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Described by his critics as 'naive', by his wife as the 'jolly journalist' and by Dorothy L. Sayers as a 'beneficent bomb', Chesterton is one of the most enigmatic figures of the early twentieth century. On the 60th anniversary of his death and drawing on much previously unpublished material, Pearce's biography surveys the celebratory life and prolific writing which made him a household name. In his rapid rise to fame at the start of the century, Chesterton took Fleet Street by storm, writing a huge number of essays, biographies, poems, novels, plays and, of course, the much loved Father Brown stories. He debated with all the great names of the day, disdaining conventionality, championing the Liberal cause and prophesying the wars and catastrophes that the century would witness. A modern intellect, he strove for integrity, his religious faith and conversion to Catholicism affecting every area of his life and profoundly influencing C.S. Lewis, Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene. At the heart of the man who aroused critical acclaim at home and abroad, is someone who loved the friendship of children, idolised his wife and was sustained by his great friendships with Hilaire Belloc, Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells. A large man in every sense, perhaps his greatest discovery was that 'the secret of life lies in laughter and humility'.

Wisdom and Innocence: A Life of G.K. Chesterton Details

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From Reader Review Wisdom and Innocence: A Life of G.K. Chesterton for online ebook

Geo Forman says

I took too long to read a biography of Chesterton. This bio allowed the reader to understand why some of his publications may not be very enjoyable and, yet, he is still so highly regarded, especially 80 years after his death. Many of his novels were a reflection of the period in which they were wrote and do not translate well to later generations. Some were a direct response to another publication or author and that relationship would need to be understood in order to appreciate the work.

I think his greatest contribution was his defense of Christianity and, especially Catholicism. He was a rather late convert and made the final step only after lengthy deliberation. Readers of many of his works can benefit from his arguments that led to his conversion.

Chesterton was also well known for his distaste of commercialism and capitalism feeling they remove people from the dignity of owning their own livelihood. He would be s wholehearted supporter of the current "buy local" movement. He equally despised communism because it advocated no personal ownership of property.

By far, his greatest works were in defense of the Catholic Church. Many of his contemporaries attribute their own conversion to Chesterton.

One of the unforeseen benefits received from this biography was an appreciation of Chesterton's relationships with many more well-known literary figures such as H G Wells, George Bernard Shaw, Evelyn Waugh, C S Lewis, and others.

A surprisingly good book and eye-opening to anyone who knows little about GK Chesterton; someone who thoroughly enjoyed life

Ann says

GK Chesterton is one of my all time favorite people ... and writers. His writings were frequently and copiously referenced ... and both his writings and his life call out to all of us to put aside differences, debate and disagree with grace and humor, and experience the joy of being alive . And one can't help but be touched by his deeply held Christian faith ... specifically his Catholic faith.

I love this description of GKC that was written by one who knew him personally:

"Mr. Chesterton is the most conspicuous figure in the landscape of literary London. He is like a visitor out of some fairy tale, a legend in the flesh, a survival of the childhood of the world ... He is a wayfarer from the ages, stopping at the inn of life, warming himself at the fire and making the rafters ring with his jolly laughter.

Time and place are accidents: he is elemental and primitive. He is not of our time, but of all times."

And he truly is a man "of all times" ... One of the things that has so impressed me about his writings is that he addressed issues that are as current today as they were at the time he was alive ie. abortion, poverty, the unwieldy state, the loss of tradition, specifically Christian tradition, to keep morality in the forefront. He is like a prophet ... and yet with the personality of one who lives with perpetual hope and joy.

Sylvia says

The most delightful thing about this book was the frequent and extensive quotation of Chesterton, which showcased his wisdom and clear perception of the world. Alongside this, the theme of innocence also ran throughout the whole biography, beginning in chapter one with a beautiful description of G.K.'s childhood and its importance: "Whenever the vaunt of woe appeared triumphant and the darkness of despair descended, a gleam of childlight would disperse the shadows. Years later, when the battle was won and the man emerged victorious, he owed a debt of gratitude to the child." (This reminded me of Alyosha's exhortation to the children at the end of *The Brothers Karamazov* about how one, good, holy memory could be the means of saving them). I loved how Pearce continued to show the childlike wonder G.K. retained through his life - and how the smallest of things could elicit such enjoyment for him as it would for any baby.

