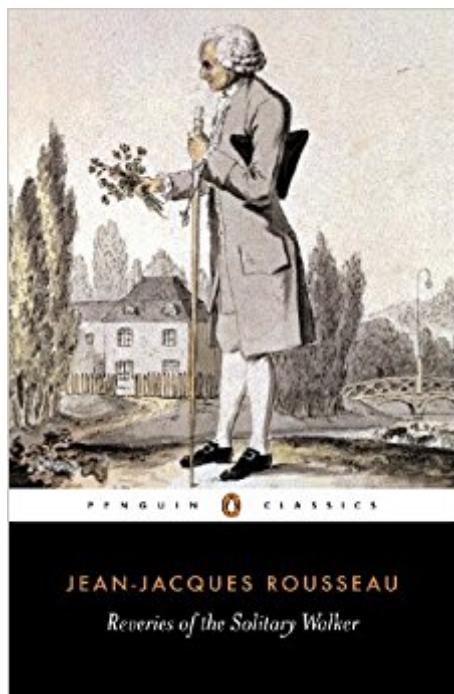


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Reveries Of The Solitary Walker (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

Ten meditations written in the two years before Rousseau's death in 1778 provide an excellent introduction to the thinker's complex world, expressing in its full force the agony of isolation and alienation. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

Text: English, French (translation)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) is the author of numerous political and philosophical texts as well as entries on music for Diderot's *Encyclopédie* and the novels *La nouvelle Héloïse* and *Julie*.

The Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4, 1776. On July 2, 1778, barely two years into the American Revolution, Jean-Jacques Rousseau died of a stroke while walking in the woods at Ermenonville, France. *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1776-1778) was Rousseau's last book,

a work that was clearly not quite finished at the time of his death. It is a series of ten essays, loosely constructed around the theme of walking around Paris and other parts of the countryside. The essays are titled "First Walk," "Second Walk," "Third Walk," and so on. The reader might expect a somewhat Romantic view of Nature by this Romantic philosopher. And finally, in the middle of the book, in the Fifth Walk, there it is: a description of the Island of St. Pierre: The shores of the Lake of Bienn are wilder and more romantic than those of Lake Geneva, since the rocks and woods come closer to the water, but they are no less pleasing. There may be fewer ploughed fields and vineyards, fewer towns and houses, but there is more natural greenery and there are more meadows and secluded spots shaded by woodlands, more frequent and dramatic changes of scenery. (81) Rousseau and Therese Le Vasseur spent only two months on the island, "but I could have spent two years, two centuries and all eternity there without a moment's boredom" (82-83). There "the soul can find a resting-place secure enough to establish itself and concentrate its entire being there" (88). Rousseau underwent a genuine emotional bonding with Nature. In short, the island is a symbol of the thing in Nature that Rousseau would most like to grasp: a peaceful refuge. Unfortunately, by this time in his life, that aspect of Nature is usually beyond Rousseau's reach. For Rousseau is a troubled man: Happiness is a lasting state which does not seem to be made for man in this world. Everything here on earth is in a continual flux which allows nothing to assume any constant form. All things change round about us, we ourselves change, and no one can be sure of loving tomorrow what he loves today. All our plans of happiness in this life are therefore empty dreams. (137) The Reveries contain a greater percentage of complaints than they do Naturalistic idylls. Why is Rousseau so unhappy in his sixties? The reasons are complicated. For one thing, he has had enemies and has suffered persecution for his ideas from political and religious enemies over the years. That abuse takes its toll after a while. Rousseau also acknowledges that his own actions may have made him a lightning rod for trouble on many occasions: I lurched from fault to fault, error to error, and folly to folly, my imprudent behavior provided those who control my fate with weapons which they have most skilfully used to settle my destiny irrevocably. (28) There was a third source of Rousseau's unhappiness, however-- a psychological one. For Rousseau suffered from delusions of persecution throughout a large portion of his adult life. After David Hume had invited Rousseau to England to escape the wrath of French and Swiss authorities in the wake of the publication of his books Emile and On Social Contract (both 1762), Rousseau's increasing paranoia caused him to imagine that Hume (that most mild-mannered of all philosophers) was "plotting against him". He broke with Hume, and left England for continental Europe. For some time afterward, Rousseau feared that Hume would hunt him down. By 1776, while Rousseau had periods

