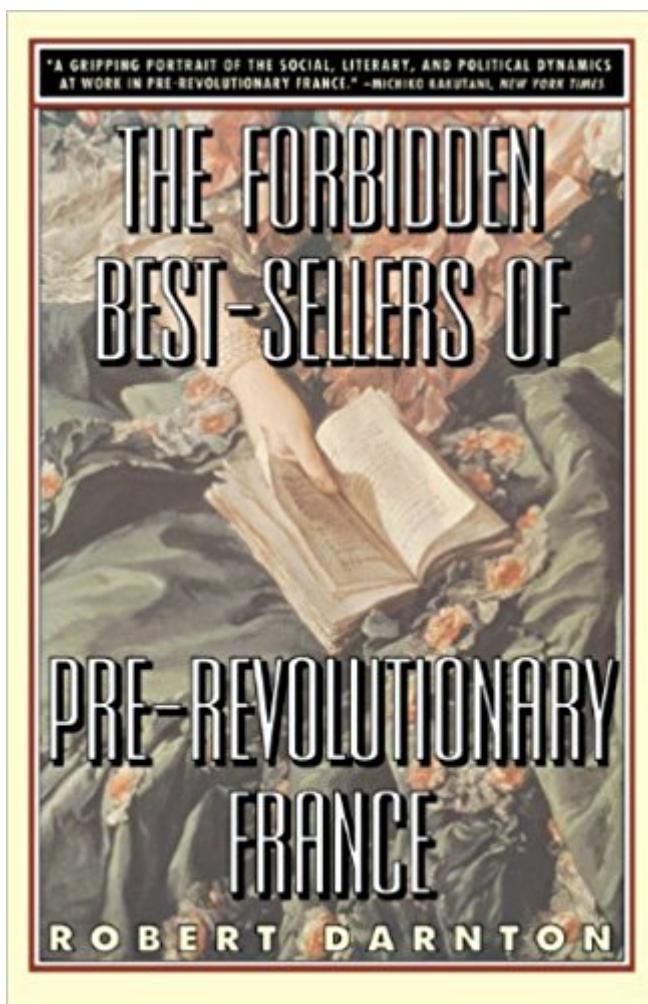


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# The Forbidden Best-Sellers Of Pre-Revolutionary France



## Synopsis

Robert Darnton's work is one of the main reasons that cultural history has become an exciting study central to our understanding of the past. His latest book vibrates with the strange political and literary energies of ancien régime France. The *Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* traces the merging of philosophical, sexual, and anti-monarchical interests into the pulp fiction of the 1780s, banned books that make fascinating reading more than two centuries later. French literature of the eighteenth century means to us today Rousseau and Voltaire and the "classic" texts that, we imagine, gave rise to the Revolution. Yet very few of the standard works of the Enlightenment were as widely read as books whose names we have never heard, books that were the currency of a huge literary underground during the reign of Louis XVI. Included in this volume are Darnton's translations of excerpts from three of these works. After twenty-five years of research, Darnton has summarized his findings in one brilliant work that examines the reciprocal relationship between private literature and the public world, the (illegal) spread of Enlightenment thought, and the interesting possibility that the writings of some not-so-famous authors contributed to the fall of the French aristocracy.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

More popular than the canon of the great Enlightenment philosophers were other books, also banned by the regime, written and sold "under the cloak." These formed a libertine literature that

was a crucial part of the culture of dissent in the Old Regime. Robert Darnton explores the cultural and political significance of these "bad" books and introduces readers to three of the most influential illegal best-sellers, from which he includes substantial excerpts. Winner of the 1995 National Book Critics Circle Award for criticism.

In this NBCC finalist, cultural historian Darnton examines subversive French works of the 1780s, arguing that these underground books were as influential as more classic Enlightenment fare.

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A good read on a misunderstood era. My only criticism pertains to his translation of THERESE PHILOSOPHE -- so much is removed of THERESE that the story doesn't make sense. After 2 pages he omits 10 pages that make sense of the rest of the story -- Therese from age 7 to age 23 is omitted. Someone left a snide comment for this review, that of course some was omitted as it was excerpted. How convenient. When publishers do it it's called censorship. The lubricity is the only real charm of D'Argens work, as Sade commented (in Juliette), and without it there is no story. Darnton could have bleeped out the --- words and given us a taste; but this is America, so fidelity to the original text is no special virtue. Is this a children's book? Even Wikipedia is nowhere near as prudish. There is really no point to Darnton's translation except to prove that he can translate. Darnton surely knew he had no competition -- d'Argens, like Mirabeau, has not had a decent English translation. This goes for most libertine novels from the Enfer of the Bibliotheque Nationale, with the glaring exception of Sade, who is far more objectionable than the innocent and realistic sensuality of D'Argens. If you don't have to have it rated PG, get the LIBERTINE READER by Michel Feher. If you read French also check out Patrick Wald Lasowski, Philippe Sollers and others whose writings on libertinism and the libertine novel are easily found in Google searches.

