



A Most Dangerous Book: Tacitus's Germania from the Roman Empire to the Third Reich

By Christopher B. Krebs

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The New York Times Book Review **Editor's Choice.**

Times Literary Supplement **Book of the Year.**

Choice **Outstanding title.**

Winner of Phi Beta Kappa's 2012 **Christian Gauss Book Award.**

"A model of popular intellectual history. . . . In every way, *A Most Dangerous Book* is a most brilliant achievement."--*Washington Post*

When the Roman historian Tacitus wrote the *Germania*, a none-too-flattering little book about the ancient Germans, he could not have foreseen that centuries later the Nazis would extol it as "a bible" and vow to resurrect Germany on its grounds. But the *Germania* inspired--and polarized--readers long before the rise of the Third Reich. In this elegant and captivating history, Christopher B. Krebs, a professor of classics at Harvard University, traces the wide-ranging influence of the *Germania*, revealing how an ancient text rose to take its place among the most dangerous books in the world. 14 illustrations

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- Sales Rank: #614389 in Books
- Brand: Brand: W. W. Norton n Company
- Published on: 2012-08-27
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.20" h x .80" w x 5.50" l, .55 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 304 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Harvard classics professor Krebs writes a scholarly but lucid account of the abuse of history. Written in 98 C.E. by the Roman official Tacitus, *About the Origin and Mores of the Germanic Peoples* was lost for centuries but resurfaced around 1500 as Germans were growing resentful of foreign domination—in this case from the Catholic Church in Rome. The rediscovered book launched a primitivist myth that captivated admirers over the next 500 years, from Martin Luther to Heinrich Himmler, who loved its portrayal of ancient Germans as freedom-loving warriors, uncultured but honorable, in contrast to decadent Romans. In fact, Tacitus probably never visited Germany, Krebs notes. Rather, using books and travelers' reports, he wrote for a Roman audience who shared his romantic view of northern barbarians. Enthusiastic German readers, culminating in the Nazis, ignored Tacitus's disparaging comments, misread passages to confirm their prejudices, and proclaimed that the ancient historian confirmed their national superiority. This is an inventive analysis of, and warning against, an irresistible human yearning to find written proof of one's ideology. Illus. (May)

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Review

A razor-sharp, eminently readable reminder of the potency of bad ideas. Christopher Krebs shows how intellectuals through the ages used and abused a Latin classic, Tacitus's *Germania*, and tells the unnerving story of its final transformation into a Nazi 'bible'. Fascinating stuff.--Anthony Everitt, author of "Hadrian and the Triumph of Rome"

A most exciting book! In Krebs hands, the story of the *Germania* manuscript becomes part thriller, part detective story.... A must-read for anyone interested in the pernicious power of the ideas of antiquity and a timely reminder of the responsibilities placed on readers as well as writers.--Tim Rood, University of Oxford, author of "American Anabasis"

A fascinating story of how a book could be used and especially abused over two thousand years, as enemies saw it as presenting Germans as brutish and barbarian, while German nationalistic pride extracted a quite different message of a nation that was simple, virtuous, and pure.... beautifully told by Christopher Krebs.--Christopher Pelling, editor of "Greek Tragedy and the Historian"

A dramatic detective story.

Fascinating. . . . [Krebs] has a light touch and a dry sense of humor. "

Clever, learned. . . . [Krebs] synthesizes a great deal of classical scholarship and intellectual history into a concise, accessible story. "

It is an extraordinary tale, and Mr. Krebs . . . tells it with great verve and charm. "

A dramatic detective story. "

About the Author

Christopher B. Krebs, a classics professor at Stanford University, has published widely on the Roman

historians and their afterlives.

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