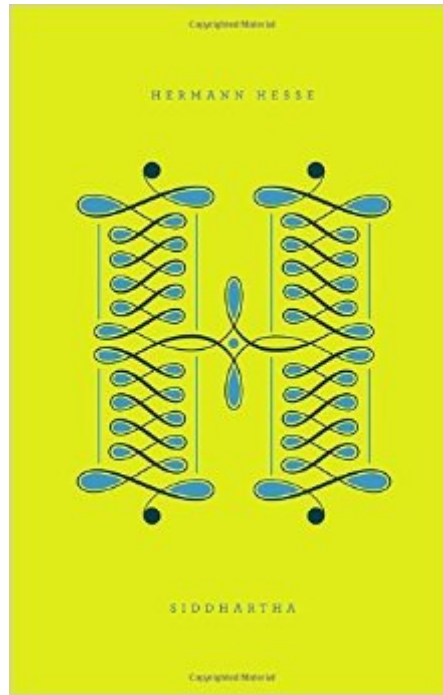


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Siddhartha (Penguin Drop Caps)



Synopsis

From A to Z, the Penguin Drop Caps series collects 26 unique hardcovers featuring cover art by Jessica Hische. It all begins with a letter. Fall in love with Penguin Drop Caps, a new series of twenty-six collectible and hardcover editions, each with a type cover showcasing a gorgeously illustrated letter of the alphabet. In a design collaboration between Jessica Hische and Penguin Art Director Paul Buckley, the series features unique cover art by Hische, a superstar in the world of type design and illustration, whose work has appeared everywhere from Tiffany & Co. to Wes Anderson's recent film *Moonrise Kingdom* to Penguin's own bestsellers *Committed* and *Rules of Civility*. With exclusive designs that have never before appeared on Hische's hugely popular Daily Drop Cap blog, the Penguin Drop Caps series launches with six perennial favorites to give as elegant gifts, or to showcase on your own shelves.

H is for Hesse. A young Brahmin named Siddhartha searches for ultimate reality after meeting with the Buddha. His quest takes him from a life of decadence to asceticism, from the illusory joys of sensual love with a beautiful courtesan, and of wealth and fame, to the painful struggles with his son and the ultimate wisdom of renunciation. Integrating Eastern and Western spiritual traditions with psychoanalysis and philosophy, written with a deep and moving empathy for humanity, Herman Hesse's strangely simple Siddhartha is perhaps the most important and compelling moral allegory the troubled twentieth century ever produced.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Siddhartha is both a western and eastern tale. Though it was written by a westerner, it has the soul and power of an ancient eastern myth. It is at once a timeless story and one that the reader will wish to continually revisit at different phases in his or her life. Hesse does a remarkable job in capturing the tone, cadence and moral complexity of ancient Indian religious stories. His "revisionist" take on the life of Buddha is at once fresh and familiar to anyone who has read the sermons of the Buddha or who has studied ancient Hinduism and Buddhism. The themes of self-doubt, denial, asceticism and spiritual rejuvenation are both profoundly and cleverly handled in Hesse's superb narrative. In many ways, this is a book that serves as a summation, and improvement on, all of the religious texts one has read. The fictional aspect allows Hesse to interweave common literary devices, such as heroic journeys and coming-of-age revelations, to make the text, as a whole, much stronger and more impacting than a dry sermon. Siddhartha's narrative works as a cycle, with each chapter offering commentary on the vices and victories of mankind and the ultimate futility of the material world. Like the river that Siddhartha comes to love, the book flows, and never missteps or hesitates in reaching remarkable insights into the nature and philosophy of humanity. This is a book that will stay with the reader for a lifetime. Its simple structure belies a greater complexity; be sure that this book leaves the reader with no easy answers, but it is sure to inspire thought and joy. *A note on translations:-For readability, flow and consistency, I find the Joachim Neugroschel translation to be the best of the many options. It never feels forced or awkward and the introduction by Ralph Freedman is also a wonderful asset to understanding the importance of the story. Neugroschel seems to best capture the ebbing German of Hesse's original, while also capturing the tone of an Indian sermon.-The Sherab Chodzin Kohn translation is also well-done, though I find it slightly overstated in certain parts.-The oldest translation, by Hilda Rosner, is the most commonly available version, though I find it to be clunky, awkward and halting. Avoid it, if possible.-A newer translation by Susan Bernofsky has received good reviews, but I have yet to read it.-Finally, two low-grade translations by Applebaum and Edwards should be avoided.

