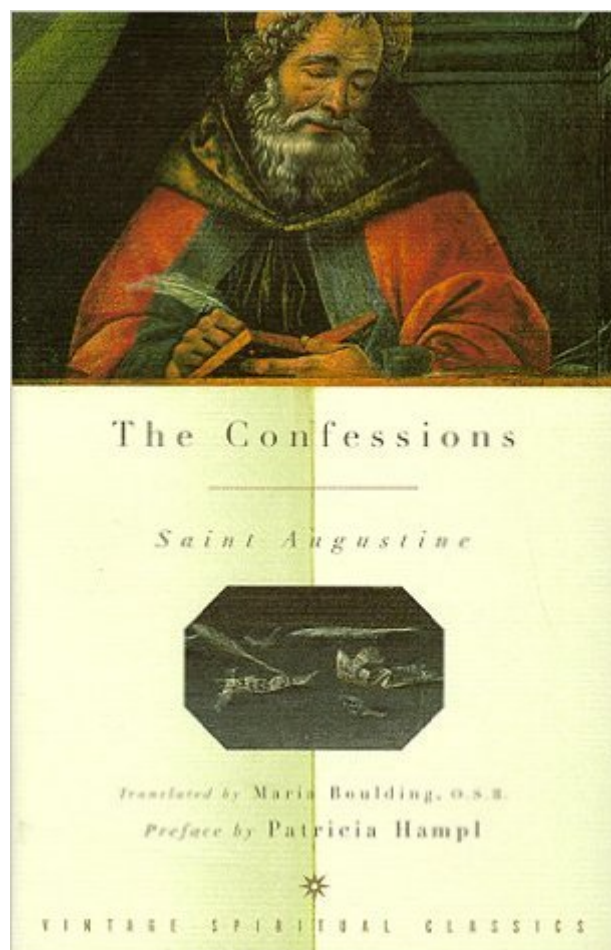


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# The Confessions



## Synopsis

"God is our home but many of us have strayed from our native land. The venerable authors of these Spiritual Classics are expert guides--may we follow their directions home." --Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Writing in the last years of the fourth century a.d., Saint Augustine of Hippo created what is at once the first true autobiography in Western literature and among the most sophisticated yet accessible theological arguments in the history of Christianity. With extraordinary candor and psychological acumen, Augustine recounts his passage from a life of sensuality, Manichaean superstition, and empty careerism to a genuine spiritual awakening, and he articulates views on marriage, morality, and faith that have shaped our discourse ever since. The Confessions allows us to appreciate both the startling modernity of Augustine's insights and the imperishable poetry of his voice. With a new Preface by MacArthur Fellow Patricia Hampl, author of *Virgin Time* and *A Romantic Education*.

In the annals of spirituality, certain books stand out both for their historical importance and for their continued relevance. The Vintage Spiritual Classics series offers the greatest of these works in authoritative new editions, with specially commissioned essays by noted contemporary commentators. Filled with eloquence and fresh insight, encouragement and solace, Vintage Spiritual Classics are incomparable resources for all readers who seek a more substantive understanding of mankind's relation to the divine.

## Book Information

Paperback: 400 pages

Publisher: Vintage; 1st edition (December 29, 1998)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0375700218

ISBN-13: 978-0375700217

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.9 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars -- See all reviews (510 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #50,353 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #59 in Books > Christian Books &

Bibles > Biographies > Saints #69 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Religious Studies >

Philosophy #200 in Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Churches & Church Leadership > Church History

## Customer Reviews

Translation by Rex Warner (in Signet Classics) This one is a very good translation, especially for the

modern reader. It conveys the immediacy and vividness of a text written more than 1500 years ago. One feels almost as a voyeur peeping into the private confession of a man to his God. The honesty and unembarrassed disclosure of his sins, and fruitless search for worldly wisdom, is something we can personally identify with, even today. It is amazing how vivid the description of life in late 4th century is in this Confessions. What a wonderful way to approach History, places like Carthage, Rome or Milan, thru the eyes of a skilled and intelligent man who pours his heart on these pages for us to benefit from. St. Augustine's life, however distant in time, is filled with events, desires, and troubles, as common today as in the year 400. We can identify fully with him, and in his longing and weakness we can see our own soul portrayed. He talks about his childhood, his family, his studies and his lifelong pursuit of wisdom and truth, specially since the age of 19. We get immersed in the daily life of people in the 4th Century under the Roman Empire, their daily worries, their intellectual debates, their religious confrontations. We see the social conditions of all classes of people, from the wealthy and idle to the slaves who fight in the Circus. We see people living, talking, traveling, dreaming, and going about their business as if we were present with them. No wonder this book is an authentic classic, one that I should have read long ago. There are many reasons to read this book. Those interested in History are certainly going to find plenty of information from eye-witness perspective; those who like to read personal memories and autobiographies won't have it easy to find a better one. For those interested in the history of religion and Catholicism, this is a must, a landmark in Christian literature. Whatever you are looking for, this book is certainly one that will satisfy your intellectual curiosity as well as fill you spiritually. One thing to bear in mind is that the Confessions are not addressed to us, readers, that is why certain things about the author's behavior seem inexplicable: certain things that would seem to us to merit more explaining, being only mentioned briefly (his behavior toward the woman he had a child with, for example), while other issues are given a lot more space. Of course the Lord knew his heart well, but still, one is intrigued at this man.

