceless volumes, he embarks on a thrilling journey that leads him to the life-affirming tenets of American philosophy—self-reliance, pragmatism, and transcendence—and to a brilliant young Kantian who joins him in the restoration of the Hocking books. Part intellectual history, part memoir, *American Philosophy* is ultimately about love, freedom, and the role that wisdom can play in turning one's life around.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

One of NPR's Best Books of 2016 A New York Times Editor's Choice "Kaag's

accounts are accurate, engaging and scrupulous. They show profound learning. They're also genuinely entertaining, recapturing lost details of thinkers' personal lives without sensationalism. The further you go on in the book, and the more of Kaag's skillful miniatures you take in, the deeper it becomes. You realize he is also making an unconventional argument for who was right, and who was wrong, in the classical tradition of American philosophy from about 1830 to 1930, in Transcendentalism and Pragmatism and Idealism and beyond. It is an argument strikingly suited to our time . . . American Philosophy succeeds, not as a textbook or survey, but a spirited lover's quarrel with the individualism and solipsism in our national thought. —Mark Greif, *The New York Times Book Review* —“John Kaag hits the sweet spot between intellectual history and personal memoir in this transcendently wonderful love song to philosophy . . . this is the most enthralling book of intellectual history I've read since David Edmonds' and John Eidinow's *Wittgenstein's Poker* . . . With its lucid, winning blend of autobiography, biography, and serious philosophical reflection, *American Philosophy* provides a magnificently accessible introduction to fundamental ideas about freedom and what makes life significant. It's an exhilarating read. —Heller McAlpin, *NPR* — “[Kaag] is as an admirably approachable teacher of the figures whose works he is cataloguing. He elucidates obscure philosophical matters. His history of American philosophy is lucid and compelling. He writes with refreshing clarity, humility, and a welcome absence of jargon. We learn a lot about the human beings behind the famous tomes . . . a lovely, intelligent, edifying, and admirable book, and Kaag an immensely likeable guide. —Priscilla Gilman, *The Boston Globe* —“Elegant . . . Describing these books enables Mr. Kaag to take us on a brisk tour from Hobbes and Locke to Kant and Coleridge and, most important, to rediscover the pragmatist work of American thinkers intent on mitigating the force of modern alienation. —Randal Fuller, *The Wall Street Journal* “For anyone with a love of books, intellectual history, or just a good story of romance, Kaag delivers a treat . . . Kaag draws our attention to how philosophy can attempt, in Royce's words, to mend our broken world. If philosophy should be woven into the conduct of life, as the Transcendentalists argued, then Kaag's book is an example of how that might look.” —Scott Bartlett, *Philosopher's Magazine* “Not since Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* have I read such a mesmerizing confluence of personal experience and formal thought.” —Robert Richardson, *William James Studies* —“In his deeper portraits, Kaag's sketches of philosophy as lived experiences are among the book's best achievements . . . Kaag inherits the pragmatists' superb pedagogical talent for translating complex ideas into language available to a wide audience . . . *American Philosophy* will prod

readers to further explore these thinkers's lives and ideas. I wanted to return to Royce and James, to find out more about Cabot, to read *The Meaning of God* after finishing the book. Maybe it will even do its part to slow the much feared dwindling of philosophy majors.

Kenyon Gradert, *Open Letters Monthly* "Offers a unique combination of memoir and the history of American philosophy that is a joy to read. Kaag ably presents both subjects in a way that keeps readers engaged as he shows the value of developing a personal philosophy that can help individuals find meaning, or at least some guidance, in their lives.

Library Journal "Philosophy not as mere academic concepts but as lived experience.

Booklist "A compelling hybrid combining memoir, a dramatic narrative about saving an endangered rare book collection, and the intellectual history of philosophy . . . Throughout the book, the author deftly intertwines the narrative threads in a story perfect for book lovers and soul searchers alike. Kaag's lively prose, acute self-examination, unfolding romance, and instructive history of philosophy as a discipline make for a surprisingly absorbing book.

Kirkus Reviews (starred review) "There is a strange daylight magic in this book. It is part memoir and part flyover of American Philosophy, which, says Kaag, "from Jonathan Edwards in the eighteenth century to Cornel West in this one, is about the possibilities of rebirth and renewal.

The book is also clearly and beautifully written. I picked it up for a quick look and couldn't put it down. Not since Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* have I read such a mesmerizing confluence of personal experience and formal thought."

Robert Richardson, author of *Henry David Thoreau: The Life of A Mind* "John Kaag is the closest thing we have to William James: a breathtakingly good prose stylist; philosophically and psychologically courageous, inventive and inspiring; ruthlessly honest; unsparing about the difficulties of love, intimacy and experience; and above all, human, in the most valuable and moral sense of the word."

Clancy Martin "John Kaag's *American Philosophy: A Love Story* is one of the most entertaining guides to philosophical inquiry to come along in decades. Stumbling on the library of a long-forgotten Harvard professor abandoned on the great man's country estate, John Kaag examines the trove and finds himself communing with the likes of William James, Josiah Royce, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Ideas may be Kaag's first love, but they bring him a flesh-and-blood Beatrice in this open-hearted account of a young man's second chance at a sentimental education."

