



The Complete Thinker: The Marvelous Mind of G.K. Chesterton

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From Reader Review The Complete Thinker: The Marvelous Mind of G.K. Chesterton for online ebook

Julie Davis says

The book description:

What does it mean to be a "complete thinker"? It means being able to take on a wide variety of ideas and disciplines and put them all together in a way that they work together. It means thinking like G.K. Chesterton.

The English author G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936) was one of the most prolific and well-known writers of his time, and one of the most widely quoted in our own. For newspapers and magazines, he wrote social commentary, literary criticism, and poetry with poignancy and wit. Creator of the beloved detective Father Brown, Chesterton also wrote novels and short stories.

"Thinking", wrote Chesterton, "means connecting things." His ideas are not only connected to each other, they are also connected to us, showing that the thought of Chesterton is timeless. In a world of increasing specialization, Chesterton connects us to the big picture by helping us see how the many and varied elements within our experience fit together. He sheds light on almost every subject and opens doors from one thing to another with dazzling clarity.

Drawing on literally hundreds of references from Chesterton's vast writings, Dale Ahlquist conducts a symphony, with Chesterton playing all the instruments in perfect harmony.

Chesterton's thoughts on almost everything--from east to west, from old to new, from politics to economics, from Shakespeare to Dickens--are woven together to create an illuminating whole.

This was not a book I'd have picked up on my own but since I got a review copy I flipped through and kept finding my eye catching on clever comments. Well. After all, we are talking about the master of soundbytes, G.K. Chesterton. But there is more to it than that. Dale Ahlquist is capturing the essence of Chesterton somehow (or so I suppose since he is the head of a Chesterton society ... and I have read only some of Chesterton's short stories).

I was fascinated and just kept reading until I got through chapter 3, at which point, time forced me to put it aside for a prior reading commitment. However, Ahlquist used his three chapters to good effect. I stepped away pondering which nonfiction of G.K.'s to try. Luckily my book club obliged by choosing The Dumb Ox for next year's list.

I will return to this book which I was really enjoying.

Steve says

Mr. Ahlquist captures the completeness of the greatest thinker, writer, and wit of the 20th Century - G.K. Chesterton. Mr. Ahlquist writes well and guides us through a convincing picture of what it means to be a "complete" thinker, and how the only way to be a "complete" thinker is to be a religious thinker, to have ones

thoughts grounded in immovable truth. Truth is a word that is neglected or dismissed in modern culture, but without Truth we are lost and depressed souls wondering through a complex reality that often times seems dark. This darkness is a paradox (one of the themes of the book) in that what seems to be darkness is really light which is too bright to see because we are not using the eyes of truth, but keep our eyelids shut.

DROPPING OUT says

I started a week ago, picking it up to read several times a day. So why so relatively little progress? Well, the book is one of those rare gems in which I find myself going back to read over a sentence, or a paragraph, or a page, or a chapter!

Perhaps presumptuous of me, but this is, in my opinion, Ahlquist's best Chesterton book.

This has been put on a shelf of favorite reads, for I cannot resist picking it up and reading passages at random.

Clare Cannon says

I was delighted to meet the author, Chesterton fanatic Dale Ahlquist, in November this year when I visited Alabama. You know those people who, having discovered an amazing truth, are so buzzing with deep excitement that you can't help but catch it? I loved Chesterton before, but meeting Dale and reading his new book has reminded me just how wise he is.

Ahlquist asserts that Chesterton's genius is not only that he has written about everything, but that he puts it all together and is therefore a 'complete thinker'. Complete thinking may not be efficient, Ahlquist explains, but it makes us consider what is important, what is worthwhile, and what is the coherent connection between all that we know is true. This contrasts with our modern tendency to departmentalise learning so that everything is separated from everything else, for fear of 'generalising'. But it is only through complete thinking that we can truly understand all that is.

