

Samuel Pepys

Samuel Pepys and John Bunyan were close contemporaries. But it is hard to think of two more different men, more different lives, and more different books. Pepys (pronounced “Peeps”) was born in London on February 23, 1633, five years after Bunyan, the son of a London tailor. He went to St. Paul’s School and later to Cambridge University, where he did well and might have become a lawyer. But through his father’s ancestors, he was distantly related to Sir Sidney Montagu, whose son Edward, eight years older than Pepys, later employed the young Cambridge graduate as his private secretary. Montagu, at that time a supporter of Cromwell, became a member of Parliament and accepted other roles in the Puritan government; and Pepys took on other duties for him. Later, after Cromwell’s death in 1658, Montagu switched his allegiance to Charles II, and as Montagu rose in the restored monarchy, Pepys rose with him. In 1660 (the year Bunyan went to jail), Pepys was given an important post in Navy Board. He rose further and was ultimately responsible for major improvements in the administration of the Royal Navy. He also grew very wealthy. Superficially, about all that Bunyan and Pepys had in common was a love of music. But Bunyan played his prison-made violin and flute, while Pepys played more aristocratic instruments, sang, and attended musicales.

Nevertheless, there is a profound connection. Bunyan represents the pious, evangelical face of Puritanism. Pepys represents its dutiful, practical, book-keeping and worldly side, for although he gave up his early support of Cromwell and the Puritan revolution and became a nominal Anglican, he retained a certain amount of Puritan character. So Bunyan wrote a great spiritual autobiography, intensely focused on the state of his soul, and Pepys wrote one of the world’s greatest diaries, intensely focused on the daily—from his sexual affairs to affairs of state and from the mundane and trivial to the catastrophic, like the Great Plague of 1665-6 and the Great Fire of London in November of 1666.

Pepys began his diary on January 1, 1660, with the appropriately ordinary fact that he got up and got dressed. He ended it on May 31, 1669, nearly 10 years later, saying he could write no longer, “having done now so long as to undo my eyes almost every time that I take a pen in my hand.”

So how is one to read such a long diary, or “journal,” as he called it? The most recent and most complete edition fills nine volumes. It also contains many footnotes, maps, and lists identifying the people Pepys referred to in each volume—all of which are very helpful. Without them one feels as if one has suddenly dived into a totally alien world. But no one can read all nine volumes in a week! So one alternative is to read a book of selections, but that too is unsatisfactory. It lacks continuity, and most shorter editions lack the necessary aids. So the best course is to try to find the complete edition and then read it selectively. For example, read the endings of years, like the entry for Dec. 31, 1667, where Pepys reveals a lot of his personal character. He woke up, he says, “with a full design to mind nothing else but to make up my accounts for the year past.” So he dutifully went around paying his bills and then recorded his year’s income and expenses and added up his net worth. He also noted, prophetically, that his eyes were very sore “with overworking them.” Then he wrote a short, pessimistic description of the condition of the city, parliament, and the “sad, vicious, negligent Court,” saying that “all sober men there [are] fearful of the ruin of the whole Kingdom....” It was not all that different, you might say, from what a thoughtful man might write in many years, which is one of the interesting features of diaries. They remind us that the more things change, the more they are the same. Finally, Pepys’ very last words for 1667 were about his now owning enough silver to serve two and a half dozen people! His own wealth was secure, as many people would also like to believe at a year’s end.

Or read his descriptions of the fire of London and the Great Plague. Find his references to his extra-marital affairs and compare them to his accounts of his arguments with his wife and his praises of her. Read his entries for different days, like Christmas, Easter, or your own birthday. Read all of the entries for a month in each of the years he wrote. It also helps to read some of Claire Tomalin’s excellent biography, *Samuel Pepys: The Unequaled Self*, especially her account of the operation he underwent, without anesthetics, to remove a kidney stone. This was before he began the diary, but it is very revealing in many ways.

Finally, read enough to answer all of the following questions.

Texts:

Robert Latham & William Matthews (eds.), *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*. 9 vols. Univ. of California Press, 1970-76.

Richard Le Gallienne (ed.), *Passages from the Diary of Samuel Pepys*. New York: The Modern Library, 1959.

Questions for Further Study:

1. To write his diary, Pepys adapted a version of shorthand, making it very difficult to read (and for editors to transcribe into English print). What evidence do you find for his reasons for doing this?
2. The English Restoration was a time of much drunkenness, philandering, gambling, and general lewdness, personified in the stereotype "Restoration Rake." To what degree was Pepys one?
3. Using Pepys as your example, what are the character traits of a diarist? Regular habits? Discipline? Self-absorption? Introspection? A strong sense of history? Lively interests in one's friends, work, and surroundings? Something else?