Chad says

G. K. Chesterton is one of the most gifted writers who ever lived. I was introduced to G. K. Chesterton through one of my other favorite authors, C. S. Lewis. I had found a list of books that C. S. Lewis considered most influential in his life, and Chesterton's *Everlasting Man* was among them.

Chesterton had a great influence on my own faith. What I like most about him was that he was a romantic; life was to be enjoyed, and you could find joy in everyday ordinary things. The title of the book says it all: *Wisdom and innocence*, on the outside seemingly incompatible, but Chesterton showed that true wisdom can only be through through innocence. One of the earliest quotes that captured this for me was in his book *Heretics* describing (I think) Byron:

We might, no doubt, find it a nuisance to count all the blades of grass or all the leaves of the trees; but this would not be because of our boldness or gaiety, but because of our lack of boldness and gaiety. The bore would go onward, bold and gay, and find the blades of grass as splendid as the swords of an army. The bore is stronger and more joyous than we are; he is a demigod — nay, he is a god. For it is the gods who do not tire of the iteration of things; to them the nightfall is always new, and the last rose as red as the first.

This biography does G. K. Chesterton justice. I was glad to get an idea of the context of many of his books, to figure out their background. One thing I most enjoyed was his interactions with contemporary authors, including among them H. G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw. Chesterton was always gracious, even when he disagreed: they argued, but they never quarrelled, as he put it.

Here are some of my favorite quotes from the book:

On the confessing of sins:

According to a contemporary critic, it is morbid to confess your sins. I should say the morbid thing is not to confess them. The morbid thing is to conceal your sins and let them eat your heart out, which is the happy state of most people in highly civilized societies.

On standing strong for morals:

It appears to me quite clear that any church claiming to be authoritative, must be able to answer quite definitely when great questions of public morals are put. Can I go in for cannibalism, or murder babies to reduce the population, or any similar scientific and progressive reform? Any Church with authority to teach must be able to say whether it can be done.

But the point is that the Church of England does not speak strongly. It has no united action. I have no use for a Church which is not a Church militant, which cannot order battle and fall in line and march in the same direction.

On "moving with the times":

The Church cannot move with the times; simply because the times are not moving. The Church can only stick in the mud with the times, and rot and stink with the times. In the economic and social world, as such, there is no activity except that sort of automatic activity that is called decay; the withering of the high flowers of freedom and their decomposition into the aboriginal soil of slavery. In that way the world stands much at the same stage as it did at the beginning of the Dark Ages...

We do not want, as the newspapers say, a Church that will move with the world. We want a Church that will move the world. We want one that will move it away from the many of the things toward which it is now moving; for instance, the Servile State. It is by that test that history will really judge, of any Church, whether it is the real Church or no.

George Bernard Shaw on eugenics:

Now when men claim scientific authority for their ignorance, and police support for their aggressive presumption, it is time for Mr Chesterton and all other men of sense to withstand them sturdily.

On dogma:

In truth there are only two kinds of people, those who accept dogmas and know it and those who accept dogmas and don't know it. My only advantage over the gifted novelist lies in my belonging to the former class.

On salesmanship:

There was only one actor in that ancient drama who seems to have had any real talent for salesmanship. He seems to have undertaken to deliver the goods with exactly the right preliminaries of promise and praise. He knew all about advertisement: we may say he knew all about publicity, though not at the moment addressing a very large public. He not only took up the slogan of Eat More Fruit, but he distinctly declared that any customers purchasing his particular brand of fruit would instantly become as gods. And as this is exactly what is promised to the purchasers of every patent medicine, popular tonic, saline draught or medicinal wine at the present day, there can be no question that he was in advance of his age. It is extraordinary that humanity, which began with the apple and ended with the patent medicine, has not even yet become exactly like the gods. It is still more extraordinary (and probably the result of a malicious interpolation by priests at a later date) that the record ends with some extraordinary remarks to the effect that one thus pursuing the bright career of Salesmanship is condemned to crawl on his stomach and eat a great deal of dirt.