Maybe I'm a bit slow on the uptake, but when I first saw the Drop Cap series I was confused about what the point was. In case you're wondering too, it's a handsome way to organize your library--yes, your physical library (you'll notice no digital edition here.) And the assumption is to choose books that every reader would want in their library. Now that I get it, it's a clever idea well executed. That said, I have some doubts about some of the Penguin choices for letters, but NOT for this book.

Siddhartha is one of many favorite books of all time. I have read or listened to it at least three times.

Happily, Penguin has chosen an excellent translation, which flows well, is consistent, lyrical, and gets the wisdom of Hesse's words. I haven't read all the translations, but I'm happy to report Joachim Neugroschel's as an excellent one. So if you're looking to organize your library in a fun way or don't own a copy of Siddhartha, this is an excellent edition to get. And if not this edition, if you haven't already, do yourself a favor and read Siddhartha.

Seriously, if you're gonna read Siddhartha, this is certainly the edition to get -- the slightly oversized Penguin Classics one. It features a useful (35-page!) introduction by Ralph Freedman, which includes suggestions for further reading. The translation by Joachim Neugroschel -- a new one -- also reads swiftly and naturally. There are no footnotes for the text itself, however.

A couple of years ago my nephew encouraged me to read Siddhartha. I kept putting it off until last week when I finally read the book, given to me as a gift. I now know why it's considered a classic in the genre of books about spiritual discovery. I expected it to be daunting for some reason -- as though it would be too Buddhisty for me. But it ended up being very accessible, and written in a simple, straightforward way. It's the story of the young Nepalese boy Siddhartha, who decides to leave his family and home to become a "samana" or wandering ascetic. He sets out with his best friend Govinda into this life of renunciation and contemplation, and when they meet the actual Buddha guy, Govinda's zeal is strengthened, while Siddhartha begins to have second thoughts about it all. He questions some of the finer points of the Buddha's teachings -- primarily the seeming contradiction of how the alleged unity of all things is coupled with the need to renounce most of these things in order to reach inner wholeness or "nirvana". So the boys part ways at this juncture, and Siddhartha sets out on his quest, freestyle. Soon he meets the perfect-10 courtesan Kamala, the most beautiful woman he has ever seen. Need I say more? This radically adjusts some of his former thoughts about sexual abstinence, among other things. Like wealth. Success. Fine clothes, booze, etc. Mostly to pay for his dealings with Kamala, he acquires wealth, discovering a special avarice for gambling. But again, disillusionment sets in. Satiated with his experience of worldliness, [or "samsara"] he decides to leave once again on a deeper quest, but by now he loves Kamala, and in the final sentence of one chapter the author drops this little nugget of info: After a time she realized that she was pregnant from her last meeting with Siddhartha. Oh, oh! He slipped one past the goalie there! But he's gone now, and unaware of his impending progeny. These latter portions of the book have Siddhartha meeting the ferryman Vesudeva -- a man who has never set off on any specific personal pilgrimage per se, yet seems much wiser regarding deeply spiritual matters, than

Siddhartha is. Sid learns a lot from Vesudeva. Meanwhile, Kamala has undergone a transformation of sorts, as well. Together with her son, she sets off to see the Buddha, but on the way, tragedy strikes. A venomous snake bites her just as she is re-united with the father of her child, and Siddhartha takes custody of the near-orphaned boy. What follows is true genius in story-telling, really, because Siddhartha finds that he cannot force the spiritual values he has learned throughout his life, onto this young boy. The very lesson it has taken him a lifetime to learn, namely that wisdom cannot be imparted through teachings of any kind, is worked out in a practical way with his son. The boy himself flees, and Siddhartha is heart-broken. For me, the message of the book came through loud and clear -- and I would phrase it thus, in the following extremely long sentence: Whatever depth of spirituality we ever achieve in this life, whatever spiritual connection we ever attain between ourselves and the world we live in, must be arrived at on a profoundly individual and experiential level, and will suffer deficiencies if merely the result of adherence to second-hand teachings or blind devotion to imparted doctrine. Far be it from me to presume upon the intentions of a great author, but if this is what Hermann Hesse set out to say back in 1922 when he wrote Siddhartha, he succeeded in the case of this reader.

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