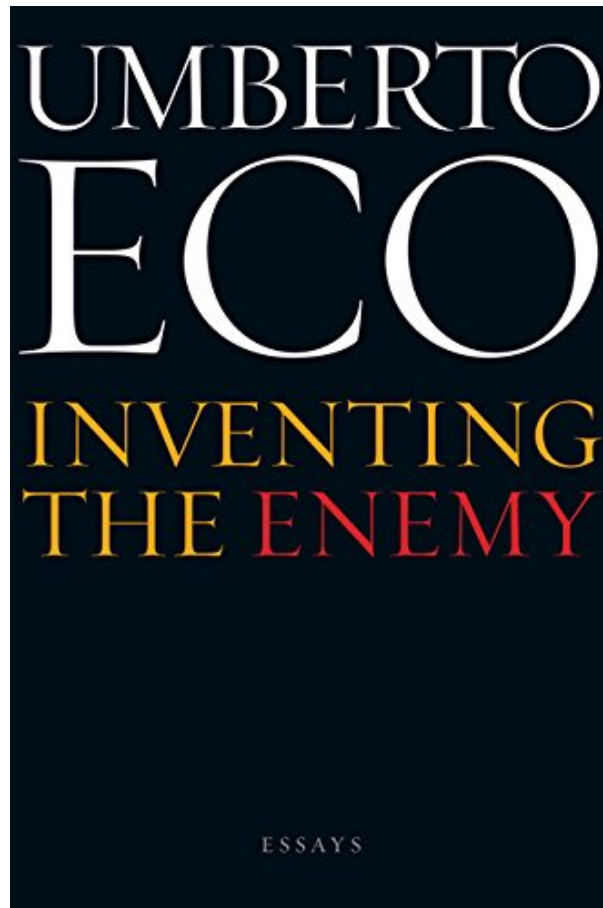
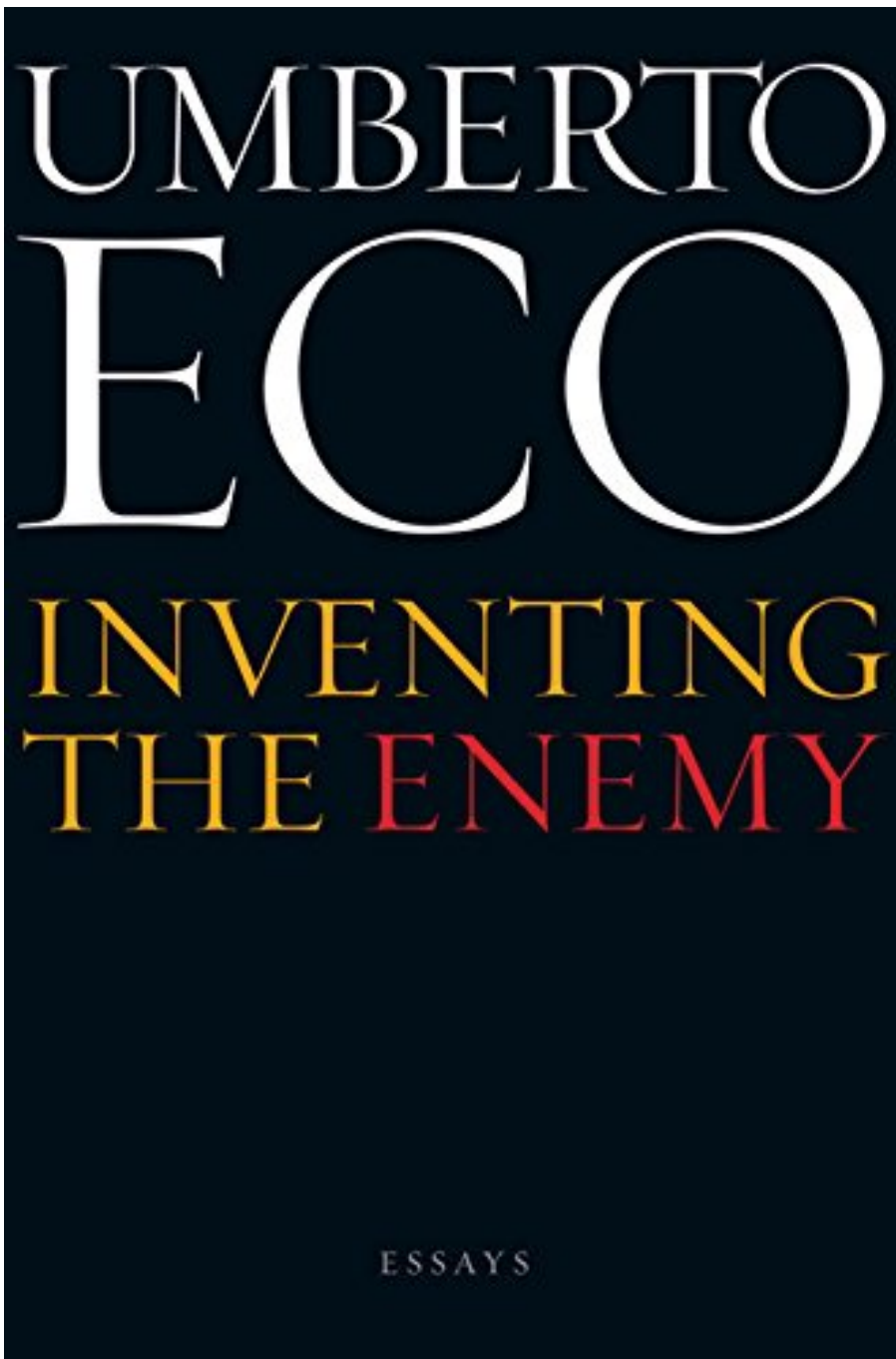


