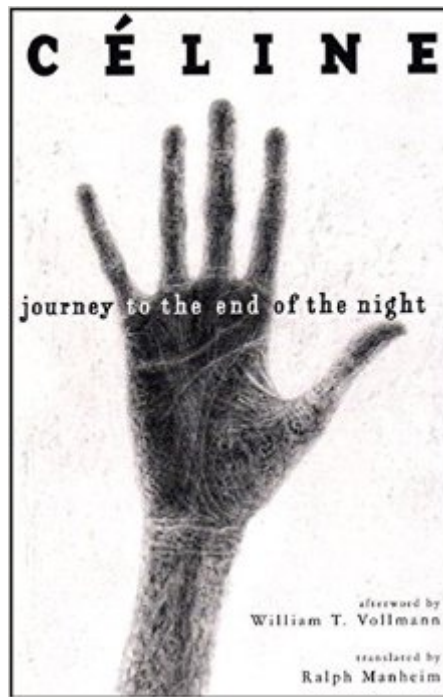


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Journey To The End Of The Night



Synopsis

The dark side of *On the Road*: instead of seeking kicks, the French narrator travels the globe to find an ever deeper disgust for life. Louis-Ferdinand Celine's revulsion and anger at what he considered the idiocy and hypocrisy of society explodes from nearly every page of this novel. Filled with slang and obscenities and written in raw, colloquial language, *Journey to the End of the Night* is a literary symphony of violence, cruelty and obscene nihilism. This book shocked most critics when it was first published in France in 1932, but quickly became a success with the reading public in Europe, and later in America where it was first published by New Directions in 1952. The story of the improbable yet convincingly described travels of the petit-bourgeois (and largely autobiographical) antihero, Bardamu, from the trenches of World War I, to the African jungle, to New York and Detroit, and finally to life as a failed doctor in Paris, takes the readers by the scruff and hurtles them toward the novel's inevitable, sad conclusion.

Book Information

Paperback: 464 pages

Publisher: New Directions; Reprint edition (May 17, 2006)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 9780811216548

ISBN-13: 978-0811216548

ASIN: 0811216543

Product Dimensions: 5.3 x 1.4 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (163 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

For the uninitiated, *Journey to the End of the Night* is a 450-page chronicle of anger, bitterness, hopelessness, despair, disillusionment, and resignation. It is one of the most pessimistic, negative books ever written. It addresses almost every base and negative aspect of the human experience: warfare, cowardice, lies, corruption, betrayal, slavery, manipulation, exploitation, perversion, persecution, cheating, greed, sickness, loneliness, madness, lust, gossip, abortion, disease, vengeance, and murder. In a book that explodes with adjectives, there is hardly a cheerful word to

be found. But don't let that stop you from reading it. It is also a weird and wonderfully written mix of prose, philosophy, rant, and slang. At times it is hilarious. It is also sad, moving, and deeply insightful. Celine's voice is unique, and his dark vision changed the face of twentieth century literature. True to its title, the book is a metaphorical journey into the dark side of humanity. It doesn't really have a plot. In a nutshell, it follows Ferdinand Bardamu (who is telling the story), who joins the army on a whim, entering World War I. The fear and madness of his war experiences leave him shell-shocked. He spends the remainder of the war convalescing in a hospital, where he spends his time avoiding the front, laying nurses, and pulling himself together. After the war, he yearns to escape, so he travels to the French African colonies to run a trading post deep in the jungle. There, he contracts malaria and is sold into slavery by a Portuguese priest, only to be dumped in a quarantine facility in New York. He eventually winds up in Detroit, where he works a dead-end factory job at Ford and falls in love with a prostitute. Restless, he leaves his love behind and returns to France.

Celine was a WWI veteran, sometimes discontented vagabond, and qualified but barely surviving Doctor/Physician who wrote one of the greatest novels of the 20th Western century. This is it. It's like a bomb hitting you on every page. The level of pessimism, cynicism, black humor, and its concomitant in the bargain--unflinching honesty--had never been equaled before in literature & few have matched it since. By his example, he inspired Henry Miller, Philip Roth, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jack Kerouac & many other luminaries to write in a similar no-holds-barred style. But as they say, the original is always the best & Celine was an original. No less a literary master and 'black satirist' than Nabokov himself has called Celine nothing but a second-rater; but even if you agree with that assesment of Celine's purely literary skills, you have to give credit to the guy for originating the no-nonsense style which made possible an artistically illuminating foray of unprecedented brutal honesty into the seedier aspects of life. During the second World War, Celine wrote and distributed anti-semitic pamphlets and was ardently pro-Nazi and pro-German occupation of France. A lot of people couldn't understand how such an indisputably important artist could also be a Fascist sympathizer. Fascism & art didn't go together in their minds (especially since most of the literati in France who had liked Celine's novels were either strong lefists and/or pro-USSR Communists). Celine had to live in exile for many years as a result of this war-time pro-fascist business, and never regained the scary perfection of form, the shattering style evident on every page of "Journey" (and its less impressive but still amazing follow-up "Death On the Installment Plan").

I do not see Ralph Manheim's new translation of Celine's "Journey to the End of the Night" (New Directions) as an improvement over John H.P. Marks's fine 1934 version, I see it as more of a refinement of the times, read both of them if you can. It is good to see Celine being brought back to the public's attention. For all his paranoia and the questions raised by the anti-Semitic pamphlets he wrote at the time of World War II, Celine remains one of the great European novelists of the century, the only logical successor, one might say, to Dostoyevsky. This is a powerful book not for the weak at heart, it is damaging to all your senses and engulfs you in a wonderful passion for true, great literature. In 1932, with "Journey to the End of the Night," Celine snatched French fiction from the manicured hands of Gide and Proust and gave it an elementary gusto, a savage bite it had hardly known since Rabelais. Four years later, with "Death on the Installment Plan," he had already snarled and elbowed his way into the pantheon. "Journey" is a picaresque novel whose protagonist fights in World War I, works in Africa, travels to the United States and returns to Paris to become a doctor. An impoverished doctor in a Paris slum like his antihero Ferdinand, Celine clearly announced his position when he wrote this fantastic book, he was "against all". While Cervantes, the other great picaresque novelist, mourned the death of chivalry, Celine's subject was the death of civility. As a slum doctor, he had heard every kind of cry of pain, anger and despair; you can find them all in his novels, mixed with his own archetypally French humor and transmogrified by a style of exalted disgust.

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