George Washington's False Teeth: An Unconventional Guide to the Eighteenth Century

Robert Darnton
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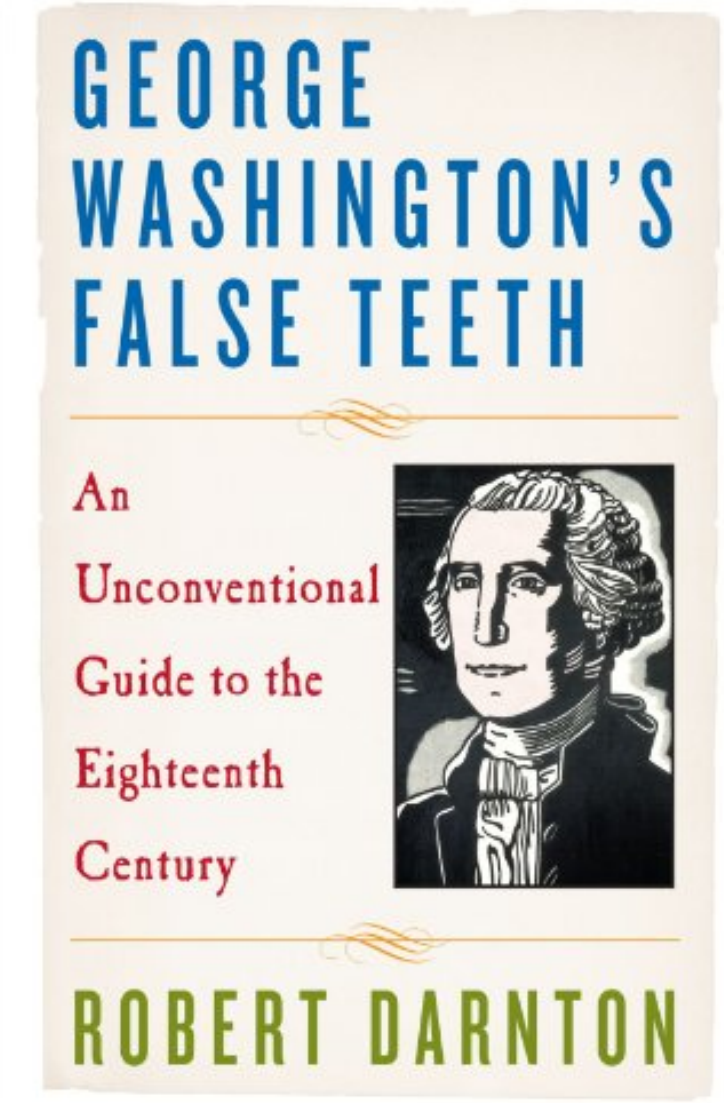

#3724089 in Books Robert Darnton 2003-05-17Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 8.43 x .51 x 5.51l, .65 #File Name: 0393337472224 pagesGeorge Washington s False Teeth | File size: 72.Mb

Robert Darnton : George Washington's False Teeth: An Unconventional Guide to the Eighteenth Century before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised George Washington's False Teeth: An Unconventional Guide to the Eighteenth Century:

39 of 41 people found the following review helpful. Kind of BlandBy pnotley@hotmail.comRobert Darnton's latest book consists of a series of assorted essays. Most are from the nineties, though one is from the eighties and one is a

