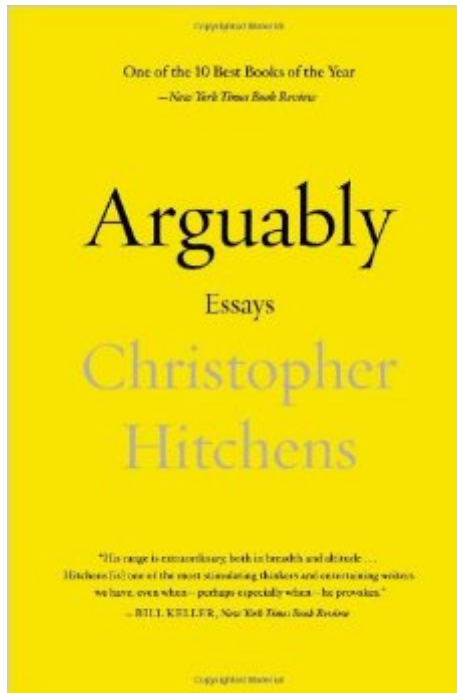


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Arguably: Essays By Christopher Hitchens



Synopsis

"All first-rate criticism first defines what we are confronting," the late, great jazz critic Whitney Balliett once wrote. By that measure, the essays of Christopher Hitchens are in the first tier. For nearly four decades, Hitchens has been telling us, in pitch-perfect prose, what we confront when we grapple with first principles-the principles of reason and tolerance and skepticism that define and inform the foundations of our civilization-principles that, to endure, must be defended anew by every generation. "A short list of the greatest living conversationalists in English," said *The Economist*, "would probably have to include Christopher Hitchens, Sir Patrick Leigh-Fermor, and Sir Tom Stoppard. Great brilliance, fantastic powers of recall, and quick wit are clearly valuable in sustaining conversation at these cosmic levels. Charm may be helpful, too." Hitchens-who staunchly declines all offers of knighthood-hereby invites you to take a seat at a democratic conversation, to be engaged, and to be reasoned with. His knowledge is formidable, an encyclopedic treasure, and yet one has the feeling, reading him, of hearing a person thinking out loud, following the inexorable logic of his thought, wherever it might lead, unafraid to expose fraudulence, denounce injustice, and excoriate hypocrisy. Legions of readers, admirers and detractors alike, have learned to read Hitchens with something approaching awe at his felicity of language, the oxygen in every sentence, the enviable wit and his readiness, even eagerness, to fight a foe or mount the ramparts. Here, he supplies fresh perceptions of such figures as varied as Charles Dickens, Karl Marx, Rebecca West, George Orwell, J.G. Ballard, and Philip Larkin are matched in brilliance by his pungent discussions and intrepid observations, gathered from a lifetime of traveling and reporting from such destinations as Iran, China, and Pakistan. Hitchens's directness, elegance, lightly carried erudition, critical and psychological insight, humor, and sympathy-applied as they are here to a dazzling variety of subjects-all set a standard for the essayist that has rarely been matched in our time. What emerges from this indispensable volume is an intellectual self-portrait of a writer with an exemplary steadiness of purpose and a love affair with the delights and seductions of the English language, a man anchored in a profound and humane vision of the human longing for reason and justice.

Book Information

Paperback: 816 pages

Publisher: Twelve; Reprint edition (September 4, 2012)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1455502782

ISBN-13: 978-1455502783

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1.5 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (246 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #28,477 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #132 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > Essays & Correspondence > Essays](#) #2869 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > Literary](#)

Customer Reviews

I should begin by admitting that I just received this book today; however, as a longtime fan of Hitch's work, I've already read the majority of these essays, so I feel confident in writing this review now. I pre-ordered this book months ago, but until today I didn't know which of his essays would be included. I'm absolutely thrilled by the final product. To begin with, it's massive - at nearly 800 pages, it's larger than "God Is Not Great" and "Hitch-22" combined. The essays are sorted into 6 sections, and I'll cover each of them in some detail below. "All American" focuses on the history, policies, and distinguished figures of the United States. It appears to be sorted chronologically; beginning with essays on Jefferson and Franklin, continuing through subjects like John Brown and Lincoln, JFK, John Updike, and Gore Vidal, and then closing with essays on modern issues like capital punishment and atheism in the modern military. "Eclectic Affinities" includes Hitchens' best essays on notable literary figures. There are about 30 essays here, covering everything from Karl Marx, to Graham Greene, to George Orwell, to JK Rowling. "Amusements, Annoyances, and Disappointments" is relatively short, with only 8 essays. However, these are some of Hitch's most famous and controversial personal remarks, including the infamous "Why Women Aren't Funny" and his charming "New Commandments". "Offshore Accounts" primarily deals with modern political conflicts. It includes his experience with waterboarding, his admiration for Kurdistan, and his encyclopedic knowledge of current politics. This is probably the most notable section of the book, and also one of the longest. "Legacies of Totalitarianism" takes us back to earlier conflicts, focusing especially on the first half of the last century. The essays here are mostly based on specific people, and the legacies that endured long after they did. "Words' Worth" covers Hitchens' essays on language and culture. The earlier sections focused on Hitch as a political essayist, but this section closes the book with Hitch as a charming raconteur. More than the other sections, it allows Hitch to be more personal and candid, and that allows his inimitable writing style and witty humor to take center stage. Over the past several years, Hitchens has been famous primarily for his antitheism. But as powerful and important as that is, I think it tends to downplay just how broad his career has been. I actually consider this book a great companion piece to his memoirs. As you look over the