In this book Ahlquist explores Chesterton's insights on truth, the limits of language, the problem of evil and sin, the universe, tradition and modernity, comparative religion, war, politics and law, commerce and capitalism, sickness and health, and life and death. As Ahlquist says, "[Chesterton] never wearies of telling the truth, which is why we never weary of quoting him. The truth is always fresh and exciting."

www.GoodReadingGuide.com

Robert Jacoby says

I bought this book very excited to read it. In all my studies I've heard of Chesterton and read snippets of him here and there. He is, as Ahlquist states over and over, a very quotable writer. I wanted a deeper dive, so when I saw an ad for this book, read the synopsis of it at the publisher's website, and read several quoted

reviews, I thought: This is it; this is my introduction to the man.

Ahlquist divides his book into 17 chapters, several of which carry "black and white" titles such as "Old and New", "East and West", "War and Peace", etc. The problem with such an approach is apparent from the titles themselves: rarely does real life compartmentalize itself so easily, so very neatly; so before I've even begun to read I was wondering, "How is this going to be pulled off?" The answer, as I read, is: not very well.

I began reading in earnest but was disappointed rather quickly. Ahlquist's style of writing irritated me a bit; it is simple, but not simply explaining things, as an F.F. Bruce might. For example: the tedious exploration of "how young people talk" (p. 24-25) as a reflection of how they think. You're seriously taking a 13-year-old girl and holding her up as to how "they" think? (I almost put the book down right there.) Or, later: "G.K. Chesterton is truly a man of letters. Truly." (p. 46). OK, I really believe you. Really.

Be warned, too, that Ahlquist is a devout Roman Catholic, and his view shows through in many points and parts. It seems that every few pages he is writing "...and this brings us to the Catholic Church." Just a sampling includes the following: Contraception is an "unnatural act" (p. 105); the "Virgin Mary" is the "perfect woman" (p. 128); theories of the "just war" (Chapter 9); Calvinism (the Reformation) is heresy (p. 153); clergy (I'm assuming Roman Catholic priests) are exceptional (throughout the text; whereas the New Testament writers clearly cite all believers as the new priesthood); and the authority of the pope (p. 244). Of course, for Ahlquist, the "object of sex is life" (that is, procreation) (p. 199). I disagree in strong terms with his point here: as a 50-year-old man, I can tell you without reservation that the object of my sex is mutual pleasure, not procreation. And as a Christian (I was born Catholic but became a Christian when I was 22), the sexual act to me is a physical, emotional, and spiritual union that reflects in some way the mystical union of Christ with His bride, the Church.

Ahlquist presents some concepts in large brushstrokes where dipping into particulars might serve him (and the reader) better. For example, in the chapter "Old and New" he talks of Modernism as if he is living in the time of Chesterton (and not in the 21st century). He disparages "modern philosophers" and "new theologians" but does not name any. In the late chapter on "Sickness and Health" he laments that folks without health insurance "have no business darkening the doors of a hospital" (p. 181). This is simply not true; I know he is doing it for effect and reaching for humor; but such broad strokes serve little purpose but to inflame emotions around an issue that is all at once economic, personal, and political. And sometimes in his enthusiastic approach to the material he seems to leave vital things out. For example, in the chapter on "Sickness and Health", Ahlquist writes that Chesterton is trying to help us have a "right understanding of the human person, who is a combination of body and spirit" (p. 192). Humans are actually tripartite beings (body, soul, and spirit; see 1 Thessalonians 5:23). This is no small error. Neither is his confusion of "religion" and "spirituality". Or when he quotes Chesterton that earth is a task garden and heaven is a playground. Really? That's the summation of your spirituality? your theology? of how we're here on earth to store up treasure in heaven in preparation for what is to come? Beyond being a childish view of the spiritual world, it is a weak and dangerous view.

