

# Ada Palmer's "Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance"

**Post by "Cleveland Okie" of June 6, 2023 at 11:44 AM**

I suspect that some of you have read Stephen Greenblatt's book, "The Swerve: How the World Became Modern." I read it years ago, although it failed to get me interested in Epicureanism. (It was reading the "Letter to Menoeceus" that did the trick).

Ada Palmer, a University of Chicago historian and also a science fiction novelist, has a book that covers some of the same territory,

["Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance."](#)

I am attending a science fiction convention in Pittsburgh, ConFluence, the weekend of July 22-23, and Ada Palmer is the main guest of honor, so I plan to read her Lucretius book before I go to the convention.

Somewhat off topic, but I am a big fan of Palmer's "Terra Ignota" novel series. Tyler Cowen plans to interview Palmer soon for his podcast.

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**Post by "Cassius" of June 6, 2023 at 12:02 PM**

That actually sounds like a more interesting book than Greenblatt's, since he spent a lot of time on what I would call church history and this one sounds more like mostly philosophy.

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**Post by "Joshua" of June 6, 2023 at 2:21 PM**

I have that book. It's a history and document analysis of the surviving manuscripts, and goes into detail studying scholia and marginalia with a view to understanding how Renaissance readers like Montaigne were receiving the poem as they read it.

It's a great book, for the information it contains, and Greenblatt cited Ada Palmer's work pre-publication. Many readers will find it rather dry compared to the *The Swerve*, which continues to be a favorite of mine.

I mentioned it to Cassius Sunday evening as part of the question we unfortunately didn't get to for lack of time.

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**Post by “Joshua” of June 6, 2023 at 2:26 PM**

That being said, please do report back with your impressions!

I might be thinking of a video where Greenblatt cites Ada Palmer and not his book, but either way he holds her work in high regard.

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**Post by “Joshua” of June 6, 2023 at 2:31 PM**

Speaking of manuscripts, I watched [this](#) video on the digitization of the Venetus A manuscript of the Iliad and found it really fascinating. It's amazing how many different specialists it takes to undergo this kind of project.

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**Post by “Cleveland Okie” of June 6, 2023 at 2:45 PM**

Joshua, I'm pretty sure Ada Palmer told me that as she worked on her own book, she and Greenblatt looked at each other's books.

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**Post by “Joshua” of June 6, 2023 at 6:00 PM**

That clears that up! Thank you, I was trying to work out how he could have managed that.

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**Post by “Cleveland Okie” of July 6, 2023 at 8:22 PM**

I just finished reading Ada Palmer's book, "Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance." I figured there might be some interest if I posted about it.

The preface and the first chapter discuss Epicureanism, Lucretius' poem and how many of the poem's concepts challenge Christian thinking. The first sentence of the preface is, "If you were told that reading this book could send you to Hell, would you keep reading?"

Palmer argues that there were essentially two "waves" of how Lucretius was read, from 1417, when an old manuscript was found by Poggio Brocciolini, to 1600, when her study concludes. The first phase was that scholars copied and edited manuscripts by hand. During this phase, most of the emphasis was on correcting the texts and preserving the poem, with little attention to Lucretius' theories on atoms, or what Palmer calls "proto-atheist" views, such as the soul isn't immortal, the gods don't interfere in the affairs of men, etc. The assumption, Palmer says, was that fixing and circulating any prominent work of Latin literature was assumed to be a moral thing to do in reviving civilization.

A second wave of reading occurred when the text had largely been corrected and made much easier to read, and when printing of this corrected Latin text made the poem much easier to find and to read. Along with printing, there came translations of the poem into the local vernacular, which also expanded the readership of the book.

During this second phase, much more attention was paid to the heretical views in the poem, and as science began to arise as an important intellectual current, the science discussions in the poem took on more meaning. Printing of the book stopped in Italy by about 1515 when the Catholic church realized the poem had seriously heretical thoughts, and later editions were printed in France and other countries.

Palmer examined dozens of manuscript copies of "De rerum natura" in libraries in the U.S. and Europe, carefully recording comments and marks written in the margins so that she could track what scholars were interested in, and also studied early printed copies. There are tables that tabulate all of this. Particular attention is paid to the notes made in the margins by figures such as Machiavelli and Montaigne.

I took the time to read the whole book, but you can get most of what she has to say by reading the preface, Chapter One and the conclusion. In comparison to "The Swerve," it is written much more for an academic audience.

Much of the discussion of the tenets of Epicureanism takes place in Chapter One. In general it seemed accurate, although I thought Palmer overcorrected for the prevailing impression that Epicureanism advocates gluttony, lust and other physical forms of hedonism, making Epicurus more of an ascetic than Emily Austin does.

I really know Ada Palmer more as a writer of science fiction and fantasy; I am a fan of her "Terra Ignota" series of four novels. She is appearing at a science fiction convention in Pittsburgh that I plan to attend the weekend of July 21-23. In her day job, Palmer is a history professor in Chicago. She has a blog and website at <http://www.adapalmer.com/>.

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**Post by "Don" of July 6, 2023 at 10:38 PM**

Thanks for the review. I may have to buy for the library.

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**Post by "Joshua" of July 7, 2023 at 12:36 AM**

Thank you, [Cleveland Okie](#) !