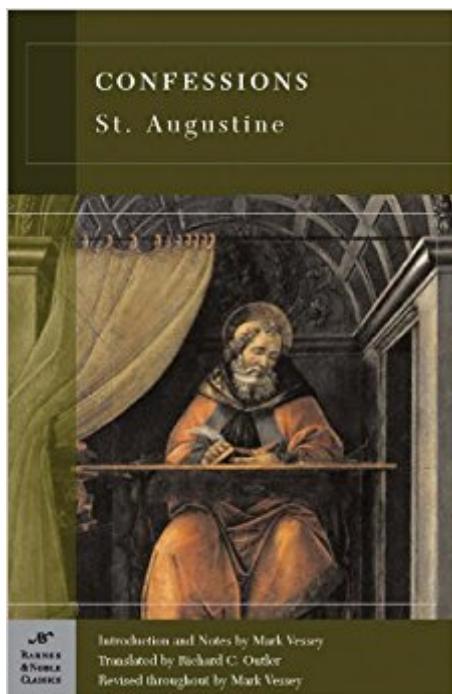


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# Confessions (Barnes & Noble Classics Series)



## Synopsis

Confessions, by St. Augustine, is part of the Barnes & Noble Classics® series, which offers quality editions at affordable prices to the student and the general reader, including new scholarship, thoughtful design, and pages of carefully crafted extras. Here are some of the remarkable features of Barnes & Noble Classics: New introductions commissioned from today's top writers and scholars Biographies of the authors Chronologies of contemporary historical, biographical, and cultural events Footnotes and endnotes Selective discussions of imitations, parodies, poems, books, plays, paintings, operas, statuary, and films inspired by the work Comments by other famous authors Study questions to challenge the reader's viewpoints and expectations Bibliographies for further reading Indices & Glossaries, when appropriate All editions are beautifully designed and are printed to superior specifications; some include illustrations of historical interest. Barnes & Noble Classics pulls together a constellation of influences—biographical, historical, and literary—to enrich each reader's understanding of these enduring works. One of the first personal histories ever written, *The Confessions* of St. Augustine offers more than a gripping narrative of one man's battle against doubt. It is also a brilliant work of theology that helped set the foundation for much of modern Christian thought. In a series of thirteen books, Saint Augustine displays a profound and searching intellect as he examines his life: his early memories of growing up in Roman North Africa during the fourth century A.D., his disgusted response to his mother's faith, his agonies and sins as a student, and finally his dramatic conversion in a garden in Milan. Along the way, the *Confessions* explores with great force and artistry the nature of time, mind, and memory, and lays out Augustine's interpretation of the Book of Genesis. Throughout, Augustine's remarkable depth of thinking is matched only by his elegance of expression, which has powerfully moved readers for more than 1500 years. A timeless classic, the *Confessions* remains an unforgettable portrait of an individual's struggle for self-definition in the presence of a powerful God. Mark Vessey is Professor of English at the University of British Columbia. He is the author of *Latin Christian Authors in Late Antiquity and Their Texts* and co-editor of *Augustine and the Disciplines: Cassiciacum to the Confessions*. He has written extensively on the reception of early Christian Latin writings in the Renaissance and later periods.

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## Customer Reviews

"[Wills] renders Augustine's famous and influential text in direct language with all the spirited wordplay and poetic strength intact." •Los Angeles Times "[Wills's] translations . . . are meant to bring Augustine straight into our own minds; and they succeed. Well-known passages, over which my eyes have often gazed, spring to life again from Wills's pages." •Peter Brown, The New York Review of Books "Augustine flourishes in Wills's hand." •James Wood "A masterful synthesis of classical philosophy and scriptural erudition." •Chicago Tribune --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

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Tremendous writing. Very moving. Amazing phrases that are part of our civilization and which every educated person should know. On the other hand, the Song of Solomon and the book of Proverbs indicates God's attitude towards married sex, which is to say the least, favorable. Augustine deserted a common law wife so he could pursue neo-Platonic asceticism. Martin Luther

rediscovered the Bible and got married. I don't like Augustine the man, and he is not a role model anyone should follow, but he writes compellingly about the love of God, while his deserted wife mourned.

One of my all time favorites is converted masterfully in digital format. Terrific source for finding inner peace and the right direction to lead your life. Highly Recommended. Enjoy!

