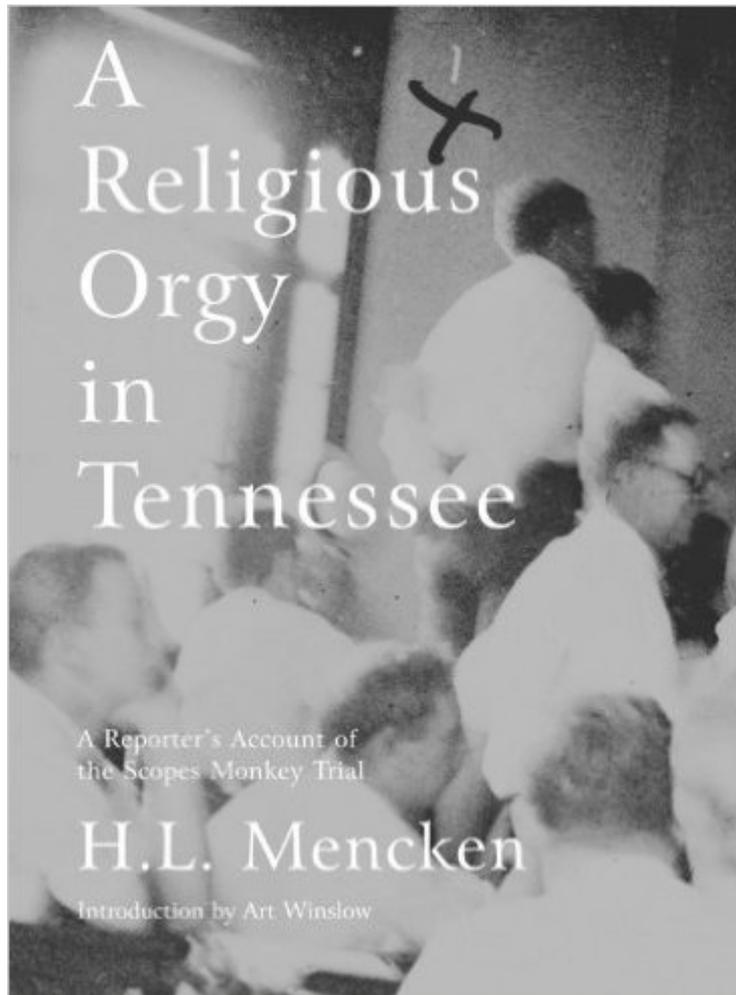


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A Religious Orgy In Tennessee: A Reporter's Account Of The Scopes Monkey Trial



Synopsis

"The native American Voltaire, the enemy of all puritans, the heretic in the Sunday school, the one-man demolition crew of the genteel tradition." —Alistair Cooke Fiercely intelligent, scathingly honest, and hysterically funny, H.L. Mencken's coverage of the Scopes Monkey Trial so galvanized the nation that it eventually inspired a Broadway play and the classic Hollywood movie *Inherit the Wind*. Mencken's no-nonsense sensibility is still exciting: his perceptive rendering of the courtroom drama; his piercing portrayals of key figures Scopes, Clarence Darrow, and William Jennings Bryan; his ferocious take on the fundamentalist culture surrounding it all—including a raucous midnight trip into the woods to witness a secret œholy roller service. Shockingly, these reports have never been gathered together into a book of their own until now. *A Religious Orgy In Tennessee* includes all of Mencken's reports for *The Baltimore Sun*, *The Nation*, and *The American Mercury*. It even includes his coverage of Bryan's death just days after the trial—an obituary so withering Mencken was forced by his editors to rewrite it, angering him and leading him to rewrite it yet again in a third version even less forgiving than the first. All three versions are included, as is a complete transcript of the trial's most legendary exchange: Darrow's blistering cross-examination of Bryan. With the rise of œintelligent design, H.L. Mencken's work has never seemed more unnervingly timely—or timeless.

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Customer Reviews

I'm not especially an admirer of Mencken. He bothers me for much the same reason that Oscar Wilde does: both have a tendency to shoot for the biting witticism, the memorable bon mot, rather

than depth. They're sometimes fun to read, but they rarely serve up anything one can sink one's teeth into. Mencken's *A Religious Orgy in Tennessee*, a collection of columns about the Scopes trial written for "The Baltimore Sun," "The Nation," and "The American Mercury," is more than just entertaining, though. It offers a look at early twentieth-century Christian fundamentalism (Mencken frequently, and incorrectly, calls it "evangelicalism") that is chilling not only for its own intrinsic stupidity--at one point, Mencken cites a woman fundamentalist who boasts that she has no books in her home and that she hates all books but the Bible (p. 54)--but also because it clearly demonstrates that fundamentalism then and fundamentalism now are essentially the same. The fundamentalist hatred of learning, the dogmatic zeal to condemn any theory or opinion not authenticated by scripture, the parochial refusal to look beyond sectarian norms: everything that Mencken encountered in Dayton, Tennessee in 1925 can be attributed to American fundamentalism today. The only difference is that today's fundamentalism is much more organized and media-savvy. Three chapters in particular stand out: Chapter 2, in which Mencken profiles the fundamentalist mind (calling it "Homo neanderthalensis"); Chapter 7, in which he describes a late night revival; and Chapter 16, in which he defends freedom of thought. The first of these three is especially fine, while the second is one of the best pieces of on-the-spot reporting Mencken ever wrote. This edition is troublesome.

I am a huge fan of H. L. Mencken and this addition to the library doesn't disappoint. Mencken was one of America's most respected, despised, and feared journalists. As the number one literary enemy of the fundamentalist most of his career, Mencken was in his element at the John Scopes trial that pitted the science of evolution against the mythology of fundamentalist Christianity. In 1925, Mencken drew the nation's attentions to a trial taking place in Dayton, Tennessee that would test the boundaries of a new law (the Butler Act) that prohibited the teaching of: "any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals." One enterprising individual set about testing the law by asking a local teacher (a friend sympathetic with the cause) to teach Darwin's theory of evolution. That teacher was 24-year-old John T. Scopes. Lasting eight days in the courtroom and eleven days in total, the weather was painfully hot probably irritating Mencken even more. Writing for the *Baltimore Evening Sun*, Mencken's verbal energy and acute wit are stunning (no journalist, pundit, or commentator today even comes close). And much of his sarcastic eloquence comes, of course, at the expense of the key figure at the trial William Jennings Bryan. As the billing promises, these reports are by the most famous newspaperman in American history are vivid, highly intelligent,

scathingly honest, and hysterically funny. Mencken saw the transparent attempt at keeping evolution from being taught in schools contemptible, and the Scopes trial as ample opportunity to ridicule the "yokels," "half-wits," and "buffoons" who believe that man is not a mammal and the earth is less than 6,000 years old.

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