

Let's get 'Metaphysical'

Author waxes philosophical on his unlikely bestseller

By MICHAEL GILTZ

When author Louis Menand began working on his critically acclaimed book, "The Metaphysical Club," he fantasized the project would take three years. It lasted 10.

He thought it would focus on the idea of pragmatism and intellectuals like John Dewey and Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. The book grew to encompass the Civil War and (briefly) the Cold War. He thought it would be several hundred pages. It's actually 480 (though with notes, it comes in at 546).

"It was hard to know where to stop," says Menand, from his office at CUNY, where he teaches English. "That was one of the big challenges — trying to figure out how many things I could cram in there without making it impossible to read. And impossible to write, too."

But one thing he never considered was hitting the bestseller list.

"In the academic world," explains Menand, "there are certain rewards that come with having a book published; it doesn't matter if it doesn't sell a copy as long as it's done."

But the bestseller list is exactly where the

49-year-old author has been. A favorite of independent bookstores, "The Metaphysical Club" has gone back to press five times and has 50,000 copies in print, an astonishing number for a serious book that is a story of ideas.

That makes it one of the unluckiest success stories of the year in publishing.

"I thought it would be silly to dream about a bestseller on 19th-century philosophy," laughs Menand. "It wasn't really a part of what I was aiming at. But it's been great."

Menand is no stranger to a wide audience.

He's on staff at The New Yorker,

and is a contributing editor at The New York Review of Books, where he is sometimes mentioned as the possible editor.

Menand, who was born in Syracuse and grew up around Boston, was raised an atheist, or "lapsed Puritan," as he jokingly puts it. Like most intellectuals of their day, his parents couldn't be bothered with popular culture (they only rented a TV to watch the Democratic conventions).

But Menand has focused on pop culture, and movies and rock 'n' roll figure



"In the academic world," says Louis Menand, author of "The Metaphysical Club" (left), "it doesn't matter if it doesn't sell a copy as long as it's done."

in much of his writing.

That helps explain why "The Metaphysical Club" is so marvelously readable — he knows how to tell a story in a way that has mass appeal.

His book begins with the future Supreme Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. being tested during the Civil War, then moves into portraits of William James, the father of modern psychology and brother of the author

Henry; and John Dewey, who would become the patron saint of librarians and was perhaps the most famous intellectual of his time.

All of them would attend or be influenced by a short-lived discussion group called the Metaphysical Club, one of many meetings educated people attended in the days when universities were just getting on their feet.

One question remains:

Why did it take Menand so long to write the book? He's not saying.

"It would have taken longer if I hadn't learned how to edit myself," he offers.

Don't blame Menand; he's just taking after his parents.

"My mother is an historian, but not an academic, and she's writing a biography of Samuel Adams," he says. "She's been working on it for 25 years."



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