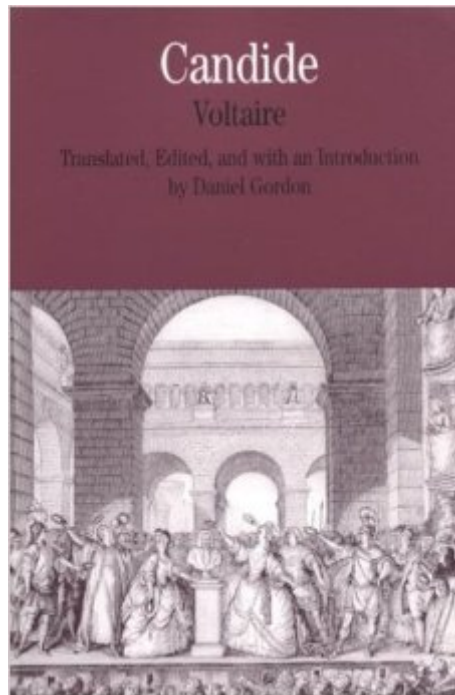


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# Candide (The Bedford Series In History And Culture)



## Synopsis

Candide, Voltaire's biting portrayal of eighteenth-century European society, is a central text of the Enlightenment and essential reading for history students today. Preserving the text's provocative nature, Daniel Gordon's new translation enhances Candide's read-ability and highlights the text's wit and satire for twentieth-century readers. The introduction places the work and its author in historical context, showing students how the complexities of Voltaire's life relate to the events, philosophy, and characters of Candide. A related documents section with personal correspondence to and from Voltaire gives students another lens through which to view this influential thinker. Helpful editorial features include explanatory notes throughout the text and a chronology of Voltaire's life.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Ever since philosophers began thinking about the meaning of life, a favorite question has been "Why do bad things happen to good people?". In Voltaire's day, this issue was primarily pursued either from the perspective of faith (everything that happens is God's will and must be for Divine purpose) or of reason (What do these events mean to you, as you interpret them subjectively?). Infuriated by the reaction by some members of the church to a horrible loss of life from an earthquake in Lisbon, Voltaire wrote this hard-biting satire of the human condition to explore these questions. Before reading further, let me share a word of caution. This book is filled with human atrocities of the most gruesome sort. Anything that you can imagine could occur in war, an

Inquisition, or during piracy happens in this book. If you find such matters distressing (as many will, and more should), this book will be unpleasant reading. You should find another book to read. The book begins as Candide is raised in the household of a minor noble family in Westphalia, where he is educated by Dr. Pangloss, a student of metaphysical questions. Pangloss believes that this is the best of all possible worlds and deeply ingrains that view into his pupil. Candide is buoyed by that thought as he encounters many setbacks in the course of the book as he travels through many parts of Europe, Turkey, and South America. All is well for Candide until he falls in love with the Baron's daughter and is caught kissing her hand by the Baron. The Baron immediately kicks Candide out of the castle (literally on the backside), and Candide's wanderings begin. Think of this as being like expulsion from the Garden of Eden for Adam. Soon the penniless Candide finds himself in the Bulgarian army, and receiving lots of beatings while he learns to drill. The story grows more far-fetched with each subsequent incident. To the casual reader, this exaggeration can seem unnecessary and annoying. It will remind you of the most extreme parts of Swift in *Gulliver's Travels* and Rabelais in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. But subtly, Voltaire is using the exaggeration to lure the reader into making complacent judgments about complacency itself that Voltaire wants to challenge. The result is a deliciously ironical work that undermines complacency at a more fundamental level than I have seen done elsewhere. Basically, Candide challenges any view you have about complacency that is defined in terms of the world-view of those who are complacent. Significant changes of circumstances (good and ill) occur to all of the members of the Baron's household over the course of the story. Throughout, there is much comparing of who has had the worst luck, with much feeling sorry for oneself. That is the surface story. Voltaire is, however, a master of misdirection. Beneath the surface, Voltaire has another purpose for the book. He also wants to expose the reader to questioning the many bad habits that people have that make matters worse for everyone. The major themes of these undercurrents are (1) competing rather than cooperating, (2) employing inhumane means to accomplish worldly (and many spiritual) ends, (3) following expected rules of behavior to show one's superiority over others that harm and degrade others, (4) focusing on money and power rather than creating rich human relationships, (5) hypocritical behavior, and (6) pursuing ends that society approves of rather than ends that please oneself. By the end of the story, the focus shifts again to a totally different question: How can humans achieve happiness? Then, you have to reassess what you thought about the book and what was going on in Voltaire's story. Many readers will choose to reread the book to better capture Voltaire's perspective on that final question, having been surprised by it. Candide is one of my favorite books because it treats important philosophical questions in such an unusual way. Such unaccustomed matching of