Augustine's *Confessions* is a classic in theology, philosophy, church history, and early autobiographies and not without reason. *Confessions* provides modern academics with details about daily life in the fourth century Roman Empire, Augustine's pivotal theological and philosophical arguments, and a vivid view of the struggles and aspirations of fourth-century Christians. Various themes permeate Augustine's writings—themes that, perhaps because of Augustine's massive effect on Christian culture, happen to continue in relevance in modern life. Augustine's autobiography is rife with similar and familiar concerns between our time and Augustine's own time. Sexual promiscuity, rebellion against authority, conversion, differing interpretations of divine message, and parental concern are all major themes in this book that continue to carry a heavy weight in modern cultural conflicts. Not unlike many life stories today, Augustine was rebellious as a youth; after experiences of conversion, he turned his life 180 degrees around. This must be a reminder that humans have, for the most part, stayed the same over the last 1600 years, but also a reminder of the widespread influence Augustine's writing has held over so many years of Western culture. The most striking aspect of Augustine's *Confessions* as a window into late antiquity is, in fact, this very reminder that people in late antiquity shared many of the same struggles and conflicts of worldview that those in Western culture share today. Augustine organizes his autobiography into thirteen books. The first three books deal with his life as a student; Augustine discusses his early years in detail that shows his very relatable, human side—childhood opinions on school, peer pressure towards vandalism, and strong sexual drive towards promiscuity as an adolescent. The next six books concern his conversion. He discusses his long process from a smart, passionate, and hedonistic scholar to Manichaeism to (at long last) Christianity. The last three books contain the philosophical and theological discussions Augustine's *Confessions* is known for—discussions of age-old questions like eternity, the radical evil of humanity, and the integrations of Greek philosophy into Christian theology. Together, these

thirteen books work together to make his masterpiece at once endearingly human and relatable as it is brilliant in its theological authority. Augustine’s discussion of his life, with all the personal details and the ex-post-facto lens, shows us more than anything else the similarity of struggles people in late antiquity and modernity went through. In his second book, Augustine repents of the acts of theft he committed in his adolescent years. He tells a story about how he would go to an orchard with some friends, steal pears, and throw them to pigs, only eating a few of the pears. He confesses this story—a story that has been impressed upon his conscience and memory as a deep, dark secret—to God, writing, “What fruit had I, a wretched boy, in these things (Rom. 6:21) which I now blush to recall, above all that theft in which I loved nothing but the theft itself?” (II. viii (16)). He explains that this was not an individual act of crime, but rather an act of foolish adolescent peer pressure: The theft itself was a nothing, and for that reason I was more the miserable. Yet had I been alone I would not have done it. Therefore my love in that act was to be associated with the gang in whose company I did it. my pleasure was not in the pears; it was in the crime itself, done in association with a sinful group. (II. viii (16)) Reading this passage, one realizes that adolescents faced the same peer pressure that they face today. The phenomenon of vandalism is not, it appears, a modern one:

“As soon as the words are spoken Let us go and do it, one is ashamed not to be shameless” (ix (17)).

Augustine’s own lens of retrospective confession shows us that he felt and confessed his guilt in a way not unfamiliar to modern readers. Perhaps the most influential theme of Augustine’s autobiography is that of chastity and purity. Throughout the book, Augustine repents over and over again for his licentious years, disgusted at his own deeds.

Although Augustine might be seen as a terrible hypocrite—condemning his past sins after he committed them all—one must understand that Augustine is not being holier-than-thou. After all, he is writing to God, and is thus incredibly careful to show his repentance for previous deeds. Augustine believes in the radical depravity of man, but his Confessions is ultimately a book of personal repentance, not a book of condemning others’ sins; without God, all men are equally depraved of good. Because of the personal nature of this book, those who choose to read it and be convicted by it do so at their personal choice to be convicted. We are given a view of the family dynamic of the ancient world as well. The modern family of parents with differing religions does not appear to be unusual in late antiquity. Augustine, writing

about his parents’ desire to educate him, tells us that “Both of them, as I realized, were very ambitious for me: my father because he hardly gave a thought to you at all, and his ambitions for me were concerned with mere vanities; my mother because she thought it would do no harm and would be a help to set me on the way towards you, if I studied the traditional pattern of a literary education. That at least is my conjecture as I try to recall the characters of my parents” (iii (8)). The lack of surprise with which Augustine writes of his parents’ differing religions makes it apparent that such mixed marriages were not uncommon. However, Augustine also shows us the regularity of domestic abuse within late antiquity. Augustine’s father “was exceptional both for his kindness and for his quick temper” (IX. ix (19)), yet Augustine’s mother, Saint Monica, in her piety bore the abuse, knowing “that an angry husband should not be opposed, not merely by anything she did, but even by a word” (IX. ix (19)); after his bout of anger had passed, she would reason with him again. “[M]any wives,” writes Augustine, “married to gentler husbands bore the marks of blows and suffered disfigurements to their faces” (IX. ix (19)). Yet she was so dedicated to her husband “as her lord” that she even rebuked other wives for complaining about their husbands’ abuse. Augustine certainly does not dismiss his father’s behavior as acceptable, but it does seem from his writing that such abuse was common behavior with few consequences. Although the marital relationships of ancient antiquity differed significantly from the modern dynamics, the process of Augustine’s conversion bares many parallels to contemporary religious conversions. The close involvement of family, the fervent prayer over many years, and the passionate and bright young scholar’s realization and conversion are all familiar motifs that are found in Augustine’s conversion process. While still a Manichaean, Augustine’s mother asked her priest to debate with Augustine in order to convince him to become a Christian. The priest refused, saying that Augustine “was still unready to learn, still in the pliable conceits of youth. He simply told her to continue to pray for Augustine, whilst assuring her that Augustine would eventually come to realize the truth of Christianity in his reading. Naturally, she was unhappy with such a response from the priest. In any case, this scenario closely reflects the familiar case of the religious parent who worries for her child’s obsession with a certain religion in Augustine’s case, Manichaeism. The partisan aspect of religious disagreement so widespread within today’s culture is also apparent in Augustine’s