This is one of the most intelligent books I have ever read about french revolution or, in this case, pre revolutionary France and the role of that vaporous, difficult to define but very real effect of ideas, emotions, frames of thinking and everything else that in the mind of public support or prepare the demolition of a regimen. The argument is smart, the style flawless. The book remembered me the great one of Crane Brinton about revolutions.

This book comes from great research project. It is very interesting and you see points and case studies you have never heard before. Gives you a great idea on how mass media works under

censorship.

I have been reading about language and art in the papers published in *Symbol, Myth, and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer, 1935-1945*, which raises some questions about uniquely human aspects of language. The experience of confusion as a valuable human reaction seems to be key to exalting the Martin Luther Stonehood of rock and roll as a unique form of literary life in 2013, when consideration of all the problems that might interrupt the hyperbolic cyberpower which keeps spinning its global financial wheels to take this bad infinity even higher into the castles of our clouds is too muddled for a rational analysis of restraining orders to keep people from inflicting speech upon each other. There was a movie about Mozart, *Amadeus*, which puts an opera about Figaro in the time that is the setting for Robert Darnton's book, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*. The financial problems of advanced civilizations are not easy to solve when large numbers of people consider sudden changes intolerable. Literary life has been creeping up on the kind of trouble that makes someone play the harmonica in the song *Trouble Every Day* on the Mothers of Invention *Freak Out* album. *Trouble Every Day*. I used to read for laughs, but Darnton's book on how books were banned for comments critical of religion, the state, and morals made me reflect on how the lack of a moral world order has been the basis for ways the religions and states have been getting away with whatever forms of perplexity people are faced with when some people just don't get it.

This was one of the many great books I read in the History of the Enlightenment class I took my senior year of college. My professor told us that Robert Darnton is his main rival in that field, which meant that he's a really good writer who really knows his stuff, does all of the thorough research, and is really familiar with so many facets of the Enlightenment. Though some of the chapters can be a bit academic at times, it never really merges into boring-academic style. He still manages to be interesting while dealing with some rather academic material, such as marketing, ordering, shipping, and which books were selling best with which booksellers. Although most of us did feel that Mr. Darnton used too many untranslated French words, phrases, and titles, like kind of showing off or being pretentious. (This is no longer the era when most people could speak and read French as a second language!) Mr. Darnton breaks down these forbidden best-sellers into the three main categories of political slander, philosophical pornography, and utopian fantasy. Too often we view history through the lens of the ruling-classes or the well-off, not the common masses who were not privileged enough to experience the same things that the rich and the bourgeoisie did. The hoi polloi

of pre-revolutionary France were not reading authors such as Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Diderot, and d'Holbach. They were reading authors such as Louis-Sébastien Mercier, Mathieu-François Pidansat de Mairobert, François de Baculard d'Arnaud, Pietro Bacci Aretino, and Jean Baptiste de Boyer d'Argens. The common people would have no connection to nor use for such high-minded things as philosophy, history, science, and theology. They wanted easily-accessible works on subjects they could grasp, understand, and relate to. However, it was through these books that they ended up soaking up a lot of the Enlightenment ideas anyway, such as personal freedom, the decadence and corruption of the ruling classes, and the importance of the individual. To round off the book, there are three lengthy excerpts provided from prominent examples of the main categories of books Mr. Darnton focuses on--'L'An Deux Mille Quatre Cent Quarante, Rêve s'il en Fût Jamais' ('The Year 2440: A Dream If Ever There Was One'), 'Théâtre des Philosophes,' and 'Anecdotes sur Mme. la Comtesse du Barry.' The first title is utopian fantasy, and is rather like a French version of Rip van Winkle, only this character has been sleeping for over 600 years instead of just 100. He awakens and naturally finds that everything is changed, unable to believe he is now 700 years old, and how much society has changed for the better. The second title is philosophical pornography, though I personally would classify it more as erotica than pornography, seeing as how there's an actual storyline and the point of the book is to communicate ideas about religion and philosophy, not just to show a bunch of characters in bed or engaging in self-gratification. My favorite character was M. l'abbé T.; it's really something else to see this priest railing against his own religion and saying things like "God would only have to destroy the devil and we would all be saved. There must be a lot of injustice or weakness on his part!" and "Thus, with this foreknowledge, God, in creating us, knew in advance that we would be infallibly damned and eternally miserable." He really doesn't pull any punches in lighting into the hypocrisy of society and the priesthood, that's for sure! The final title is political slander, and tells the story of the well-known Countess du Barry, the mistress of King Louis XV. There are a number of racy scenes in this one as well, along with some R-rated songs with the subject of her goings-on with the king. Overall, though it's not exactly the type of book one brings to the beach or reads to pass some time on a rainy day, it should be required reading for all those interested in the Enlightenment and the types of books that the hoi polloi were really reading back then. It certainly made me interested in seeking out the full-length books that are excerpted!

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