



The Book of Masks: An Anthology of French Symbolist & Decadent Writing (Atlas Arkhive, #2)

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This anthology is the largest ever selection from the Decadent and Symbolist writers of the French fin-de-siècle — a period whose social and spiritual ills had so much in common with those of today.

The selection is based on a series of essays on contemporary writers published as *The Book of Masks* by the foremost critic and author of the period: Remy de Gourmont. (The "masks" are remarkable portrait drawings by Felix Vallotton.) De Gourmont's essays brilliantly evoke the pre-occupations of each author, their genius and shortcomings, while simultaneously describing, and contributing to, the literary theories of the movement. His introduction provides one of the most important overviews of Symbolism and describes its gradual subsidence into its "dark side": decadence. De Gourmont's book consisted solely of essays, but the editor of this anthology has added characteristic texts from each writer to accompany them. Nearly fifty are included, ranging from the extraordinary obscure and unjustly forgotten to the literary giants of the day. Here are works by Gide, Mallarme and Verlaine which have never before appeared in English.

Symbolism was a strange amalgam of the social turmoil of its times; its authors veer between an aesthetics based on simplicity and asceticism and the decadent debauches forever associated with Huysmans and Wilde. Their political associations were equally split, between Catholic piety and right-wing nationalism, and anarchist individualism taken to the point of bomb-throwing. What united these disparate writers was a desire to escape the confines of realism. They produced a fierce literature based on a renewed use of language, finely tuned, often astonishingly lush, which examines that mysterious region of the spirit that lies between inner and outer life. This collection should necessitate a complete re-evaluation of a school of writing that endured for several decades.

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K. says

Re-read of one of my old university favorites. *The* most important book in the world to me - revelatory and inspiring, this shaped my literary tastes more than any other.