St. Augustine is one of the greatest thinkers the West ever produced. Born in North Africa in the waning years of the Roman Empire, his Confessions detail his ultimate conversion to Nicene Christianity after a ten year journey through the various trendy sects of the 4th century C.E. Augustine was a member of the Manichean heresy, a follower of Astrology, and an all around sinner. He enjoyed the barbaric games of the coliseum, was overly proud of his education and teaching positions, and just couldn't bring himself to give up the ladies. He even had a son, Adeodatus, who was born out of wedlock. In short, Augustine loved the things that most people

love, and he loved the same things that we love in our decadent age. This is what makes this book so relevant today; it shows how little the human race has come in 1500 years. Augustine's struggles are our struggles. Two points of interest are worth mentioning here. The first is Augustine's mother, St. Monica. Throughout the book, Monica is an omnipresent figure in Augustine's life. She is a tireless Christian, and she does many things to try and bring Augustine into the faith. She prays incessantly, has visions and dreams from God that promise Augustine's conversion, and she follows her son everywhere he goes. Augustine gives much praise to his mother, but it's important to remember that he was writing this account after his conversion. At the time, Augustine must have been sick to death of some of her antics. He actually lied to her so he could sneak off to Rome without her, although she was soon on a boat so she could catch up with him. I also felt sorry for his father, Patricius. Dad wasn't really into the Christian thing, so Monica put on the pants in the family. Augustine even says that Monica made God the 'true' father in their house. A second point of interest is Augustine's actual conversion. He seems to go through two of them in quick succession. The first is an intellectual conversion, as Augustine uses the texts of Neo-Platonic authors to prove to himself the fallacy of the Manichean theology. It seems the Manicheans believed in a Christ figure that was not fully divine, as well as the idea that God was a substance. Augustine shows how substance can be corrupted, making this idea totally incompatible with the idea of a perfect God. After all, if a substance can be corrupted, how can it be perfect? After the intellectual conversion, Augustine still can't totally believe because he can't give up the fleshly sin of lust with women. This second conversion finally comes about in the famous 'pick it up and read' incident in the garden. Augustine, wracked by his sins and on the verge of some type of mental collapse over his anguish, hears a child's voice singing, 'Pick it up and read.' Seeing this as a sign from God, he picks up Paul's Epistles and reads the first thing he sees in the book. He reads a passage about the evils of fleshly vice and his conversion is complete. After this conversion, the rest of the book veers off on a tangent. Augustine examines the concept of time, in great detail, and writes an incredibly dense exegesis on the first parts of the book of Genesis. This section, with the exception of his discourse on time, isn't nearly as interesting as the account of his life and the fundamental changes he goes through as he tries to find the true way to live life. I do suspect that thousands have converted after reading this book because it speaks to every human on a fundamental level. The above description I've given doesn't even begin to cover the amount of information in this book. The Confessions is both beautiful and thought provoking and I would recommend it to anyone. I do have a word of warning for those who are considering giving this one a shot. Avoid, like the plague, the John Ryan translation. It is wordy, dense, and not at all clear. Read this Penguin version, written by Mr.

Pine-Coffin (great name, huh?). It is a clear and concise translation. It's one thing to struggle with ideas in a book, but why should we have to struggle with the syntax? Go forth and read, young man!

Like the Carolinne White translation of the "Confessions," also carried by , this paperback does not have the complete original text. Rather, some of the ideas have been selected out by someone and are here rephrased into more contemporary language. That's OK, but anyone buying this book ought to know that this version is an abridgement and not the full text of the "Confessions" that they're buying.

I won't recount all the excellent reasons for reading this remarkable book. It's not a part of the Western Canon for nothing! It's a seminal work (autobiography) in a seminal field (Patristics) worth reading regardless of religious orientation, including none. What makes THIS particular version so exciting is that it is eminently readable and still quite stylized. Chadwick's eloquent translation caputes not only Augustine's ideas and thoughts, but equally important, his rhetorical skills. This alone justifies the purchase of this work. The philosophical nuances that, ironically, have entered twentieth-century thought again are very clearly articulated in Chadwick's translation. Other translations are likely to obfuscate what Chadwick elucidates. Read this great work by a great translator. I am confident you'll return to it again and again (even if you disagree with the Doctor).

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