comprehensive nature of the combined essays, you can't help but admire the life Hitchens has led. As he puts it, he "burned the candle at both ends, and it gave a lovely light." This book, almost as much as "Hitch-22", is evidence of that. My one small disappointment is that the book focuses almost exclusively on essays written relatively recently. I'm guessing this has a lot to do with copyright entanglements, but I would like to have seen more of his older works. His recent essays are all easily available online, and I was hoping for a bit more from past archives. Having said that, I can also see the benefit of relying on the recent works, as they give a very fresh, updated look at the world. In fact, this book has instantly become my "go to" recommendation for people saying they want to be more involved in current events. It's long enough to be comprehensive, but the essay format allows it to be concise as well. And even though most of this material is available free online, it's definitely worth owning this archive of his most notable short works. I love the structure and layout of the essays, and the index is marvelous. It's a wonderful book for any fan of Christopher Hitchens, as well as anyone interested in politics, history, and culture.

Christopher Hitchens has been told he hasn't much time to live, so with whatever time he does have left he gives us *Arguably*, a book of essays, for what may be his final effort. And if by chance you haven't ever read Mr. Hitchens and would like one book to stand as a proxy for his life's work, let it be this. *Arguably* is a compendium of short brilliant gems, intended for either the lay or the professional reader, that comes together to form a thesis about the variations on human activity put together by a literary descendent of Emerson, H.L. Mencken and Paul Goodman. No human activity on any subject is too small to warrant his attention. Hitchens has the ability to present the past in such a way as to leave the general reader exclaiming "shouldn't this be the way we handle the present?" For example, in the essay *Jefferson Versus The Muslim Pirates*, there is not a single mention of 21st century pirates operating out of motherships, and yet every reader will make a connection between the Barbary pirates and our current circumstances. His ability to explain the past happens just outside the mothership of current events and he leaves it to the reader to connect the two. Other essays reduce to a simplicity that have the reader wondering, in the case of a nation trafficking, Hitchens believes, in human bondage like North Korea, why immediate international pressure of the kind that ended apartheid in South Africa isn't brought to bear to end the regime of Kim Jung-il. On the other hand, if you thought *The Big Sleep* had a complicated plot, (4 viewings to resolve what Eddie Mars had on Lauren Bacall) you may be dazed and confused by his review of the film *The Baader Meinhof Complex*, although even that sorts out understandably: Nazi fascism versus Stalinist communism. There are some essays, like *Vietnam Syndrome*, where Hitchens

abandons all mental and literary gymnastics in favor of the E.M. Forester axiom: only connect. He believes the legacy of environmental poisoning there is so dire a story that he begs for the reader's attention and is willing to make presentations as graphic as they are disturbing to get it. In literary matters, he can lift the veil of contemporary hype, and with a few deft strokes penetrate an entire phenomena (Stieg Larsson) or he can debunk the courtly mannerisms of one of the world's greatest authors (John Updike). Skip the essay on Edward Said. It's overly cerebral; proceed instead to *The Swastika And The Cedar* which has an action angle that is cinemagraphic. I have Matt Damon playing Hitchens, the journalist who instigates his own beating by Syrian bullies. This is a voice not content to write about events and not above participating in them. Mark Twain gets representation here, as does Dickens, Graham Greene, Rebecca West, Stephen Spender, Jessica Mitford, Martin Amis, Samuel Johnson, Vladimir Nabokov and Saul Bellow, but it is the writer's wife who has the best single line in the book ("Women get funnier as they get older") so that what we have here in sum as well as substance, is an author's valentine to the human race.

An excellent compilation/anthology of recent essays published by that incomparable prose stylist Mr. Christopher Hitchens in "The Atlantic Monthly", "Slate", "Vanity Fair", & a few other outlets. These short pieces range from political, cultural, moral, or just thought-provoking topics. This is a big, hefty volume, good for hours & hours of reading pleasure -- and I do mean 'pleasure'; Mr. Hitchens' literary emissions are delicious, sensuous. Nearly anybody can 'write well' (if only enough effort is expended); to few does Fate bestow such graceful expression.

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