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- Sales Rank: #494932 in Books
- Published on: 2012-09-04
- Released on: 2012-09-04
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x .99" w x 6.00" l, .95 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 240 pages

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Umberto Eco: "It seems we cannot manage without an enemy."

By John Williamson

First introduced to Umberto Eco after seeing the 1986 film "The Name of the Rose" shortly after it was released, I was enthusiastically describing the performances by Sean Connery and F. Murray Abraham to a friend. She asked if I had read the book, which I had not, and she offered to loan me her copy. I read it and had to get my own, and *The Name of the Rose* became a personal favorite, closely followed by Foucault's *Pendulum* (1988), my favored conspiracy theory novel.

But the author is also an excellent essayist, and his new title *Inventing the Enemy: Essays* does not disappoint. Always informative, often thought provoking, and frequently entertaining, this one will appeal to fans of this Italian novelist, philosopher, semiotician and literary critic. For those who are new to Umberto Eco and want a sampler, it's an excellent place to start.

The title essay here, "Inventing the Enemy" is the first, and ties in to a topic of his earlier novel, *The Prague Cemetery*, by illustrating how the presence of an enemy is essential to a nation's success. The first pages set the theme, as one finds early into this essay:

"Having an enemy is important to not only define our identity but also to provide us with an obstacle against which to measure our system of values and, in seeking to overcome it, to demonstrate our own worth. So when there is no enemy, we have to invent one."

The author skillfully illustrates his hypothesis, using Osama bin Laden, 'The Negro', Austrians and gypsies who 'stink', and Jews to illustrate how we cannot seem to manage without an enemy. Romanians (in Italy), along with criminals and prostitutes, witches, "ugly ducklings" (quoting from Shakespeare's 'Richard III'), and the excesses of hate in George Orwell's novel 'Nineteen Eighty-Four,' to name a few.

His essay "Absolute and Relative" delves into several philosophies relating to the ideas presented in the title, and while the author explains concepts regarding both the absolute and the relative, he concurrently shows how neither term can be exactly understood. We are left without the pleasure of solving the ambiguities of the absolute and the relative, but the process of investigating these notions is entirely satisfying in its own right.

Eco's following essay, "The Beauty of the Flame," focuses on fire, and the author notes how fire, the "divine

element" can help support life, but can also extinguish it. The flame has such enormously conflicting attributes, and the author takes an outwardly understandable subject and builds it to a captivating mystery.

"Treasure Hunting" delves into various religious icons, both known and unfamiliar, from the Crown of Thorns to the swaddling clothes of Jesus, to name a few. And it isn't just religious artifacts that Eco touches upon; there are such diverse items as Elvis Presley's Cadillac(s) to the items offered in Christie's auction catalogs. And one senses the author's dry wit just below the surface with some of these.

Each essay here offers something fascinating. "Fermented Delights" will surprise the reader. "No Embryos in Paradise" will be provocative for some readers, where Eco assesses St. Thomas Aquinas's theories regarding embryos and their souls. The author skillfully avoids taking a hard stance on issues such as abortion, using this essay to assess Thomas's beliefs. It does, however, offer food for thought to a topic that does cause much debate in the contemporary world.

Without delving into these, Eco examines the controversial with his typical depth of view. "Thoughts on WikiLeaks" looks at the ongoing WikiLeaks scandal, and some will agree with Eco's observations, while others will not. "Censorship and Silence" examines various means of restricting the media, noting that "Noise becomes a cover." And regarding noise, I had to laugh at his comment: "Look at that idiot walking along the street, wearing his iPod headphones..." The rest of his observations here in this essay are profound.

