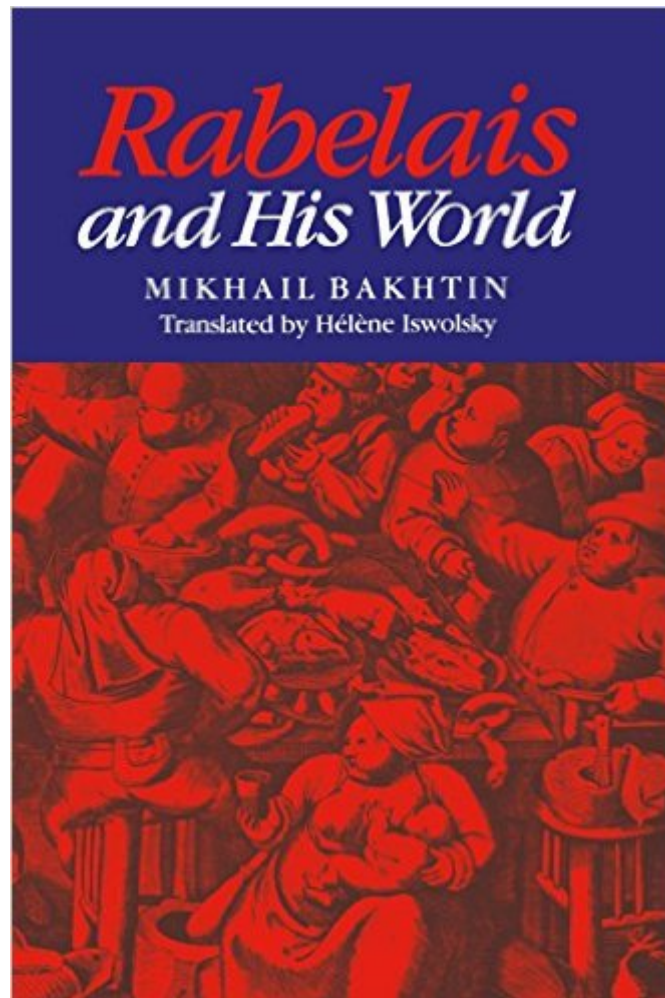


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Rabelais And His World



Synopsis

This classic work by the Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) examines popular humor and folk culture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. One of the essential texts of a theorist who is rapidly becoming a major reference in contemporary thought, *Rabelais and His World* is essential reading for anyone interested in problems of language and text and in cultural interpretation.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Those who come to *RABELAIS AND HIS WORLD* by Mikhail Bakhtin with little or no knowledge of either the author or his topic are likely to find the first chapter arcane and scholarly but all the following ones engrossing if not gross. It helps to know that Mikhail Bakhtin grew up in post-Czarist Russia, lived through the terrors of Lenin and the worse evils of Stalin. As an academic, Bakhtin well knew of the stifling intellectual and social tyranny of his native Russia. He grew to prize freedom because he had so little of it. Slowly, he developed the thesis that of all the literary genres he could use as a bully pulpit to exhort his fellow countrymen to seek liberty it was only the novel that held any promise. Bakhtin saw the novel in a manner totally unlike any of his contemporaries. For him, a novelist like Dostoevsky or Rabelais could people his novels with characters who could speak their lines not as a mouthpiece for the author (monologic) but as a collective howl of pain of those whose voices might otherwise be stilled (dialogic). In his mind, the novel became synonymous as a tool of literary freedom, and thus dangerous to the Powers That Be. Bakhtin uses Rabelais as the focal

point for his thesis that the spirit for freedom of an oppressed people can never be halted only delayed. He notes that Rabelais, who lived in the 16th century, wrote GARGANTUA AND PANTAGRUEL, an extended fiction that permitted and encouraged a carnivalesque atmosphere in which the commoner, the fool, the prostitute, and other dispossessed voices could for one single day shout out their derision at an otherwise dominant power structure. No royalty or government VIP would be safe from vituperation.

The concept of the carnival has been somewhat lost in modern society. Literature from the past is often filled with annual town carnivals and circuses, filled with ringmasters and clowns. Today, with the advent of the amusement park, television, and video games, the carnival concept has faded and the circus has practically gone bankrupt. Mikhail Bakhtin, in his classic work Rabelais and His World, goes even further, however, in saying that the concept of the carnival was lost in literature much further back in time. He passionately defends the novels of Francois Rabelais, a writer considered to be repulsive by many of the great authors and philosophers of history. Bakhtin even attacks Rabelais' admirers because he believes that they do not understand the concepts of Rabelais' works. Elementary and junior high school English teachers constantly infuse into their students the mantra of writing an effective introduction in order to lure the reader into reading on in the story. Bakhtin, in a sense, achieves and does not achieve this task. His passion is obvious and his enthusiasm is great. He is also insulting, crass, and irascible. While some may continue reading just to see what he says next (ala Howard Stern), there is likely to be an equal number of people who would close the book and put it away forever after the first thirty pages. My suggestion- read the introduction if you think you have thick skin. Bakhtin really is very effective in summarizing the concepts of the book in those first sixty pages, but that is often lost in the midst of his constant attacks on Romantic and modern authors. You will, however, get a very good image of what Bakhtin believes is the true carnival spirit. He does not play with words.

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