Megan Marshall Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Margaret Fuller: A New American Life* "Is life worth living? This is the age-old but forever timely question at the center of this remarkable and daring memoir. Part history of American philosophy, part personal narrative, *American Philosophy:*

A Love Story, takes us deeply into that 'epic love affair with wisdom' that is philosophy, but it does so through the wonderfully intimate lens of the author himself, a young and accomplished philosopher who has summoned the nerve to expose his flaws, his failures, his deepest doubts about it all, a rare act of creative courage and generosity that leads us to where the heart of true philosophy lies: to a deep and abiding sense of wonder. This is an absolutely stellar memoir."

—Andre Dubus III

John Kaag is a professor of philosophy at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell. He is the author of *Idealism, Pragmatism, and Feminism* and *Thinking Through the Imagination*. His writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and many other publications. He lives outside Boston with his wife and daughter.

This was an interesting introduction to 19th-century American philosophy, told partly via biography. I learned about people of whom I'd never heard, got additional details on people that I knew, and got to see a bit of the arc of development of these ideas. However, this just was not quite as well-done as in Sarah Bakewell's works. The philosophers themselves never become fully fleshed characters, their lives seem pretty dull, their ideas too ethereal, and the stakes too unimportant. The frame of using his own love life as a way through each of the philosophers got a bit tedious by the end and at times even seemed too contrived. I'm also really annoyed that although he quotes from the philosophers, he gives absolutely no citations, so the reader cannot follow up on a single idea.

I understand what the author was attempting to communicate but, nevertheless, the book was somewhat disappointing because it was really short on serious philosophical ideas. Too much attention was given to Emerson and not enough to early and later 20th century philosophers at Harvard and elsewhere despite some attention to Peirce and James.

I admittedly took a couple of classes with John Kaag in college. In those classes, I was challenged to think differently from my four years as an engineering student. His classes were thought provoking and immensely interactive. I heard that he wrote a book that got some positive recognition, and jumped at the chance to read it. I would say this book has three different aspects to it. He clearly spent a great amount of time understanding the background of all of the philosophers he quotes throughout the book, and it allows you to begin to understand them and where they were

coming from when reading some of their passages. It also shines a light on Kaags struggle with trying to come to some sort of idea about what life is and why it's worth living, as many of us also do. To keep things interesting there is the love story aspect as well that keeps you excited about what is to come. In the end, Kaags book was quite the experience to read. It was helpful for him to sort of guide us through some of the historical events that took place over the years within the elite philosophical players.

This is a terrific book, written with zest and insight. Anyone who has been delighted by Sarah Bakewells *How To Live* on Montaigne will find his book a worthy companion. John Kaag manages adroitly to weave much together. Yes, the book brings us in contact with some of the giants of American philosophy: Emerson, William James, Charles Peirce, and Josiah Royce. And from them we get doses of insight and wisdom aplenty. At the center of this book, however, are others. The private library of the once-famous Harvard philosopher Ernest Hocking is the setting for the story, as the author fondly works his way through the book collection and discovers, in the process, the fascinating lives of Hocking and his wife, Agnes. Making appearances in this book are such well-known figures as Robert Frost, Pearl S. Buck, and Gabriel Marcel. They, along with Hocking and other classic American philosophers, grappled with the meaning of life, with what makes a life significant. We follow Kaag as he elucidates their perspectives with careful fluency, attentive of strengths but cognizant of stumbles. He ends up trying to bridge the best of pragmatism and existentialism, a worthy endeavor. While Sartre often came up short, as Kaag notes, in the human dimension of solidarity (at least in his early work), Simone de Beauvoir fared much better, especially in her *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. One other strand needs to be noted. In this book, Kaags own life stands revealed, in a manner that is never cloying or disruptive. Like the philosophers with whom he spends his time, he is oftentimes a man adrift, searching, unwilling to settle for clichéd thought and existence. He is a person of parts, present but not obtrusive. We come to appreciate his journey and rejoice in its, if not final, then present path. This book will be of interest to anyone thinking about the essential problems of philosophy and life.

This is an unusual book, a blend of autobiography and intellectual history, which tells the story of how the author found his professional footing and love through exploring, with his colleague Carol Haye, William Ernest Hockings fabulous library, tucked away on a remote farm in the mountains of New Hampshire. While coming

across book after rare book, Kaag delivers accessible mini-lectures on the author or previous owner of the book. The theme of the book is to throw light on the personal lives of the classical American philosophers from Emerson to Hocking, and to show how their thoughts were embedded in American culture and society of their time. Along the way Kaag also shows how his growing appreciation of classical American philosophy allows him to work his own way through a serious amount of existential angst, to arrive at a new outlook on life. Kaag throughout pays detailed attention to his physical surroundings, evidently a way of reminding us that the philosophers of the past - notably William James - were embedded in a physical environment as well as a social one, and that the experience of hiking mountain trails, as James had done, contributes importantly to our understanding of James's philosophical thoughts. The writing is throughout lively, a regular page-turner. The book is written for the general reader, without any scholarly apparatus, yet I found I learned a great deal from it.

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