Eco's explorations of "Imaginary Astronomies," complete with historical illustrations is highly entertaining, while his essay, "Why the Island Is Never Found," is to this reader one of the more fascinating, offering a geographical combination of fact and fantasy, highly illustrated, and why islands become lost... and are never found.

There are other essays here, and all of them are good to excellent. I've left no spoilers here, but leave the reader to find the joy of exploring them and their diversity, as they are always good food for thought.

For those who enjoy Eco in essay form, his earlier *Misreadings* (1993) is still in print, and offer the reader vintage satires written between 1959 and 1972. In this his "The Discovery of America" chronicles Columbus' 1492 landing via news casting techniques used for man's first walk on the moon. His highly irreverent *How to Travel with a Salmon & Other Essays* show this curmudgeon at his literary best, and is a personal favorite.

The author's creativity knows no bounds. These essays in this book illustrate the range of the wit and wisdom of this author, and it doesn't take long to understand why Umberto Eco is considered by many to be one of the greatest essayists and authors of our time. If you like to think and read at the same time, this book of essays is highly recommended.

8/6/2012

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

From dense to delightful

By Martina A. Nicolls

Inventing the Enemy and Other Occasional Writings is an exceptionally eclectic collection of previously published or presented essays written in a variety of styles, from scholastic to wistful, and dense to delightful.

Just as I was in a café reading the first essay, "Inventing the Enemy" a young man with Planet Enemy walked by. In Eco's piece, from a lecture at Bologna University on May 15, 2008, he explores the notion of the

enemy - who we, collectively and individually, regard as our historical enemies, but also our cultural enemies, whether real or perceived or invented. For example, he cites ancient to contemporary texts to illustrate his point, from Marcus Cicero's 63BC Orations against Catiline to Jean-Paul Satre's No Exit (1944) to George Orwell's Nineteen Eight-Four (1949), as well as historical events (global conflicts). He writes of people's intolerance of other races, lower classes, and of people who are different from "us." "The enemy is ugly," he states, and adds, "The need (for an enemy) is second nature even to a mild man of peace. In his case the image of the enemy is simply shifted from a human object to a natural or social force that in some way threatens us and has to be defeated, whether it be capitalistic exploitation, environmental pollution, or third-world hunger."

Basing our lives on "this Other" and finding "this Other intolerable because to some degree he is not us" we "create our own hell," Eco writes. The enemy springs from our own fears, insecurities, intolerances, and even virtuous causes. So when we see Planet Enemy on a T-shirt we remember our own fictional heroes and villains, but we may also reflect on good versus evil, and them against us.

In his second essay, "Absolute and Relative" - a lecture presented during the Milanesiana festival on July 9, 2007, Eco explores the idea of truth, of cultural relativism, of moral relativism, and of faith and conviction. He examines the history of truth, what is a subjective fact, and that which may be open to interpretation (and therefore open to dispute) according to a set of definitions, rules of physics, or some other means, such as history, philosophy, or divinity. Each has their own "various degrees of verifiability or acceptability." He ponders whether "if there were no facts but only interpretations, then an interpretation would be an interpretation of what?" and "if interpretation interprets each other, there would still have to have been an object or event in the first place that has spurred us to interpret."

Not all of Eco's 14 essays are as esoteric as the two mentioned above. The light-hearted "Living by Proverbs" is comical, and the "Censorship and Silence" is a thought-provoking off-the-cuff piece, while "Thoughts on Wikileaks" is sure to evoke controversy. "Why the Island is Never Found" talks of the fascination people have for islands, and the creation of maps as explorers sought far off islands: islands lost and islands found and islands that don't exist.

Readers will find something of interest in this heterogeneous collection. And with the density of some essays, re-reading will bring twice the pleasure, or twice the pain. And because one does not lead into the other, the essays can be cherry-picked according to a reader's moods and concentration levels. At any level, the "occasional writings" are intellectual and influential.

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

Lots of good stuff

By Phelps Gates

I've always found Umberto Eco's novels rather frustrating, since I end up spending most of my energy in trying (usually unsuccessfully) to solve the puzzles rather than in enjoying the story. This book is unencumbered with narrative and gives us Eco's insights into a wide variety of subjects. He's a fox rather than a hedgehog, and I've rarely seen a collection of essays that ranged over a wider area! We hear his thoughts on relics, both sacred (Christ's foreskin) and secular (Elvis's Cadillac), an astonishing collection of quotes from irate Italian fascisti on James Joyce, and a remarkable appreciation of Victor Hugo, to name only a few. The title essay, on the need to invent enemies from within when lacking ones from without, is probably the highlight, but all of them are worth reading. And the variety is such that if you don't like what you're reading, just hang on for a few pages.

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