of rationality and lucidity, his mental illness was also very pronounced. His erratic behavior was noticed by many observers. He had withdrawn from contact with large groups of people. Throughout the *Reveries*, Rousseau consistently complains of people plotting against him. The reader must use a bit of judgement in evaluating such passages. When Rousseau recollects a mob stoning his house in Switzerland, he is talking about a real-life event when people *were* plotting against him. When Rousseau says that doctors and members of the religious order of Oratorians are among his persecutors, I think that we can take this to be a notion purely in the imagination of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In a similar vein, when Rousseau writes about spies following him about in the streets of Paris, we can probably take this with a grain of salt. By 1776, there were no active political enemies of Rousseau taking an interest in him. It seems pertinent to ask the question: Suppose Rousseau had lived a bit longer and written a few more essays. Would he have been more at peace? There are signs that he might have been. He had rediscovered the joys of studying botany (and he takes great pains to tell us why other scientific studies will not do for him). And while he professed to hold authors and literature in disdain, he admitted his great love of Plutarch. Who knows what other writers he might have embraced in future essays? And in the last essay, he recollected his great love for Madame de Warens. Yes, there were signs that Nature was providing him some comfort. The *Reveries* is not really a great book. It doesn't have the stature of *Emile*, *On Social Contract*, or *The Confessions* (completed 1770). But it is an oddly engaging little book that captures the portrait of a brilliant, greatly flawed, and-- in the end-- strangely sympathetic man. Like the character in the Bob Dylan song, he had been through some stormy times and now wanted "to go where it's quiet".

Aristotle said that, in order to lead a solitary life, one would have to be either an animal or a god. Nietzsche added a third alternative: one would have to be a philosopher. The "Reveries" is closely followed by the "Confessions" as my favourite of Rousseau's writings. In it, Rousseau gives reason to doubt that he himself has achieved real solitude in his life (and not just loneliness). It is nevertheless my favourite because it is here that Rousseau presents solitude, not as an escape from the world, but as the most philosophical way of embracing it and of living in it.

When I read Rousseau's 'Confessions' I admired the man so much. But two issues compromised my view of him. Firstly his report of assigning his five children to the Foundling Hospital soon after birth - what a thing to do (and if he had investigated that prospect he would surely have realised that would have been as bad for them as any shortcomings he saw in what he could provide) - and what

a thing to impose on his partner! Secondly was the negative view he had of people. Maybe some were against him, but somehow what he wrote didn't really convince me. In Peter France's introduction to his translation he suggests that some historians have wondered if Rousseau actually did have children - something I wondered about in my review. Am I making too much of this? In these ten reveries the matter of the children does recur. And in one of them he discusses what it means to tell lies - not without real insight - and how it can be justifiable. In the same breath he talks about his children. Perhaps we can draw our own conclusions. Something is not quite right for me here - the thinking processes of one of the world's great thinkers - at least as he committed them to paper. But strangely, after reading the reveries I am less convinced that there were, in fact, no children. These reveries 'scared' me a bit - there was a lot of what I see for myself as I get old - and I'm not ready for that yet! But I did enjoy Rousseau's puzzles, his anecdotes, his travel tales.

Although regarded as the unsocial misanthropist, it took J.J. Rousseau complete ostracism from society to understand what completes him and creates constant fulfilment in his soul. With eloquent lyrics that beautifully portray his sincere sentiments, this collection of contemplations shows the self-searching rewards evident in solitude and tranquility. His lingering frustration and distrust with humanity hovers over every word, yet it doesn't overshadow the wisdom with which the book permeates. For anyone looking to search deeper within themselves, this book offers great insight to what may help aid in that path for enlightenment.

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