More irritating than troublesome are Ahlquist's metatext moments ("speaking to the reader") sprinkled throughout the text, where it literally feels like he stops writing his book to wink at the reader. "I mention all this right here because it is certainly relevant, but also because you are probably going to skip chapter 12, which is about economics, just like you skipped the last chapter, which was about sin" (p. 89). I felt like jumping right into the book to retort: "Well, no, Mr. Ahlquist, I did not skip the chapter on sin, and I won't be skipping the chapter on economics. But you're giving me lots of reasons to do so!" And sometimes his asides are condescending: "The harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace." (Haven't heard that last one? It's from the Epistle of Saint James, chapter 3, verse 18. And the verses that come right

after it explain why wars begin. You should probably look them up sometime.)" (p. 122-123) Thanks, Mr. Ahlquist, but I do know that one; because I've read the Bible from cover to cover, twice, in two different translations.

All is not lost, though. There are some great moments in the book. They mostly come when Ahlquist is quoting Chesterton (which he does liberally; wide swaths of the book are given over to block quotations from Chesterton; sometimes this works, sometimes this works to distract). In the chapter "East and West" (basically pitting Christianity against Buddhism), Chesterton is quoted: "It is as true of democratic fraternity as of divine love; sham love ends in compromise and common philosophy; but real love has always ended in bloodshed" (p. 113). (But then he goes down a rabbit hole with some odd review of a book of poems Chesterton wrote and how the poet was a heroin addict, a Satanist, and a tool of the Illuminati. Very odd.) "It is terrible to contemplate how few politicians are hanged" (p. 140). The chapter on "Buying and Selling" and Chesterton's role in the formation of and advocacy for Distributism (on the political spectrum between the Left's Socialism and the Right's Capitalism). It's the idea that property ownership is a fundamental right of man. Here Ahlquist gets on a great roll: "Freedom means self-government, which means ruling yourself instead of having someone else rule you. But ruling yourself means self-control" (p. 171). As an aside, it's interesting to note how Ahlquist quotes Chesterton many times on the importance of liberty--for example, "Property is really the positive form of Liberty." (p. 178). But he does not bring it full circle back to Jefferson's famous words in the Declaration of Independence: "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"--and how that phrase was debated among the founders and that some argued for "the pursuit of property". Evidently, Jefferson and Chesterton were closer thinkers than anyone realized!

For all this I found the book an interesting and eye-opening read. It did serve its purpose as a solid introduction to Chesterton, "the complete thinker". The man's breadth and depth of writings are quite impressive. And there are many wonderful one liners to remember and even write down. My issue with the book was Ahlquist's heavy hand throughout, inserting himself with his stilted, unhelpful, and sometimes confusing prose into the text to try to prove his own particular points (some would say to grind his ax). While I can agree with him on many issues about society's decay, and the reasons for that decay, it did not work for me in how he was presenting it here. Finally, for me, Ahlquist failed in what he set out to do--to put it all together (p. 14)--because the book has not brought together the totality of Chesterton's thoughts, it simply compartmentalizes his different thoughts on different subjects. Then the book just ends. Still, he could not prevent the brilliance of Chesterton from shining through. It was a decent overview of Chesterton's writings on a wide variety of topics and, in parts, a very challenging and enjoyable read.

2.5/5 stars. "it was ok"

Jary Welker says

I have always love the GK Chesterton quotes that I would encounter - they always seemed to make so much sense - and now I understand why. While I may not agree with his Catholic faith, the man is truly a 'complete thinker' and will make anyone else who reads his material a better thinker. This work by Dale Ahlquist will lead me to read Chesterton.

Ann says

Dale Ahlquist does Chesterton a great service by skillfully weaving together a tapestry of Chestertonian thought on a vast number of topics. Showing to the reader that Chesterton is indeed a "complete thinker" ... able to address large and small issues with his signature wit, humor, intellect, and faith. Chesterton is indeed one who holds the beacon of truth high for all who want to see it. Dale Ahlquist shows how his thinking on a wide variety of topics connects always to his deeply rooted faith in what is true ... Chesterton himself said, "Thinking means connecting things." And I think Ahlquist has made a solid case that what Chesterton's thinking does is connect things to the truth.