writing: “[H]e [the priest] told her [Saint Monica] how he himself as a small boy had been handed over to the Manicheans by his mother, whom they had led astray” (III. xii (21)). Disagreement on interpretation of Saint Monica’s vision about Augustine’s conversion also adds to the realism of Augustine’s account; while Augustine believed that Saint Monica would convert to Manichaeism, Saint Monica interpreted the vision to mean that Augustine would become Christian. Augustine’s conversion from a young rebel to an austere conservative from a series of realizations is reminiscent of the twentieth-century Jesus movement that stemmed largely from the hippie movement. Although Augustine was no hippie – not even an intellectual hippie – he was nonetheless a rebel, and during his conversion he channeled all of his anti-establishmentarian attitude into becoming averse to the common practices of worldly pleasures. One controversial form of entertainment in late antiquity was the gladiatorial games. Augustine writes vehemently against them in Book VI chapters vii-viii, lamenting the love of the gladiatorial games some of his close friends held. Somehow the games possessed an incredible ability to enliven the bloodlust in a person, and people could become addicted to the games from first sight. Describing a friend who had been resistant to watch a gladiatorial game, Augustine writes: “As soon as he saw the blood, he at once drank in savagery and did not turn away. His eyes were riveted. He imbibed madness. Without any awareness of what was happening to him, he found delight in the murderous contest and was inebriated by bloodthirsty pleasure. He was not now the person who had come in, but just one of the crowd which he had joined, and a true member of the group which had brought him” (VI. viii (13)). Roman gladiatorial fights do not exist in the modern world, yet this form of entertainment was a common part of the daily life of many Roman citizens. Augustine’s perspective sheds light both on the widespread access to such entertainment and the controversial nature this entertainment held – not unlike many modern controversial issues that concern libertarian principles – and gives us a great insider’s view of the phenomenon of the Roman gladiatorial fights and its place in society while under the magnifying glass of controversy and going through the transition that led to its extinction. Writing in the late antiquity, Augustine’s personal autobiography gives us an authentic, honest, open-hearted view of his life. The details Augustine discusses when writing about his struggles as a youth show us that people in late antiquity had many similarities and faced similar challenges as do people in modern times. To be sure, some things have changed: Roman gladiatorial fights are illegal in most countries, and domestic abuse is much less common in first-world countries. Nonetheless, the

striking similarities between people in late antiquity and today are revealed by the personal perspective Augustine's autobiography provides. People may have enjoyed different forms of entertainment at the time, but ultimately the struggles and social forces that propelled people to right and wrong have remained the same.

Incredible historic setting and the courage and conviction of one believer. Just on fortitude alone, it's incredible to read. And, makes me want to read Early Church Fathers and dig into Logos software all the more. Profound faith builder, for those interested in the Christian relationship and an undaunted model in speaking one's own undiluted truth to compromising leadership in any era this world and its occupants have seen.

This is the first autobiography in Western Civilization, perhaps the world. Augustine was not so different from your typical American 20 something. He had a live in girlfriend, fathered a child reluctantly out of wedlock, went to all the "prestigious," universities at the time, taught at them, fell for the "enlightened," Mancicheans before his conversion. His mother also interesting had her flaws before overcoming them as well and praying him into heaven. The first part of the book is a page turner. The second part, dives into some pretty thick theology and philosophy and I have gotten bogged down in it. That being said, give this book to somebody seeking Truth, perhaps a lapsed Catholic and anyone who thinks they can't be a saint. Augustine is our hope, he was exactly like many of us and now is one of the Church Fathers whose name will never be forgotten,

I've only just begun to read it. This is another book that I am "revisiting." I read it as a young woman, but I have forgotten so much, esp. my reaction. Right now, as an elderly woman, an intelligent one albeit, but I find it slow reading because it is so difficult to read and comprehend at the same time. I find it interesting, as a Catholic, to learn that some of the Church's premises came from, such as original sin.

Much of this book is tedious. However, his metaphysical discussions are worth reading. It's not a page turner, but if you are interested in the varieties of religious experience or the history of religions, this is a worthwhile read.

Reading it made me look back on my life and start to imagine the "what if" moments. St. Augustine's generally views what he believes he has done wrong. For a sin is not only that which can easily be

seen or known, but also the things we and other individuals aren't even sure are wrong. I started to slowly understand that no matter what, we are all sinners, and that we need to start taking the steps into trying to get closer to God, to our faith, to our final destination (heaven). For only God truly knows what is incorrect, and only He needs to forgive you. This book is a helpful encouragement into praying daily, and in reading the bible more often. I just hope that I will continue following the things acquired from it."Neither heaven, nor earth, nor any other body is thy God." ... "but thy God is even unto thee the Life of thy life." - St. Augustine of Hippo

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