On the problem of pain:

There is no cure for that nightmare of omnipotence except pain; because that is the thing a man knows he would not tolerate if he could really control it.

On "blind following":

If you mean swallow them without thinking about them, Catholics think about them much more than

anybody else does in the muddled modern world... It is precisely because most non-Catholics do not think, that they can hold a chaos of contrary notions at once... Thinking means thinking connectedly. If I thought the Catholic creed untrue, I should cease to be a Catholic. But as the more I think about it, the truer I think it, the dilemma does not arise; there is no connection in my mind between thinking about it and doubting it.

Elizabeth says

Fantastic biography. I enjoyed it almost as much as I enjoy reading Chesterton himself (which is saying a lot).

It's worth noting that this is a Catholic perspective of Chesterton. As a non-Catholic, I got the glimpse into Chesterton's spiritual self that I wanted, and a great deal of insight into the difference between us.

I have rarely gotten emotional at the end of biographies. We know, after all, how they all end. But by the time I closed in on 500 pages of celebration of such a brilliant and joyful life, I felt England's (not to mention Frances Chesterton's) loss deeply. I can only say that I am surprised he is not even more widely read and revered than he already is by my contemporaries.

Jeff Miller says

This is the most in-depth biography of Chesterton I have read, and I have read several including Chesterton's own autobiography.

Really excellent, especially running across details I was unaware of. Pearce is a master biographer.

Leonard Ondigo says

Joseph Pearce did me justice, more justice to guide me into the life of a legend. The legendary letter man whom I adore and respect. This book provides a quintessential insight into the life of G.K. Chesterton, the incarnate of Shakespeare. I enjoyed it from start to the end. The polemic treatise of G.K.C and his friend and for Bernard Shaw were so heavenly full of humor. The poems were so inspiring, so sublime. The works of G.K.C are etched into the hearts of men who loved him, and I am proud to be one. He was the apostle of sanity.

Stephen says

"I cannot help but thinking you were England -- the Merry, chivalrous, simple-hearted, fearless England that I loved." - an old friend's letter to Chesterton

Mention the name G.K. Chesterton today, and most who have a glimmer of recognition will venture that he

was a Christian apologist. Chesterton was no theological pendant, however; at the peak of his career, which he still occupied at the time of his death, he was a bestselling author, editor, and journalist recognized by many as something unique. More than that, however, he was fun, with an amiability that led even his antagonists to maintain warm relations with him even as they heatedly debated through public newspapers. Pearce's title, *Wisdom and Innocence* alludes to a core dynamic expressed in the life of Chesterton -- the embrace of romance and reality, wonder and wisdom, faith and reason. The same man who could earn praise from medieval scholars for his biography of St. Thomas Aquinas and hold public debates against H.G. Wells and Bertrand Russell might just as easily entertain a house of small children single-handedly the same night, with equal joy.

Although Chesterton was baptized into the Anglican church, his parents were merely bowing to social convention when they brought him before the font and priest; they were hazy Unitarians and spiritualists. In his youth, Chesterton experimented with the occult, becoming convinced that there was something more than the material world, and had a distinct appreciation for what we might now call the divine feminine. Chesterton did not write a *Surprised by Joy* equivalent about his embrace of Christianity via the Anglican church, but the tipping point occurred when he was beginning to teach and met a young nihilist who believed in nothing, not even the possibility of truth. Judging by letters Chesterton wrote thereafter, encountering this man was a staring-into-the-abyss movement that set him searching for meaning and order. He found it in the Anglo-Catholic movement of the Anglican church, and his sympathy for Catholicism would only strengthen over the years, until he finally converted and became one of the Church's most vocal champions.

