

## Serendipities Language And Lunacy Umberto Eco

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Best-selling author Umberto Eco's latest work unlocks the riddles of history in an exploration of the "linguistics of the lunatic," stories told by scholars, scientists, poets, fanatics, and ordinary people in order to make sense of the world. Exploring the "Force of the False," Eco uncovers layers of mistakes that have shaped human history, such as Columbus's assumption that the world was much smaller than it is, leading him to seek out a quick route to the East via the West and thus fortuitously "discovering" America. The fictions that grew up around the cults of the Rosicrucians and Knights Templar were the result of a letter from a mysterious "Prester John"—undoubtedly a hoax—that provided fertile ground for a series of delusions and conspiracy theories based on religious, ethnic, and racial prejudices. While some false tales produce new knowledge (like Columbus's discovery of America) and others create nothing but horror and shame (the Rosicrucian story wound up fueling European anti-Semitism) they are all powerfully persuasive. In a careful unraveling of the fabulous and the false, Eco shows us how serendipities—unanticipated truths—often spring from mistaken ideas. From Leibniz's belief that the I Ching illustrated the principles of calculus to Marco Polo's mistaking a rhinoceros for a unicorn, Eco tours the labyrinth of intellectual history, illuminating the ways in which we project the familiar onto the strange. Eco uncovers a rich history of linguistic endeavor—much of it ill-conceived—that sought to "heal the wound of Babel." Through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Greek, Hebrew, Chinese, and Egyptian were alternately proclaimed as the first language that God gave to Adam, while—in keeping with the colonial climate of the time—the complex language of the Amerindians in Mexico was viewed as crude and diabolical. In closing, Eco considers the erroneous notion of linguistic perfection and shrewdly observes that the dangers we face lie not in the rules we use to interpret other cultures but in our insistence on making these rules absolute. With the startling combination of erudition and wit, bewildering anecdotes and scholarly rigor that are Eco's hallmarks, Serendipities is sure to entertain and enlighten any reader with a passion for the curious history of languages and ideas.

Serendipities is an iconoclastic, dazzlingly erudite and witty demonstration, by one of the world's most brilliant thinkers, of how myths and lunacies can produce historical developments of no small significance. In Eco's words, 'even errors can produce interesting side effects'. Eco's book shows how: -- believers in a flat earth helped Columbus accidentally discover America -- the medieval myth of Prester John, the Christian king in Asia, assisted the European drive eastward -- the myth of the Rosicrucians affected the Masons, leading in turn to the widespread belief in a Jewish masonic plot to dominate the world and other forms of paranoid anti-Semitism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

"Eco wittily and enchantingly develops themes often touched on in his previous works, but he delves deeper into their complex nature . . . this collection can be read with pleasure by those unversed in semiotic theory." --Times Literary Supplement

"Impishly witty and ingeniously irreverent" essays on topics from cell phones to librarians, by the author of The Name of the Rose and Foucault's Pendulum (The Atlantic Monthly). A cosmopolitan curmudgeon the Los Angeles Times called "the Andy Rooney of academia"—known for both fiction and novels that have become blockbuster New York Times bestsellers—Umberto Eco takes readers on "a delightful romp through the absurdities of modern life" (Publishers Weekly) as he journeys around the world and into his own wildly adventurous mind. From the mundane details of getting around on Amtrak or in the back of a cab, to reflections on computer jargon and soccer fans, to more important issues like the effects of mass media and consumer civilization—not to mention the challenges of trying to refrigerate an expensive piece of fish at an English hotel—this renowned writer, semiotician, and philosopher provides "an uncanny combination of the profound and the profane" (San Francisco Chronicle). "Eco entertains with his clever reflections and with his unique persona." —Kirkus Reviews Translated from the Italian by William Weaver

The idea that there once existed a language which perfectly and unambiguously expressed the essence of all possible things and concepts has occupied the minds of philosophers, theologians, mystics and others for at least two millennia. This is an investigation into the history of that idea and of its profound influence on European thought, culture and history. From the early Dark Ages to the Renaissance it was widely believed that the language spoken in the Garden of Eden was just such a language, and that all current languages were its decadent descendants from the catastrophe of the Fall and at Babel. The recovery of that language would, for theologians, express the nature of divinity, for cabbalists allow access to hidden knowledge and power, and for philosophers reveal the nature of truth. Versions of these ideas remained current in the Enlightenment, and have recently received fresh impetus in attempts to create a natural language for artificial intelligence. The story that Umberto Eco tells ranges widely from the writings of Augustine, Dante, Descartes and Rousseau, arcane treatises on cabbalism and magic, to the history of the study of language and its origins. He demonstrates the intimate relation between language and identity and describes, for example, how and why the Irish, English, Germans and Swedes – one of whom presented God talking in Swedish to Adam, who replied in Danish, while the serpent tempted Eve in French – have variously claimed their language as closest to the original. He also shows how the late eighteenth-century discovery of a proto-language (Indo-European) for the Aryan peoples was perverted to support notions of racial superiority. To this subtle exposition of a history of extraordinary complexity, Umberto Eco links the associated history of the manner in which the sounds of language and concepts have been written and symbolized. Lucidly and wittily written, the book is, in sum, a "tour de force" of scholarly detection and cultural interpretation, providing a series of original perspectives on two thousand years of European History. The paperback edition of this book is not available through Blackwell outside of North America.

"Eco's essays read like letters from a friend, trying to share something he loves with someone he likes.... Read this brilliant, enjoyable, and possibly revolutionary book." —George J. Leonard, San Francisco Review of Books "... a wealth of insight and instruction." —J. O. Tate, National Review "If anyone can make [semiotics] clear, it's Professor Eco.... Professor Eco's theme deserves respect; language should be used to communicate more easily without literary border guards." —The New York Times "The limits of interpretation mark the limits of our world. Umberto Eco's new collection of essays touches deftly on such matters." —Times Literary Supplement "It is a careful and challenging collection of essays that broach topics rarely considered with any seriousness by literary theorists." —Diacritics Umberto Eco focuses here on what he once called "the cancer of uncontrolled interpretation"—that is, the belief that many interpreters have gone too far in their domination of texts, thereby destroying meaning and the basis for communication.

Parodies of literary and academic writers include a version of "Lolita" with an older woman, an inside account of heavenly bureaucracy, and the story of Columbus' landing as if done by television news

How do we know a cat is a cat . . . and why do we call it a cat? An "intriguing and often fascinating" look at words, perceptions, and the relationship between them (Newark Star-Ledger). In Kant and the Platypus, the renowned semiotician, philosopher, and bestselling author of The Name of the Rose and Foucault's Pendulum explores the question of how much of our perception of things is based on cognitive ability, and how much on linguistic resources. In six remarkable essays, Umberto Eco explores in depth questions of reality, perception, and experience. Basing his ideas on common sense, Eco shares a vast wealth of literary and historical knowledge, touching on issues that affect us every day. At once philosophical and amusing, Kant and the Platypus is a tour of the world of our senses, told by a master of knowing what is real and what is not. "An erudite, detailed inquiry into the philosophy of mind . . . Here, Eco is continental philosopher, semiotician, and cognitive scientist rolled all into one." —Library Journal (starred review)

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