reworking of a chapter of his doctoral dissertation in the sixties. Darnton starts with a defense of the Enlightenmnet, then goes on to discuss information networks in ancien regime France ("the eighteenth century Internet.") He then goes on to discuss cosmpolitanism in 18th century Europe, Voltaire and Jefferson's differing ideas of happiness, Rousseau as an anthropologist, the debate in pre-1789 France over the nature of the United States, the Girondin leader Brissot and stock market speculation in the 1780s, and finally an autobiographical essay on his work in the archives and his research on Brissot.The result is a work that is less successful and less interesting that Darnton's two previous collection of essays "The Great Cat Massacre" and "The Kiss of Lamourette." Only the essays on the Parisian Internet and the quarrel between Condorcet and Brissot on America show new scholarly research. We see some of Darnton's old themes: the communication of ideas, the quasi-pornographic Enlightenment Undergound, but little that is new. The essay on Rousseau is an intelligent, not unsympathetic discussion of his career which looks like it could be a good article for Harpers' (and where in fact it was published in the eighties). The discussion of cosmpolitanism seems superficially interesting: in the 18th century publishers spewed out French books from London to Amsterdam to Dresden. During the Seven Years War Laurence Sterne travelled around France without any concern that the French might object to his presence, while Voltaire personally congratulated Frederick the Great for his victories over Voltaire's king. But these facts tell us little that would not be already known to students of the eighteenth century. The same lack of insight hurts his essay on happiness.The title essay in defence of the Enlightenment is definitely the most lively. Darnton criticizes those who accuse it of such sins as imperialism, Orientalism, Nihilism, Positivism, and Totalitarianism. He makes some good points but the result is not fully convincing. For a start, he is not fair to the criticism of Adorno and the Frankfurt School. They saw themselves not as the enemies of the Enlightenment but as critics, as its loyal opposition. Adorno himself several times stated that the only cure for the damage caused to the world by reason is more reason. So while it is true that in our day and age there are no alternative moral criteria than those set up in the Enlightenment, it is also, in Adorno's case, somewhat beside the point.Another problem with the essay is a certain tendentiousness. It is all very well to point out Diderot's cosmopolitianism, Voltaire's campaigns against judicial murder and Abbe Raynal's defense of the Indians. It is vitally important to remember that the Counter-Enlightenment contributed far more to the evils of slavery, misogyny and anti-Semitism. But the failure of the Democratic Party to treat their fellow Americans of African descent with basic decency cannot be blamed on the heavy weight of the Habsburgs or the Holy Office of the Inquisition. Likewise, even if one is sympathetic to the Jacobins, one cannot disassociate the Enlightenment from Terror, as Darnton does, simply because Robespierre preferred Rousseau to the Encyclopediasts. And there is the other side of the Enlightenment. There is Hume's support of slavery and Kant's indulgence of racism. Helvetius can be horribly crass nor can Adam Smith be entirely exculpated from those who used "The Wealth of Nations" as an excuse to let people starve in famines. And where is Bentham? Bentham's crass philistinism, his plans for perfect prisons and his having his butler executed for stealing some silverware make him the perfect villian of "Discipline and Punish." He cannot be so easily ignored.The best essay in the final one as Darnton recounts how as an archival student he learned by accident that Brissot may have been a spy for the French police while Marat had not been guilty of theft and imprisoned in the 1770s. At times it is amusing: when he visited Orleans, the chief archivist, a man named Le Maire, offered to give him a tour of the city. Darnton's French was so bad then he thought the mayor of Orleans was personally welcoming him. But as it goes on it is a touching story of how Darnton found out incriminating facts about someone he had once admired and found that he was guilty of crude huckstering and self-deceit. These days it is easy for people to join the winning side and claim that they were just facing the hard truths. Darnton's essay shows the real ambiguities such self-righteous bluster hides.10 of 10 people found the following review helpful. EnjoyableBy J. C. ClackThe unconventional in the subtitle "An Unconventional Guide to the Eighteenth Century" is a little deceiving. This reader expected to find curiosities large and small, such as Mr. Washington's false teeth in an exegesis to show how different that century was from the ones we grew up in.The unconventianility is really Mr. Darnton's insinuation of himself into the text with many allusions from the 18th century to ours. It's ok - it's a historian's sin he cheerily admits up front. So Paris's informal political communication networks of gossip, handbills, songs, subversive literature, et al. focuses on ... well ... the King's sex life. There's more to it than that, of course, but still, in all a lot like the internet and a certain recent president.The last chapter, "The Skeletons in the Closet: How Historians Play God" is worth the price of admission.4 of 73 people found the following review helpful. WhateverBy A CustomerAnyone who teaches at Princeton shouldn't be allowed to publish a book with the words "false teeth" on the cover!

A master historian's excavations into the past unearth a world that is unexpected and compelling. George Washington was inaugurated as president in 1789 with one tooth in his mouth, a lower left bicuspid. The Father of His Country had sets of false teeth that were made of everything but wood, from elephant ivory and walrus tusk to the teeth of a fellow human. With characteristic learning and bracing insight, Robert Darnton shows us that the Enlightenment had false teeth alsothat it was not the Father of Our Modern World, responsible for all its advances and transgressions. In restoring the Enlightenment to human scale, Darnton locates its real aims, ambitions, and significance. So too with the French Revolution, another icon of the eighteenth century, approached here through the gossip, songs, and broadsides

that formed the political nervous system of Paris in the Old Regime. Figures we think we knowVoltaire, Jefferson, Rousseau, Condorcet, even historians themselvesemerge afresh in Darnton's hands, their vitality, if not their teeth, intact. 17 b/w illustrations.

From Publishers WeeklyAs Princeton history professor Darnton notes in his introduction, "everything about the eighteenth century is strange, once you examine it in detail." His pleasingly eccentric book of essays offers many surprising supporting examples. But this isn't a mere laundry list of oddities; Darnton is thoughtful and engaging in his historical analysis of the Enlightenment, and his narrative, in which he occasionally appears in the musing, professorial first person, will absorb the educated lay reader. In "The News in Paris," Darnton considers how news was disseminated in the city in 1750. It was not, he says, through newspapers, "because papers with news in them-news as we understand it today, about public affairs and prominent persons-did not exist. The government did not allow them." He traces the complicated methods by which court gossip and political machinations spread throughout the Parisian populace, concluding that 21st-century Washington resembles 18th-century Paris in its focus on "political folklore" and the private lives of leaders instead of the platforms they espouse. In "The Great Divide," Darnton records Rousseau's early picaresque adventures and then shows how the great philosopher (and "first anthropologist") came to regard civilization as a "process of corruption," and later to champion a patriotic civil religion. Throughout, Darnton uses the 18th century to provide "historical perspective to current questions"-about, for example, the shifting of European identity and the Internet's influence on information sharing-and openly ruminates about the problems of being a historian. This is a well-researched and sharply intelligent book, and Darnton is a knowledgeable and delightful guide to the time period. 17 bw illustrations Irresistible....[Darnton]...cut[s] the Enlightenment down to size, humanizing it....Sharp perspectives, adroit observations, vivid historical consciousness. -- Kirkus s, starred review, 15 April 2003About the AuthorRobert Darnton is the Carl H. Pforzheimer University Professor and the director of the University Library at Harvard University. His honors include a MacArthur Prize, the National Humanities Medal, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, and election to the French Legion of Honor. He is the author of The Great Cat Massacre and The Forbidden Bestsellers of Pre-Revolutionary France, winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award.