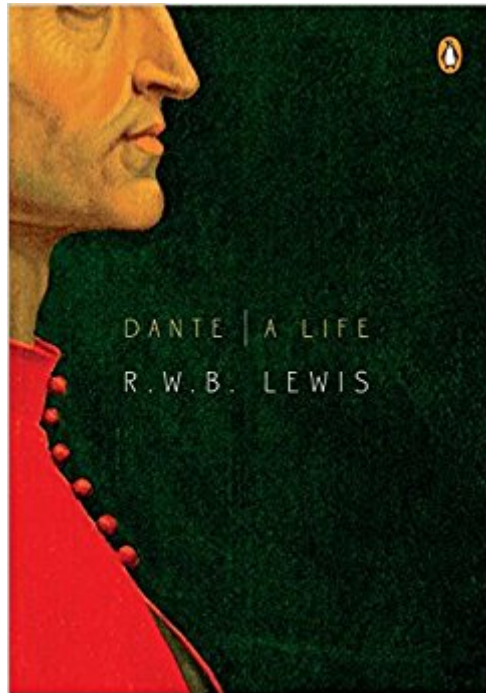




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# Dante: A Life (Penguin Lives)



## Synopsis

An insightful biography of Florence's famous son Acclaimed biographer R.W.B. Lewis traces the life and complex development—emotional, artistic, philosophical—of this supreme poet-historian. Here we meet the boy who first encounters the mythic Beatrice, the lyric poet obsessed with love and death, the grand master of dramatic narrative and allegory, and his monumental search for ultimate truth in *The Divine Comedy*. It is in this masterpiece of self-discovery and redemption that Lewis finds Dante's own autobiography—and the sum of all his shifting passions and epiphanies.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

History, literature, love, and religion come together in this graceful biography of the world's most revered and influential poet. R.W.B. Lewis, who won a Pulitzer Prize for *Edith Wharton*, displays the same intelligent understanding here of the complex interplay of inner and outer forces that shape an artist. His lucid account of political and literary conflict in 13th-century Florence (subject of another Lewis book, *The City of Florence*) illuminates the context in which Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) came of age, fell in love with the unattainable Beatrice Portinari, forged the "sweet new style" that transformed Italian literature, and embroiled himself in factional disputes he would angrily renounce after his exile from Florence in 1302. Lewis makes palpable the intellectual and imaginative energy that fired Dante to write an influential political treatise (*De Monarchia*), a powerful argument for literature written in the common tongue (*De Vulgari Eloquentia*), and of course his twin tributes to

Beatrice: one of the most eloquent love poems ever written (*La Vita Nuova*) and that supreme chronicle of the human spiritual quest, *Divine Comedy*. The author notes autobiographical elements in all Dante's works without trivializing their creative majesty, and if the poet's personality is somewhat muffled across the distance of eight centuries, his artistic presence still "sparkles and sings and smiles like one of the spirits in Paradise." Drawing cogently (and with generous acknowledgment) on previous scholarship, this volume worthily fulfills its mission as an entry in the excellent Penguin Lives series of short biographies for the general reader. --Wendy Smith --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

There could hardly be a more fitting biographer for Dante than Pulitzer Prize-winning literary critic Lewis, who has called Dante's native city of Florence his second home for 50 years. In this newest offering in the Penguin Lives series a fraction of the size of Lewis's previous biographies of Edith Wharton and the Jameses Lewis shows an uncanny ability to capture crucial moments in Dante's life and development as an artist. Whether he is presenting the intricacies of Florentine politics or the living woman behind Dante's immortal vision of Beatrice, Lewis manages to provide just enough context to illuminate the known facts of Dante's life without losing the thread of his narrative. Lewis is especially effective in tracing the artist's tormented relationship with his native city, including his banishment from Florence in the political intrigues of the 1300s. In one memorable passage, he describes the "Purgatorio" (in which Dante consigns whole populations of Tuscans to eternal suffering) as the "exile's furious song" an attempt by an all-too-human artist to pass celestial judgment on his malefactors. Always a memorable writer, Lewis shows himself a particularly spry craftsman here; this may well be one of the most pleasurable biographies of Dante, as well as one of the shortest. Anyone in search of a brief but eloquent guide to the life of the Florentine master should not hesitate to turn to this book. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

DANTE by RWB Lewis is my introduction to the Penguin Lives series and if this is representative of the full series, I'm reading every volume. In 205 pages, in graceful prose that never flags, Lewis deftly sketches the life of Dante Alighieri and the times in which he lived, and, very important, offers a reading of his greatest works. The early Florentine Renaissance was a period fraught with political turmoil and Lewis does a good job of sorting out the factions and turns of events and their impact on Dante's life. His rereading of Dante's works is generous--no need to have read the masterpieces recently or perhaps at all to learn from this and gain an appreciation. In fact, this book would make a

fine introduction to a study of THE DIVINE COMEDY. Lewis shares his own wonder and pleasure in Dante's work, and when he cites the original Italian lines, to provide an idea of their flavor, he always provides a translation.

I am getting ready to go to a week long Road Scholar course on Dante's Divine Comedy and now after reading Lewis' book I feel more prepared. It explained so much of the confusing cantos with translations and modern day examples. Thank you

Dante was the poet historian of Florence, its passionate official, and its bitter and frustrated exile. His life became entangled in the old European struggle between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines, two names derived from two noble combative houses of Germany, the Welf and Weiblingen. The Guelphs, so long the leaders of Florence, fell to quarreling with each other. In the fall of 1301 war broke out between the White Guelphs and the Black Guelphs. The Blacks, who favored the nobles over the merchants, summoned Dante to appear to answer charges of corruption during his previous administration. When he failed to show, he was condemned to death. Dante never set foot in Florence again. Dante got his revenge, as writers often do, by writing about his enemies. In this case the writing was the *Comedia*, subsequently dubbed the *Divine Comedy*. Having taken two college courses in Dante and one given by Richard Howard, I think there was nothing in this little book that I didn't know or wasn't familiar with. And there was nothing in it that was wrong or controversial. I recommend it as a good way to start your study of Dante and I commend it as a good way to get up to speed on the life and times of the poet that Yeats said started modern poetry.

Perfect introduction to Dante, his works and his times. A list of sources and main bibliography for further reading.

A brief but sound biography, written with style and clarity. Lewis brings as much life to his portrait of Dante as the surviving information allows. Although this is not a critical biography as such, his observations on the poetry are helpful, especially to those with little previous knowledge.

This is an excellent overview of the age and community in which Dante lived and wrote. Not at all comprehensive, it gives a surprising insight into the great poet and his works, and it makes for enjoyable reading. I found myself stimulated to read more in this area, in order to understand better the influence that Dante's works have had on Western civilization and literature over the past seven

centuries.

R.W. B. Lewis has written a good basic biography of Dante--a fine introductory work into one of the most complex and dynamic lives in all of literature.

It has good information, but it so dry it is hard to get through. I would much rather read Boccaccio's biography of Dante even though it has a lot more bias.

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