

Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 2001. Pp. 546.

Reviewed by Elijah Villafana

Less than one hundred years after its fight for independence, America fought its bloodiest and most horrific internal battle in history: the Civil War. Most of the accounts focus on the decisions of President Lincoln, the issue of slavery, and the hostilities between the North and South; in other words, a primarily social and political history. However, these narrow accounts woefully neglect a cultural revolution that was largely formed and shaped by America's most "traumatic experience."¹ In a decade where Americans questioned and rationalized the spreading disease of death and destruction, a new philosophy—interested in reconciliation—brought a sophisticated minority a way to cope with and uproot a unique national philosophical persona. It is this aftermath that assured in a cause and effect—and subsequent change over time—that Louis Menand writes his scholarly volume *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*. Under his thesis Menand delves into and unearths the fascinating development and progression of pragmatism in a culture undergoing change fashioned by modernity and tumult in examining the lives and influences of the four-naissance pragmatics: Oliver Wendell Holmes, Charles S. Pierce, William James, and John Dewey.

Menand first surveys the rationalism of the distinguished Oliver Wendell Holmes. In a conflicted course as an unfortunate Union officer to his seat on the Supreme Court, Holmes is a highlighted case throughout Menand's study—for good reason. Heavily influenced by the Plato and the transcendental Emerson, Holmes viewed morality and science as compatriots in a dogmatic world. Holmes came to exemplify the

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transformation made by the Civil War. According to Menand, the war “made him lose his beliefs in beliefs.”² Now to most, this would be a frightful occurrence, however, to Holmes it was a revelation that brought with it a new set of values. With a great wariness towards dogmatic beliefs, Holmes only found certainty in mankind’s uncertainty; after all, it is certitude that leads to violence. Following the same vein of thought, justice for Holmes was the equivalent sum of what judges have decided—which differed from the next three pragmatists that saw the sum of beliefs upon which men act. Preceding pragmatism’s entrance by a year, Menand asserts Holmes’ belief is that “law is nothing more or less than what judges do.”³ Menand persuades the reader that Holmes—whose quest begins and finishes the book—aptly belongs in the company of the pragmatist men and tends to even epitomize their beliefs.

A mathematical genius of sorts, Charles S. Peirce had a major impact on pragmatism and philosophical theory. Working for the government in his spare time, Peirce questioned everything—which essentially led to his beliefs in nothing. According to him, humans, who had a limited perception, should take nothing as fact until it was proved through statistical theory. Even the law of gravity may not be absolute because its actions cannot be seen everywhere that it may exist. The best way—or at least the method with the least room for statistical error—to come to some form of exact knowledge is to rely on the collected perceptions of the community. This idea—that the community extends beyond the individual.

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Ibid, 4.

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Ibid, 347.

William James, one of Peirce's devoted admirers, is described by Menand as a man who was “fragile...socially insecure,” and very indecisive. However, it was these characteristics that prepared James to construct a philosophy which shapes “the way people think—the way they come up with ideas, form beliefs, and reach decisions.”⁴ According to James, ideas or beliefs that do not benefit humanity are irrelevant; discussion or debate about these inactive ideas is merely mental gymnastics. Only beliefs that may be actualized are worth believing. To sum up, beliefs must have some sort of “cash value.”⁵ Ideally, beliefs only then assume a certain truth-value once they are worked out in everyday life.

John Dewey was not only a pioneering educator in nineteenth century—he was a pragmatist who emphasized the modern theory of ‘doing what works’. Believing that children should be taught by doing, Dewey—while at the University of Chicago—concurred that a more pragmatic hands on approach would foster a better learning environment. Dispelling with rote memorization, Dewey believed children should actualize learning; all the while, emphasizing the power of the community over the individual. In a time when most people believe that there are individuals first and then they form a society, Dewey believed that “there is no such thing as an individual without society.”⁶ The distinction is a difficult one, but important when applied to education and

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Ibid, 351.

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Ibid, 369.

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Ibid, 330.

other fields of human endeavor. To the Dewey and the others, it was especially important in the ideal of democracy where “participation changes everything.”⁷

Louis Menand gives the reader a great biographical sketch of the pragmatics that comprised the “Metaphysical Club” of Cambridge, Massachusetts. In addition to this, however, and infusing pragmatism in the framework of the post-Civil War era, Menand places considerable importance on the progress of modern science, as observed by his books major devotion to it. Particular attention is committed to Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution along with statistical theory. These developments, for Menand, had a predilection to discourage a view of the universe as rational, permanent, and purposeful. Knowledge became closely tied to the theories of statistical simplification and a theory of error; furthermore, placing emphasis on what worked. The way Menand manages to combine topics as diverse as mathematics, evolution, spiritualism, document forgery and race relations into a single narrative is marvelous. Menand integrates every new event and individual with the rest of his work; thus enhancing the issue and helping each new idea take the story to the next stage.

Quite arguably the most important thinker and contributor to pragmatic thought presented in the book, William James was not a major focal point—as he should have been. Overall, nevertheless, Menand does an excellent job involving the reader in every aspect of the characters mind set and explains the critical ideas of these New England men and why their ideas contribute to the actions and thoughts of today. Interesting and well-written—though often dense—Menand presents a cornucopia of ideas and events in

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the book giving the reader an understanding of this powerful period that ushered in the “birth of modern America.”⁸ Menand brings together a true history of ideas, showing how a shared national experience created and wrought a pragmatic philosophy that “was designed to make it harder for people to be driven to violence by their beliefs.”⁹ As historian James Brewer Stewart affirmed, it was a “pervasive influence of warfare”¹⁰ that amplified American’s cause of abolitionism, so could be said, as well, for the aforementioned individuals who sought to live out their philosophies in a noticeable way.

As a work of history and winner of the 2002 Pulitzer Prize, Menand succeeds in providing a great deal of background about the state of the world his subjects were living in, so that we twenty-first century readers can “see how almost unimaginably strange they and their world were, too.”¹¹ While grasping the big picture, Menand displays how these men were products of their times—generating timeless truths that are as observable today as they were back then.

8

Ibid, ix.

9

Ibid, 440.

10 James Brewer Stewart. *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1976. pp 20.

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Menand, 442.