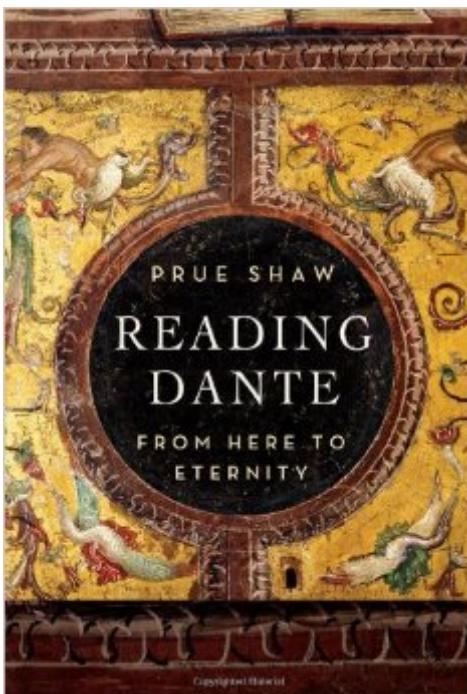


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Reading Dante: From Here To Eternity



Synopsis

The best and most eloquent introduction to Dante for our time. Prue Shaw is one of the world's foremost authorities on Dante. Written with the general reader in mind, *Reading Dante* brings her knowledge to bear in an accessible yet expert introduction to his great poem. This is far more than an exegesis of Dante's three-part *Commedia*. Shaw communicates the imaginative power, the linguistic skill and the emotional intensity of Dante's poetry—the qualities that make the *Commedia* perhaps the greatest literary work of all time and not simply a medieval treatise on morality and religion. The book provides a graphic account of the complicated geography of Dante's version of the afterlife and a sure guide to thirteenth-century Florence and the people and places that influenced him. At the same time it offers a literary experience that lifts the reader into the universal realms of poetry and mythology, creating links not only to the classical world of Virgil and Ovid but also to modern art and poetry, the world of T. S. Eliot, Seamus Heaney and many others. Dante's questions are our questions: What is it to be a human being? How should we judge human behavior? What matters in life and in death? *Reading Dante* helps the reader to understand Dante's answers to these timeless questions and to see how surprisingly close they sometimes are to modern answers. *Reading Dante* is an astonishingly lyrical work that will appeal to both those who've never read the *Commedia* and those who have. It underscores Dante's belief that poetry can change human lives. 34 illustrations

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Customer Reviews

This veteran expert on Dante guides us through thematic chapters rather than a chronological commentary through the *Commedia* or a critical biography introducing us to the highlights of his life. The results can be challenging, but if you can keep the Guelphs from the Ghibellines straight--and this Cambridge professor makes sure we do--this study may reward those new to Dante, or those, like myself, looking for a broader overview of his career, and his influences, than a footnoted edition of *The Divine Comedy* might provide. Dr. Shaw appears to have spent half a century examining Dante. Therefore, she knows every facet of the poet's considerable erudition, his complicated political entanglements (we are reminded he faced torture and death for his allegiance), and the dramatic achievement that made the vernacular, after the poet had his way with Tuscan dialect and his own nimble invention of so many more words that he recorded in his verse, the standard for the emerging language of Italian, from an era when regional variations proliferated. None, as Shaw shows, as good as Dante's own, as he agrees in a show-off comparison he set down to display his own Florentine expertise. This type of confidence, growing as Dante took on more challenging models after 1300, resulted in those famed hundred masterful cantos. Reading Dante progresses by chapters on friendship, power, his life, love, time, numbers, and words. I found to my surprise those on time and numbers as engrossing as those on love and words. For, Shaw sharpens her gaze when delving into the textual acumen that displays Dante's talents at their best.

Despite the author's stated intention (Introduction) to convince some "liberal humanist" friends that Dante is worth reading, I suspect that most readers will be from the ranks of those already intrigued by prior reading. But whatever the draw, readers will find the experience pleasurable and their appreciation of the "Commedia" enriched. I would be surprised if most did not join me in promptly re-reading the text with a better understanding and heightened appreciation for Dante's artistry and craftsmanship. Although Shaw directs this book to the "general reader," said reader should be warned that some of the chapters delve into intricacies, e.g. of Italian dialect, that verge on the academic, while making scholarly points. That may prove an occasional distraction, although it not an accident and is not really a defect, as these digressions mostly are integral to the interpretive guidance that Shaw is offering. Certainly, these discussions are pertinent to her objective of enriching the context and reading experience by showing what Dante was up to and how he went about it. Although I am by no means a Dante Scholar, I suspect that (as she sometimes indicates) her interpretations may not always be shared by all those who are. No matter for the true general reader, as her interpretations are lucid and helpful, even if some might be debated. Prospective readers should understand that this is not a biography of Dante: Although there is a good amount of

biographical material related in explicating the text, the emphasis is on the text itself. Dante's "life and times" are nicely treated in other books and, I think, add valuable context --- I would have welcomed a bit more, rather than less in this volume.

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