



Hermits; The Insights of Solitude

By Peter France

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In this inspiring book, Peter France, who spends much of his time living in a semi-eremitic manner on the Greek island Patmos, explores the history of hermits and uncovers the truths they found in their solitude. This rich compendium provides engaging accounts of the lives of famous hermits and hermitic movements--from the Greek Cynics to the Desert Fathers to more modern seekers such as Thoreau, Thomas Merton, and the American poet Robert Lax. As an antidote to disillusionment with the modern world and as a guide to rediscovering our true selves, *Hermits* will not fail to provide reassuring enlightenment.

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Hermits; The Insights of Solitude By Peter France Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From *Library Journal*

A former BBC personality, France (*Greek as a Treat*, Penguin, 1995) spends over half the year living in solitude on the Greek island of Patmos; his own taste of the hermetical life leads him to write this study of solitaries from the ancient Greeks to the present. France has chosen a representative group of hermits, and his simple discussions of such figures as Thoreau and Thomas Merton serve as good introductions for readers unfamiliar with their work. Chapters on lesser-known figures such as Charles de Foucauld or groups such as the Russian *startsy* (spiritual fathers) are, likewise, excellent introductions, and a nice bibliography leads the reader to more in-depth sources. The final chapter highlights the contemporary poet Robert Lax in a fitting, parting interview. This well-written, rather personal exploration will entertain as well as inform. Readers interested in a more scholarly treatment would do well to consult France's bibliography. A good choice for public and academic collections. —Mark Woodhouse, Elmira Coll. Lib., N.Y.

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From [Booklist](#)

France gave up his high-profile career with the BBC to lead a contemplative life on a Greek island, a decision that inspired this engrossing history of hermits. Most solitaries left no record of the revelations they experienced, but others felt compelled to share the insights acquired through living a simple and meditative life, and it is those articulate hermits, those intent and spiritual-minded outsiders who have, curiously, taught the rest of us so much about living in the thick of things, that France so skillfully portrays. He begins with a masterful overview of the early Greek philosophers, who were "the first to discover the significance of the individual," a realization intrinsic to the hermit tradition, then moves on to St. Anthony of Egypt and other Desert Fathers, the forest-dwelling Russian Orthodox *startsy*, our own Thoreau, the Hindu hermit Ramakrishna, the Saharan explorer Charles de Foucauld, Thomas Merton, and the poet Robert Lax. France's supple commentary is augmented by piquant and affecting excerpts from various hermits' teachings, a blend that succeeds gloriously in illuminating and celebrating our species' "impulse to withdraw from society," an attempt at self-discovery that, wondrously, serves instead to define our profound commonalities *Donna Seaman*

From *Kirkus Reviews*

A lively, vivid, and moving history of hermits, religious and secular, and the instincts that drove them to embrace solitude. France (*The Rape of Egypt*, not reviewed), deeply attracted to the solitary life himself, began his investigation because he wondered "if solitude confers insights not available to society." He traces the origins of a belief in isolation as part of a meditative life to China in the sixth century b.c., when the newly emergent faith of Taoism taught that "it is by withdrawing rather than by asserting ourselves, through retreat rather than pursuit . . . that we acquire wisdom." This belief was similar to the ideas of the Desert Fathers, devout Christians who, in the centuries immediately after the rise of that faith, retreated to harsh landscapes well away from society, where they could wrestle with the meaning of their faith and the stubborn appeals of the flesh. France devotes a chapter to the Russian *startsy*, revered spiritual figures who spent years apart from society in an attempt to attain serenity—but who then often rejoined society to share what they had learned of the deeper instincts of faith. There are studies of, among others, Henry David Thoreau, the Indian mystic Sri Ramakrishna, and Thomas Merton, whose writings offer a contemporary insight into "the nature of solitude, its risks and its benefits." The book concludes with a chapter on the poet Robert Lax, who has lived a largely solitary, reflective life on the Greek island of Patmos for four decades. Writing in a prose of great clarity, and drawing heavily on the precise, powerful reflections of solitaries and religious hermits, France offers a succinct survey of the forces that have driven men and women to separate

themselves from society to pursue their faith, and argues persuasively that solitude still can, in our relentlessly crowded, anxious, hustling age, offer unique spiritual benefits and insights. (Book-of-the-Month Club alternate/Quality Paperback Book Club selection) -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Patsy Marshall:

Reading can called brain hangout, why? Because if you are reading a book specially book entitled Hermits; The Insights of Solitude your head will drift away trough every dimension, wandering in each aspect that maybe not known for but surely will become your mind friends. Imaging every word written in a guide then become one application form conclusion and explanation that maybe you never get prior to. The Hermits; The Insights of Solitude giving you a different experience more than blown away your mind but also giving you useful info for your better life on this era. So now let us teach you the relaxing pattern this is your body and mind will be pleased when you are finished looking at it, like winning a casino game. Do you want to try this extraordinary wasting spare time activity?

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