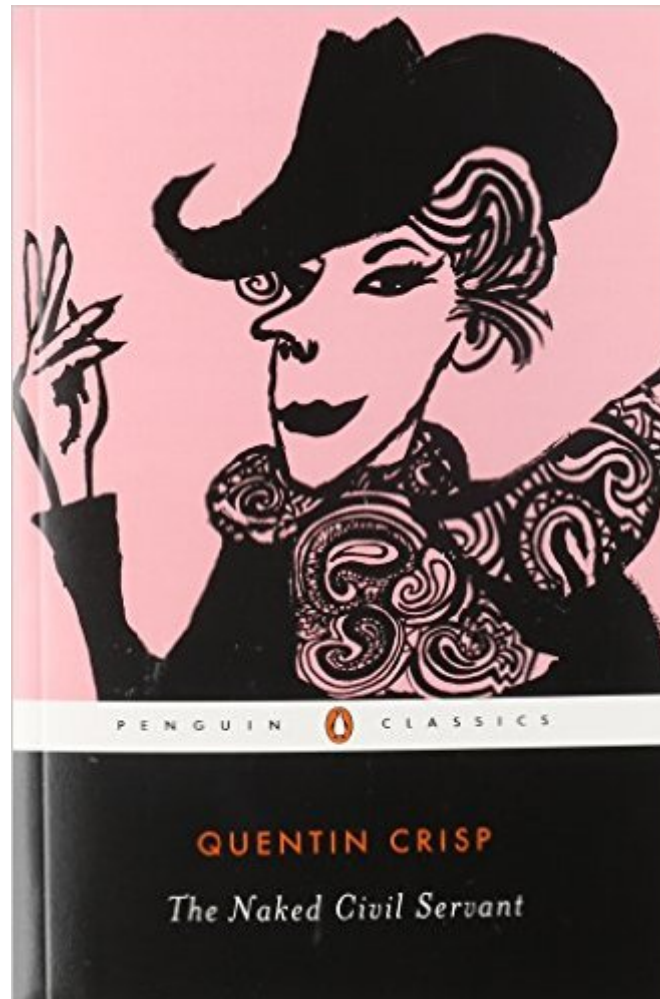


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The Naked Civil Servant (Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics)



Synopsis

A comical and poignant memoir of a gay man living life as he pleased in the 1930s. In 1931, gay liberation was not a movement—it was simply unthinkable. But in that year, Quentin Crisp made the courageous decision to "come out" as a homosexual. This exhibitionist with the henna-dyed hair was harassed, ridiculed and beaten. Nevertheless, he claimed his right to be himself—whatever the consequences. *The Naked Civil Servant* is both a comic masterpiece and a unique testament to the resilience of the human spirit. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

Book Information

Series: Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics

Paperback: 240 pages

Publisher: Penguin Classics; Revised ed. edition (May 1, 1997)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0141180536

ISBN-13: 978-0141180533

Product Dimensions: 5 x 0.6 x 7.7 inches

Shipping Weight: 6.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars — See all reviews (31 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #146,589 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #5 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Specific Groups > LGBT > Gay #173 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Specific Demographics > Gay & Lesbian #231 in Books > Gay & Lesbian > Nonfiction

Customer Reviews

Quentin Crisp truly embodies the expression "to thine own self be true." But his life bumped up against another cliché, "don't frighten the horses." As a young man in London during the 1920s and 1930s, he lived openly as an effeminate, homosexual man, not closeted, but, as he says in these witty memoirs, "brazening it out" and willing to take the social and other lumps associated with such visibility. Actually, his sexuality seems to be the least of his problems in these sharply observed autobiographical accounts. An eccentric in the true British tradition, he refused ever to dust his

bedroom, observing that after the first three years the dust didn't get any worse . . . and at bedtime he slipped beneath the seldom-washed sheets ensconced in cold cream like a cocoon in its chrysalis. Corporate life had its own bewilderments and intrigues for Mr. Crisp, who was silly enough to take literally what he was told to do. When asked to buy his employer a pair of scissors, he went to a good stationery store and spent one shilling sixpence (eighteen pence, pre-decimalization, about US\$.50 at that time) for a good pair of office scissors. This frightened his office colleague no end, who had expected him to pick up a cheap pair at Woolworth's for sixpence. Crisp facetiously suggested denominating the more costly pair "paper shears" and was aghast when she accepted his notion all too happily. His droll take on the mismatch between his mentality and the corporate life shows us that his ego demands no grandiosity, no sense of who is "right" and who is "wrong," but simply a perpetual befuddlement at two mindsets that can never understand each other.

Rereading "The Naked Civil Servant" after many years, I find Quentin Crisp's melancholy wit just as bracing as I did when I first encountered the book. The chiseled perfection of Crisp's aphorisms recall Oscar Wilde (though Crisp's distaste for Wilde was famous; Wilde's hubris and subsequent downfall made life that much harder for the gay men, such as Crisp, who came after him). One famous example: "I would have been tempted to say that he was ill did I not know that health consists of having the same diseases as one's neighbors." Another: "'Immaturity' is one more word that requires definition. To men it means the inability to stand on one's own two feet. A woman flings it at anyone who doesn't want to marry her. Here I find myself for once inclined toward the masculine view." Yet despite the humor, the overwhelming mood of "The Naked Civil Servant" is of loneliness. Crisp, who outed himself flamboyantly forty years before Stonewall, presents himself as a wildly contradictory character: exhibitionistic yet inherently and Englishly modest, too honest to present himself as anything other than he was, yet realizing fully the opprobrium and loss of companionship he would suffer by doing so. Reading his autobiography shows a younger generation of gay men precisely the mindset a hidebound society instilled in homosexuals in the early 20th century. Crisp, despite his flamboyance, was not immune to it: "Homosexuals were ashamed. They resented not being in the mainstream of life. The feeling varied from irritation to the anguish of irrevocable exile. It had little to do with God or the neighbors or the police. It was private and irremediable.

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