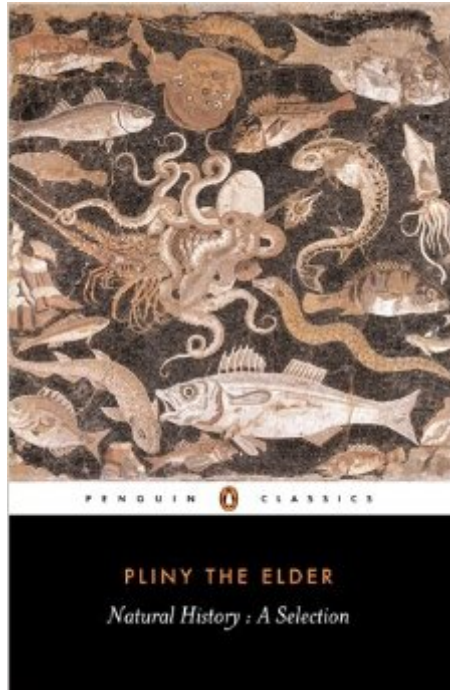


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Natural History: A Selection (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

Pliny's *Natural History* is an astonishingly ambitious work that ranges from astronomy to art and from geography to zoology. Mingling acute observation with often wild speculation, it offers a fascinating view of the world as it was understood in the first century AD, whether describing the danger of diving for sponges, the first water-clock, or the use of asses' milk to remove wrinkles. Pliny himself died while investigating the volcanic eruption that destroyed Pompeii in AD 79, and the natural curiosity that brought about his death is also very much evident in the *Natural History*—a book that proved highly influential right up until the Renaissance and that his nephew, Pliny the younger, described as full of variety as nature itself. John F. Healy has made a fascinating and varied selection from the *Natural History* for this clear, modern translation. In his introduction, he discusses the book and its sources topic by topic. This edition also includes a full index and notes. 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.

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Customer Reviews

For those of you who wish to get acquainted with Pliny, learn more of ancient customs and practices, or if you just look for something different and enlightening to read for a change this book is highly recommended. As the title rightly suggests this Penguin Classic consists of eclectic samples taken from the 37 books that comprise the Natural History. It is based on an updated, accurate and easy to read translation by John Healy and includes a 32 page introduction, the official section numbering, a key to ancient places mentioned in the text and an index. At 400 pages it is substantial enough to offer many pleasurable hours of thought provoking reading, although, to be honest, I had expected considerably more material to be included. This selection also reflects the translators interest in mineralogy and metallurgy (22 pages are for example devoted to a treatise on gold and silver while no selections have been made from book XIX on vegetable gardening). A curiosity which deserves a note here is book XIV (pp. 182-193 in this edition) in which Pliny gives an eminent account of the art of wine and viticulture. It is an absolute must read for all connoisseurs of good drink. Considering that the complete works are both very expensive and bulky this is a good introductory option. But this is only an appetiser. Those who wish to indulge in more serious reading, or look to read Pliny in a more scholarly manner for the possibility of making good and well informed quotes, will undoubtedly do better by consulting the separate volumes which contain the whole unabridged text (eg. H. Rackham's authoritative translation with parallel Latin-English text published in 10 volumes by Harvard University Press). Had this Penguin edition covered more material I would have rated it at 5 stars.// J. Silvennoinen

You can discount this review by the way that I bought this seeking to read the famous account of Vesuvius' eruption. I couldn't remember which Pliny wrote it - and since I have free shipping through Prime, I just went ahead and impulse-bought the Natural History, without even Googling the Plinys. Anyhow. These selections from the Natural History are fascinating. Pliny was an energetic man, hugely desirous of literary immortality, who wrote his books in the interstices of a full career as a soldier and an administrator. Pliny worked when others were asleep; Pliny read and dictated in a sedan chair as he moved about urban areas. The book is rambling and discursive, full of vignettes, asides, and diatribes. Parts are straightforward precisés of other authors (for example, I recently read Vitruvius, and Pliny's section on water and pipes reads almost like a New Yorker review of Vitruvius' coverage of water detection and pipe construction) while other parts are based on Pliny's personal observations. The whole is laced with Pliny's rants about the evils of luxury and greed and the decline of the desire for fame; anyone who wonders about the sustainability of contemporary society will find his complaints about the frivolity and vanity of "modern" men to be nearly as

appropriate today as they were almost 2000 years ago. Healy's translation is clear and easy to read. However, Healy's selections are occasionally jarring, and some of the section titles are annoying and condescending. The footnotes can be repetitive, and are often rather ill-chosen; Healy footnotes Latin terms that are pretty obvious from cognates, while leaving some more mysterious terms completely unexplained. (It's almost as if he were aiming at a particularly incurious high-school audience.) The index is rather poor, but the Key To Place Names struck me as quite good; it's interesting to see how some names have survived (with modification) while others have been swept away by conquering tides, and it's nice to be able to put a location to places that I've seen in other works and just sort of filed under "exotic locations". Overall, Pliny is not for everyone. I certainly wouldn't recommend it as a first exposure to Roman literature! However, I think any omnivorous reader with even a passing interest in the classics will think their time with Pliny was time well spent. Pliny ranges; Pliny amuses; Pliny will be nice to have on your shelf if industrial civilization does collapse.

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