Chesterton didn't unsheath his pen only to defend the Church on theological grounds, however. For him, the Catholic faith undergirded western civilization, and even the material expression of society -- the organization of the means of production, for instance -- had a religious importance. From an early age Chesterton held the large industrialists of the day in contempt, and critiqued capitalism first from the left, and then later from Catholic theology. Marx may have cheered the fact that the family had been destroyed as an economic unit, but for Chesterton this was the crux of the problem. He objected and resented to the fact that so much land and property were pooling into the hands of a few titanic industrialists and their bankers. To take away a man's economic independence, to reduce him to a proletarian laboring for nothing but money -- to force him and his children to abandon a home for a hovel, and spend their energy for another besides improving their own home and familial enterprise, was to undermine human dignity and tarnish a creature made in the image of God. In general, Chesterton found modernity absurd, unhealthy, and (in the case of fascism) regressive. He regarded the strident nationalism of the early 20 century as a return to tribal barbarism, and a betrayal of the cosmopolitan aura of the Roman and Catholic world. His early denouncement of Hitler, at a time before democratic leaders were eying the ill-shaven Austrian with envy for his energy, earned Chesterton kudos after the evils of Hitler's regime became apparent.

Wisdom and Innocence is an incredible biography, a review of not only GKC's life, but his work. Pearce is exhaustive, poring into Chesterton's poetry and smaller stories as well. Pearce also visits Chesterton in the company of his friends and rivals. Chesterton and an Anglo-French writer named Hilaire Belloc were especially close, united in their love for their faith, literature, and wine, and Chesterton himself inspired many who became friends. His two chief friendly antagonists were George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells, who shared his concern about the power of tycoons but little else. This book is nearly as big as its subject, and well worth reading for anyone who has a serious interest in Chesterton. The depth which it goes into may be a little much for very casual readers, however: it had chops scholarly enough to merit Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn granting Pearce an interview for his later biography, *Solzhenitsyn: A Life in Exile*.

Melissa says

My absolute favorite Pearce book! This is an amazing biography. There may have been a few tears in the last chapter.

Emily says

A good biography, with many fantastic insights into who Chesterton was. I was a little put off by Pearce's style now and then, and occasionally annoyed by his methods, so it's not a five-star book. However, I'm a lover of the classics, so please understand that this weights my standards - this is still a very good book. I really appreciated that the book did not just end with Chesterton's death, but continued to cover the death of his wife, Frances. The two were one flesh, and this is very fitting.

booklady says

I love G. K. Chesterton as an author and Joseph Pearce as a biographer. They come together beautifully in this book!

Ashley Adams says

wonderful biography of a neglected intellectual and all around poly math. Maybe one of the last "great men". I wonder how he would have dealt with the new atheists probably with the same caustic wit which he dealt with everybody. I'm not catholic but reading about chestertons conversion to the catholicism almost makes me want to become a catholic.

Steve says

I love a man I have never met, and this book has made me love him more. G.K Chesterton has been dead for 50 years, yet when his death was reported in this book it brought a tear to my eye. This book gives insight into the man, as well as his writings and is a must read for any fan for G.K. Chesterton.

Sara says

"Holy Father deeply grieved death Mr. Gilbert Keith Chesterton devoted son Holy Church gifted Defender of the Catholic Faith. His Holiness offers paternal sympathy people of England assures prayers dear departed, bestows Apostolic Benediction." - A telegram from Cardinal Pacelli four and on behalf of Pope Pius XI to Frances Chesterton upon the news of the death of her husband.

I am so glad that Jennifer and I read this together so that we could sob together.

Finishing biographies is always so painful if the biographer has done their job. Pearce has more than done his job.

Heather Bain says

I did not want to put this book down. I cried at the end because I felt the impact of Chesterton's life upon me and all those who have been touched by his wit and wisdom. Pearce does a great job in using historical records and written works to give us a broader scope of the person he truly was.