treatment and subject matters leaves an indelible impression that normal philosophical arguments can never match. Voltaire also has an amazing imagination. Few could concoct such a story (even by using illegal substances to stimulate the subconscious mind). I constantly find myself wondering what he will come up with next. The story is so absurd that it penetrates the consciousness at a very fundamental level, almost like doing improvisation. In so doing, Voltaire taps into that feeling of "what else can happen?" that overcomes us when we are at our most pessimistic. So, gradually you will find yourself identifying with the story -- even though nothing like this could ever happen to you. Like a good horror story, you are also relieved that you can read about others' troubles and can put your own into perspective. This last point is the fundamental humanity of the story. You see what a wonderful thing a kind word, a meal, or a helping hand can be. That will probably inspire you to offer those empathic actions more often. After you have finished *Candide*, I suggest that you ask yourself where complacency about your life and circumstances is costing you and those you care about the potential for more health, happiness, peace, and prosperity. Then take Voltaire's solution, and look around you for those who enjoy the most of those four wonderful attributes. What do those people think and do differently from you?

It is probably fair to say that there is no book that is quite like Voltaire's '*Candide*'. This is a venomous satire of the 'Optimistic' philosophy and outlook of enlightenment thinkers such as Leibniz and Alexander Pope. As such, it is served well by the unique combination of repeated brutality and a deft, light touch. If that last comment doesn't make sense, then you'll just have to READ THE BOOK. At a mere 144 pages (in this edition), this is a classic that is a breeze to read. As to the charge that this book is too "violent" or "in bad taste", I would only ask you to remember that Voltaire was furious that learned members of a "civilized" society (like Leibniz, Pope, and even Rousseau) could claim that the apparent senseless violence and mayhem wrought by disasters, war, disease, man's cruelty, etc. was actually only a part of some 'greater good' - after all, God (being perfect) could not 'logically' create anything but the 'best of all possible' universes. Voltaire's touch is so light and understated that I defy anyone to write anything that contains a third of the violence in '*Candide*' and still manages to read as breezily and somehow be genuinely funny. But dark satire must be funny - otherwise it lapses into pedantry. Read it - even if you do not like it, I guarantee you that it will disturb you and make you think. And for that, we can thank Voltaire.

No the story doesn't change from edition to edition, but the supplementary material provided does change. *Candide* isn't just some hectic adventure story. It really fails as literature in this regard, and

certainly Voltaire's purpose was not to make you chuckle while you whiled away a few empty hours. He would weep to think that you missed out on what he was really trying to tell you. Rest easy. I am not going to launch into a stuffy monologue on Leibnitz and 18th century French Catholicism, but in essence you should know that this is the essence of the story. The philosopher Leibnitz (who with Isaac Newton independently invented Calculus) explained the existence of evil in the world thusly: God, in his infinite wisdom, thought of all possible worlds that he could create, and he chose this one; therefore this must be the best of all possible worlds. Voltaire was also continually chastising the Catholic Church for its lack of tolerance of other beliefs, and for its aristocratic pomp. Enter now the Norton Critical Edition of *Candide*. This book presents the 75 page story along with 130 additional pages of various articles and essays on the times in which it was written; commentary by Voltaire and by his contemporaries; and critiques of the story by modern writers. Sure there are always a few dull, academic essays making their mandatory appearance in a book like this, but my suggestion is just to skip them. After all there are a lot of them to choose from. Learn the story behind the story so to speak. After all it is the background of *Candide* that makes *Candide* the forceful satire that it is.

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