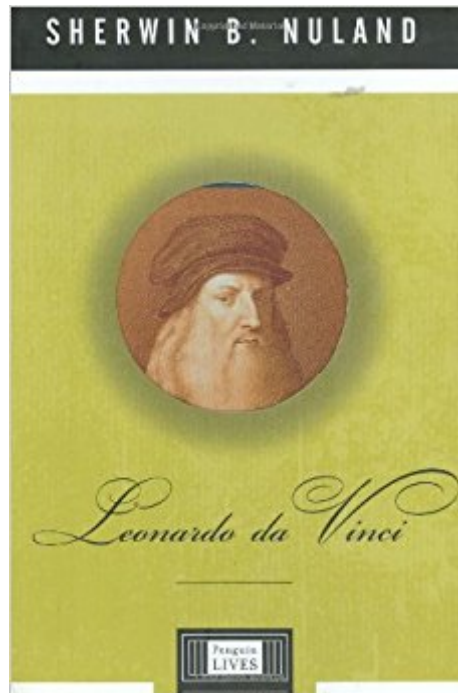




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# Leonardo Da Vinci (Penguin Lives)



## Synopsis

A distinguished chronicler of the human body and spirit interprets a Renaissance geniusThe enigma of the Mona Lisa's smile is not less than the enigma of her creator's life force."In Leonardo da Vinci, Sherwin Nuland (whose own work Time has called "awe-inspiring") completes his twenty-year quest to understand an unlettered man who was painter, architect, engineer, philosopher, mathematician, and scientist. What was it that propelled Leonardo's insatiable curiosity? How could he be, in the same moment, as naive as a child and as profound as a sage? Nuland finds clues in his subject's art, relationships, and scientific studies--as well as in the manuscripts spotlighted by their sale at auction to Bill Gates. Nuland detects the siren voice that lured the great artist so often into the arms of science--his fascination with anatomy, first as the basis for his paintings and then as the crucial component in his aim to systematize all knowledge of nature. Scholarly and passionate, Nuland's Leonardo da Vinci takes us deep into the first truly modern, empirical mind, one that was centuries ahead of its time.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Say what one will about Edna O'Brien's ravishing clip job of Joyce, Peter Gay's moderate Mozart or Edmund White's microcosmic Proust, the editors at Penguin Lives have a knack for matching up free-thinking meditators and their subjects. A surgeon and a writer about medicine, Nuland (How We Die) uses much of his brief bookAlimited in size and scope to the series's quick-take, authorially

inflected format. To explain the prodigal da Vinci as pioneering anatomist. The first 11 pages detail Nuland's personal obsession with da Vinci; the later pages describe da Vinci's concern with human and animal anatomy, and review the bibliographical jumble of his surviving notebooks and papers. Nuland's da Vinci is tireless, perhaps sublimated, in his intellectual and artistic activity, finishing few canvases (one the Mona Lisa, another The Last Supper) and almost nothing else during a long life largely financed, sometimes erratically, by patrons who indirectly supported an expensive retinue of friends, assistants and servants. He emerges as a compulsive investigator of geometry, optics, hydraulics, architecture, sculpture, painting, botany, biology, military mechanics and the flight of birds. Moving from city-state to city-state in Italy, encountering ruler after ruler who sought to harness his gifts. Yet perhaps unforgivably, given the series's promise of New Yorker profile-like effervescence, da Vinci as personality slips away; what we get is a clean condensation of the facts. Only the final chapter, "Matters of the Heart and Other Matters," injects some of Leonardo's own fervor, in an in-depth look at one of his abiding obsessions, the structure and function of the human heart. Nuland's account is solid, but lacks enough of the flourish that its subject so effortlessly achieved and, that, on a much smaller scale, the Lives series seems to strive for. 4 illus. BOMC, QPB, History Book Club selections. Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Artist, anatomist, architect, mathematician, military engineer-few have been as protean as Leonardo. Sir Kenneth Clark called him "the most relentlessly curious man in history." To Nuland, "he is also the historical figure about whom we are most relentlessly curious." In this brief life, Nuland summarizes Leonardo's achievements skillfully. Being a physician (clinical professor of surgery at Yale University), he is particularly interested in Leonardo's pioneering anatomical dissections and drawings. But to him as to other biographers, Leonardo remains essentially elusive. As the English critic Walter Pater said, "he seemed to those about him as one listening to a voice, silent for other men." EDITORS OF SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN

