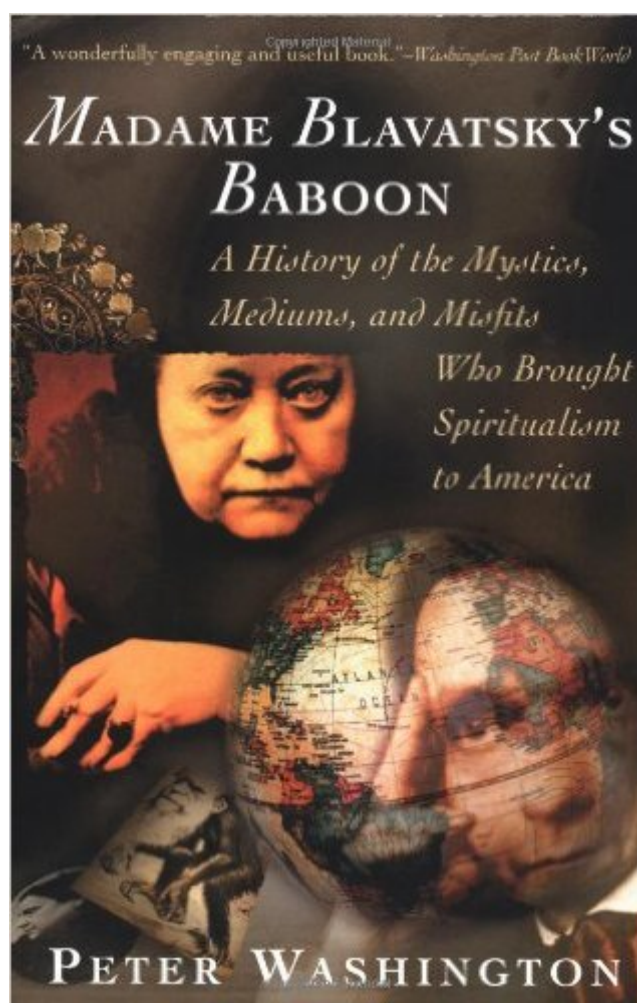


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Madame Blavatsky's Baboon: A History Of The Mystics, Mediums, And Misfits Who Brought Spiritualism To America



Synopsis

Just before the turn of the century, a renegade Russian aristocrat named Madame Blavatsky came to America claiming that man was descended not from the ape but from spiritual beings. Thus began Theosophy, the very first "new age" religion. This thought-provoking and often hilarious study delineates the course of Theosophy and other sects which have come down through the years.

Photos.

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Customer Reviews

This book starts out well but becomes bogged down in details. Do we really need to know everything about J.G. Bennett's business partners, his mining projects, or learn the exact chronology of Gurdjieff's movements? Eventually the cast of minor characters becomes so confusing that the more important figures are obscured. Careful editing could have removed perhaps 100 pages of useless information and replaced it with more interesting material. Ironically, despite the author's almost pedantic attention to the obscure, several important literary and religious figures who deserved attention were left out. Though confusing, Washington's focus is extremely narrow. He does very well at describing his characters, but seems unable to explain what really made them tick, or why others chose to follow them. In religious/intellectual terms, the big picture becomes lost in the details. I came away with no real sense of where these characters fit into the history of their time. Washington tells us, for example, every aspect of the foibles of gurus like Ouspensky and Gurdjieff with their tiny bands of disciples in the 20s and 30s, but explains nothing

of the wider, pervasive effects of spiritualism on European and American society in those decades. Washington is no historian, and it shows in his floundering descriptions of events like the Great Depression and the world wars. The most obvious issue is bias. Washington tries. Despite his criticism, I think he actually admires Steiner and Krishnamurti, and tweaks them reluctantly. But his often ribald mockery of the characters he dislikes - Blavatsky, Leadbeater, etc. - grows tiresome. I don't particularly care for them either, but find critiques without sneers more effective. This is a history that needed to be written.

To track the spoor of the Western guru from the late nineteenth century onward is the prodigious challenge which Peter Washington gamely accepts. Whether he is the right man for the job is another question. His study's title, *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon*, signals an unfortunate tendency to reduce issues of psychological, historical and metaphysical complexity to a tract about twisters and duffers. Extrapolating his forgivable disdain for the turquoise track suit of David Icke, he cheerfully deconstructs major progenitors of the New Age: Madame Blavatsky, Annie Besant, Rudolph Steiner, Piotr Ouspensky, Krishnamurti, Aldous Huxley and Gurdjieff; seven at one blow. That Icke is to Krishnamurti as a nail is to requiem goes unremarked. Resta's famous "Sphinx" photo of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky ensures a splendid book cover. What a woman! Much is to be forgiven a mystic who, apart from owning a stuffed baboon "claimed to have ridden bareback in a circus, toured Serbia as a concert pianist, opened an ink factory in Odessa, traded as an importer of ostrich feathers in Paris, and worked as an interior decorator to the Empress Eugénie." But forgiveness is not Washington's strong suit. Just a spell of remission from his remorseless subtext "crazez l'infame" would have doubled the value of this ambitious historical study. Almost everyone here is a "baddie"; it is only a question of degree. Blavatsky's obesity is grotesque, her cigarettes foul, her merits non-existent. Julia Ostrowska ("I think she is splendid", wrote Katherine Mansfield) is simply "a Polish prostitute".

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