As always when reading Chesterton, I am so amazed at how current his thought is ... even though he died in 1936, western culture was already struggling and reeling from the force of ideas that threatened to shake the foundations of what people saw as outdated religion ... subjects such as evolution, euthanasia, abortion, militant feminism, government run health care, relativism ... all these things were coming onto the public scene at the turn of the century and Chesterton saw in all of them the weaknesses that were inherent in each idea when placed up against truth.

James Wallace says

Champagne

Excellent and comprehensive. G.K. Chesterton would be proud of Ahlquist's evaluation, and I agree personally: to read Chesterton is to drink champagne

Seth says

Dale Ahlquist would rather be reading Chesterton than reading anyone else, and he wants to bring us, his readers, to the same place. I will readily affirm that this book greatly magnified my appetite for reading Chesterton--and it was already high--if for no other reason than the sheer volume of topics that Chesterton wrote about. He was one of the most prolific writers of the last 100 years, and literally every view he expressed--on any topic--was cohesive, internally consistent, and related to all his other views. He was able to discern the true heart of an issue and to describe it with a clarity of insight that was often surprising in its simplicity.

I've read Chesterton's Father Brown mysteries and quite enjoyed them. I've started *Orthodoxy* and *The Everlasting Man* more than once, and I'm even more determined now to get through them. The difficulty is not that Chesterton is unreadable. The opposite is true. Rather, the intellectual routes he takes to get to his final conclusions seem meandering while reading them--but once you get to the end, everything clicks into place and you realize how simple yet profound his point is. It takes consistent mental concentration to fully engage Chesterton. But it's worth it, and Ahlquist is a good evangelist for doing so.

If Ahlquist's goal is to get the reader to thirst for Chesterton, he succeeds, but he occasionally does so in a negative way. Much of the book is simply a string of Chesterton quotes pulled from a myriad of sources, with Ahlquist guiding the conversation and providing a summary of Chesterton's view on the particular subject at hand. If Ahlquist would rather be reading Chesterton, as he states, he sometimes makes the reader want to skip his own book *about Chesterton and simply move to the real stuff*.

If this were a biography, it would border on hagiography, as Ahlquist clearly adores Chesterton and is up-

front about dismissing literally all of his critics. But this book isn't about Chesterton the man, or his life, per se. It's about his mind, and the comprehensive worldview found in it. There is truly no thinker like Chesterton.

Marvin McCooty says

Clear, funny, nuanced, and very helpful. Chesterton was a great thinker, and this book will help all become better thinkers.

Erik says

I love Chesterton quotations, so this book was enjoyable. The author mixes his own thoughts with Chesterton's with a heavy dose of quotes on 14 topics. A few of the chapters were not as enjoyable as others, but overall it is a treasure trove.

Nathan Albright says

In reading this book there was the frequent feeling that the author was overselling his case in Chesterton's greatness, and even more so in the greatness of the Roman Catholic Church whose larger agendas he lamentably served. My response to this book was somewhat complex, as might be imagined. I came to appreciate, for one, the way that the author was highly inspired by Chesterton and the wide variety of his writings, only some of which are slightly familiar to me [1]. Anyone who can write movingly on pocket lint has a great deal of personal respect as someone who likewise seeks profound meaning in the triviality and mundane qualities of my existence. On the other hand, I saw in the author's continual attempts to use the intellect and skill and humility of Chesterton to bolster the protean cultural agendas of the Roman Catholic Church as distinctly unwelcome and deeply ominous. I was left, therefore, with a profound desire to know Chesterton better from his own writings to the extent that is possible while also remaining deeply suspicious of his supposed friends, like this author and others who would use his writing and thinking as popish apologetic writings.