Leonardo was the prototypical "Renaissance Man," a fact that renders him remarkably difficult for any one biographer to encapsulate fully. Add to that the page limitations imposed upon writers of the Penguin Lives (the typical Life is roughly 165 pages long), and you have an impossible task, no matter how competent the author. Sherwin Nuland is that rarest of all creatures, an articulate doctor (surgeon), who has written several popular books about his craft, including the very popular *How We Die: Reflections on Life's Final Chapter*. So he was the ideal choice to write about Leonardo's anatomical studies, which he does well. What he omits is any discussion of

Leonardo's other accomplishments in art, mechanics, aeronautics,... But what modern writer could have written knowledgeably about those wide-ranging fields? Perhaps Isaac Asimov, but he died in 1992. To Dr. Nuland's credit, he doesn't try, producing instead a fine book on those topics he does understand. Still, he doesn't capture the man. For those who are interested, there is an excellent film, *The Life of Leonardo Da Vinci*, produced for Italian television in 1971, that provides a superb overview of Leonardo's life. A labor of love by the Italians, it is the definitive film on the subject.

There can be little doubt that Leonardo da Vinci was a man of great intellect and skill. His impact upon society, however, has not been great. His inventions were never brought to fruition and his work in anatomy, while treasured today as being complex and far sighted, did little for the practice of medicine at the time of its publication. Yet, despite all this, it is a brave man who totally disregards Leonardo. The author of this work on da Vinci, Sherwin B. Nuland, is a surgeon; an interesting choice for a biographer. Nuland brings a particular skill set to the work but not a complete skill set. The first portion of the book that deals in general with Leonardo's life is not strong. The reader is whisked through the years without ever feeling that he has gained any insights whatsoever. But, when Nuland turns to anatomy in the final chapters, the book takes a whole new turn. Clearly, the writer's knowledge shines and the reader sees in much greater depth the genius that was Leonardo. At a time when there were no X rays, anesthesia or any real knowledge of the body's circulatory system, Leonardo's work was brilliant. Rather than describe the workings of the human body, Leonardo used drawings as his medium. Working with cadavers and having to work at great haste, Leonardo was a man ahead of his time. Nuland allows the reader to truly imagine the skill of the man. Overall, Nuland's book is a work in two parts. The first, which is general biography, has only slight merit. His subsequent analysis of Leonardo's work in anatomy reads wonderfully. It is a great pity that the whole book could not have been of the same standard as the second part.

This is a concise and well written biography of the great artist and scientist. It is especially interesting because of the clear explanations by Dr. Nuland of just how advanced were Leonardo's observations for his time. An excellent read!

The focus of this informative biography is da Vinci the anatomist, not Leonardo the painter or proto-technologist. Indeed, this biography truly comes alive only when Nuland, a surgeon and author, describes the advances Leonardo achieved in his study of the body. In my opinion, Nuland's

touch isn't so sure in other areas of Leonardo's achievement and there are, in fact, patches that sound like a product of rushed and unedited dictation. Still, I'd rate this as a superior introduction to a scientist centuries ahead of his time. This fine book, by the way, definitely enriched my experience at the da Vinci exhibit that is now showing at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

A bit tedious at times, but worth reading if you have any interest in the Renaissance, or in the life of the original and ultimate Renaissance Man.

I chose this rating because, although the book is interesting, it has so much detail as to other people and places, that sometimes I forget it's about Leonardo. I thought it would merely follow his life and ingenuity. All in all, it is very informative!

Excellent reading

This was a gift.

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