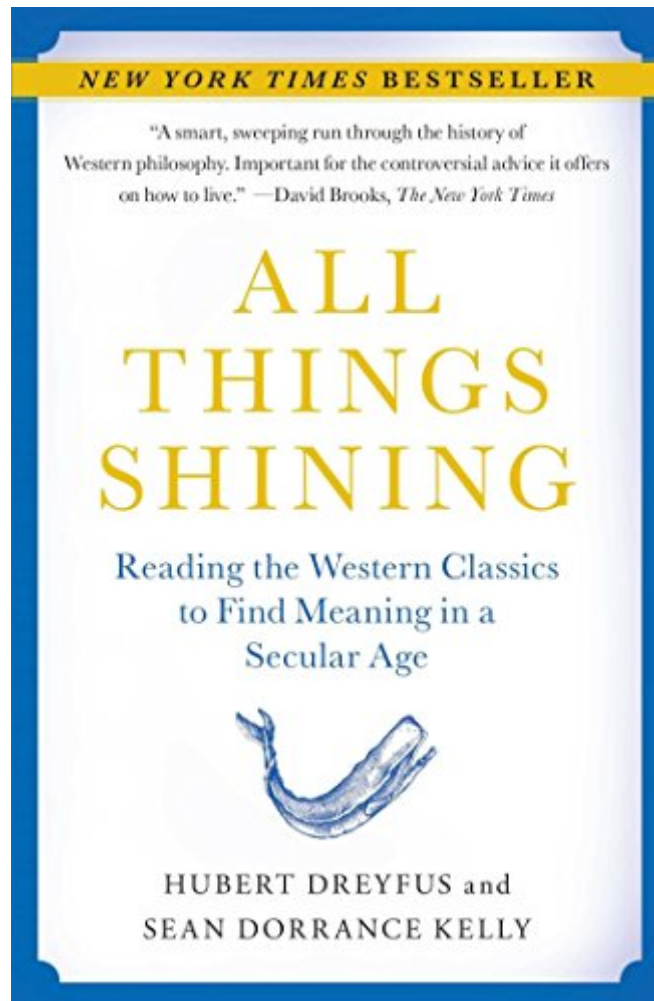


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All Things Shining: Reading The Western Classics To Find Meaning In A Secular Age



Synopsis

In unrelenting flow of choices confronts us at nearly every moment of our lives, and yet our culture offers us no clear way to choose. This predicament seems inevitable, but in fact it's quite new. In medieval Europe, God's calling was a grounding force. In ancient Greece, a whole pantheon of shining gods stood ready to draw an appropriate action out of you. Like an athlete in a zone, you were called to a harmonious attunement with the world, so absorbed in it that you couldn't make a wrong choice. If our culture no longer takes for granted a belief in God, can we nevertheless get in touch with the Homeric moods of wonder and gratitude, and be guided by the meanings they reveal? *All Things Shining* says we can. Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly illuminate some of the greatest works of the West to reveal how we have lost our passionate engagement with and responsiveness to the world. Their journey takes us from the wonder and openness of Homer's polytheism to the monotheism of Dante; from the autonomy of Kant to the multiple worlds of Melville; and, finally, to the spiritual difficulties evoked by modern authors such as David Foster Wallace and Elizabeth Gilbert. Dreyfus, a philosopher at the University of California, Berkeley, for forty years, is an original thinker who finds in the classic texts of our culture a new relevance for people's everyday lives. His lively, thought-provoking lectures have earned him a podcast audience that often reaches the iTunesU Top 40. Kelly, chair of the philosophy department at Harvard University, is an eloquent new voice whose sensitivity to the sadness of the culture and to what remains of the wonder and gratitude that could chase it away captures a generation adrift. Re-envisioning modern spiritual life through their examination of literature, philosophy, and religious testimony, Dreyfus and Kelly unearth ancient sources of meaning, and teach us how to rediscover the sacred, shining things that surround us every day. This book will change the way we understand our culture, our history, our sacred practices, and ourselves. It offers a new and very old way to celebrate and be grateful for our existence in the modern world.

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Customer Reviews

If you cannot imagine enjoying, or even finding wise counsel, in a book recommending a return to something like polytheism, you are not alone. I have difficulty enough contending with the lingering specter of monotheism: one god, or, more precisely, the loss of any sense of one God, is heartache enough. But something about King Menelaus's admiration for his wife Helen has always intrigued me. At a feast in honor of Telemachus, Odysseus's son, Menelaus listens with rapt appreciation as his wife, Helen, the very Helen of Troy, recounts her passionate embrace of Paris, and her flight to Troy; she left Menelaus and their young child for this most famous of affairs. A decade-long war was fought to get her back. Now she is sitting beside Menelaus later in life recounting those days devoted to her passion? And he sits by admiring? I've read the Odyssey many times, and I have always stubbed my toe on this scene. Shouldn't Menelaus react in rage? And why no shame from Helen? The two of them seem to exult in the memory of this costly betrayal. I have shaken my head at this passage, regarding it as a bizarre prelude to the main event, Odysseus's struggle to return home. *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age*, by Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, opened my eyes. I was using the wrong standard to evaluate Helen's conduct: she swooned for Paris not as an act of betrayal to Menelaus, but because she had responded to Aphrodite's mood, eros. Paris shone, in her eyes, and those eyes were not beclouded with wayward lust, a Christian gloss. She responded to something stirring within and accessible to all, if they would but listen: even in our time we celebrate the sweetest passion.

"All Things Shining" is a book written by two philosophers, for a general audience. While there is textual analysis and criticism, it is in service of a goal that the authors feel should have very broad appeal in our secular and nihilistic age: "The world used to be in its various forms, a world of sacred,

shining things. The shining things now seem far away. This book is intended to bring them close once more. [. . .] Anyone who wants to lure back the shining things, to uncover the wonder we were once capable of experiencing, and to reveal a world that sometimes calls forth such a mood; anyone who is done with indecision and waiting, with expressionlessness and lostness and sadness and angst, and who is ready for whatever it is that comes next; anyone with hope instead of despair, or anyone with despair that they would like to leave behind, can find something worthwhile in the pages ahead. Or at least that is what we intend. The authors goal, in short, is to clear a path by which people can lure back the "merry May-day gods of old"--the sacred shining things--in order that they may thereby lead intense and meaningful lives, as the ancient Greeks once did. However, they are not interested in trying to recover anything supernatural; they are not, for example, interested in bringing back belief in a literally existing, supernatural Greek Goddess named "Aphrodite". They are instead interested in something that might be called a mood, or an attunement, that opens one to the world, and to a sacred dimension that once may have been understood as, and represented by a god or goddess: the erotic dimension and that which attunes one to it, being that which was once called "Aphrodite"; the aggressive, war-like dimension "Ares"; and so on.

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