In taking 250 pages to examine the complete nature of Chesterton's thinking, the author examines a great deal of very serious matters. Probing questions of education, including how to think, as well as the importance in seeking and remaining grounded in truth and wrestling with the limits and frequent imprecision of language, the author then turns to questions of evil, sin, the universe and other little things (like elephants!). The author explores Chesterton's well known love of paradox in looking at old and new, East and West (Chesterton was a perceptive and early critic of the Buddhism that has become increasingly popular in the West), and war and peace. The author examines Chesterton's insights into politics, economics, health, life and death, and hope. Towards the end of the book the author examines such issues as being, through Chesterton's noted literary criticism, and his insights into the exception proving the rule, before including a rare discussion of Chesterton's decisive but forgotten demolishing of the scientific and philosophical arguments of Clarence Darrow. In the course of these demonstrations of the larger nature of Chesterton's thinking, the author shines light on a variety of works by Chesterton himself, ranging from philosophical and theological ones to comical sketches and insightful literary criticism on Shakespeare and others, to prescient insights into politics, economics, and international relations. The author even manages to

tackle the issue of Chesterton's bulky weight, showing him to have been a large person but not a glutton, and a prolific writer who nevertheless considered himself slothful, both of which I can relate to all too well, sadly.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given my own perspective, Chesterton comes off much better than the author. This book shines when the author puts down his own pen and lets Chesterton speak (or, in this case, write) for himself. In all too many cases, though, the author takes issue with those who would appreciate some aspects of Chesterton's thinking without appreciating others, apparently feeling that one need appreciate all of the facets of a complicated man in order to truly appreciate any of them. Should I demand to be treated likewise as a similarly complicated and "complete" thinker? Would that be just or humble of me to do so? Again, the author comments on Chesterton's remarkable humility and his enjoyment in catching people off-guard by taking them seriously and agreeing with them where possible, but unfortunately the author shows himself to be not nearly as great-minded as the subject of his effusive adoration. The author manages the rare achievement of making the reader want to read a lot more of Chesterton and a lot less of himself, although this may not be so upsetting of a conclusion given his high regard for Chesterton, something both the author and I can agree on congenially, however much the author's strident Catholicism makes me feel deeply uncomfortable.

[1] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2016...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2015...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2013...>

Anne says

I was eating up the Chesterton quotes but not getting into the format of this particular book, when the back cover led me to two other books by the same author. The Apostle of Common Sense and Common Sense 101 seem to be closer to what I had expected this one to be, so off I go to the library to give those a whirl instead.

Ray Schneider says

This is a great book for anyone starting out to learn about G.K. Chesterton the British journalist (1874-1936). Dale Ahlquist is the president of the American Chesterton Society and he does a simply awesome job of presenting Chesterton's breadth and depth and illustrating how on-target Chesterton is in capturing our own deficiencies. Chesterton is amazingly prescient.

Finished reading this for one of the bookclubs we are in. Read the last five chapters aloud to Jessica in the car on the drive back from Pennsylvania.

This is a good book to get a sense of Chesterton from. It has lots of Chesterton quotes and some recommendations for some of Chesterton's work and has a lot of footnotes. Since I've collected all the volumes of the Chesterton opus from Ignatius Press there isn't any Chesterton I can't lay my hands on. I wish I

could say I've read them all but that wouldn't be true. I've read a lot of the major ones. "Orthodoxy", "The Everlasting Man", "Manalive", "The Man Who Was Thursday", etc. But there are many riches I have not yet mined.

Donald says

I began reading Chesterton in the late 1980's. Always admiring his wit and intellectual power, I never knew how comprehensive his ideas were. Chesterton was no acolyte; he was a systematic thinker that adjoined intellect, reason, politics, and theology into a coherent whole. Ahlquist's book is opinionated and quite informative. I enjoyed every chapter and word.

There are quite a few Chesterton biographies, but few commentaries on his political and intellectual contributions in such a concise volume. Kudos to Ahlquist.
