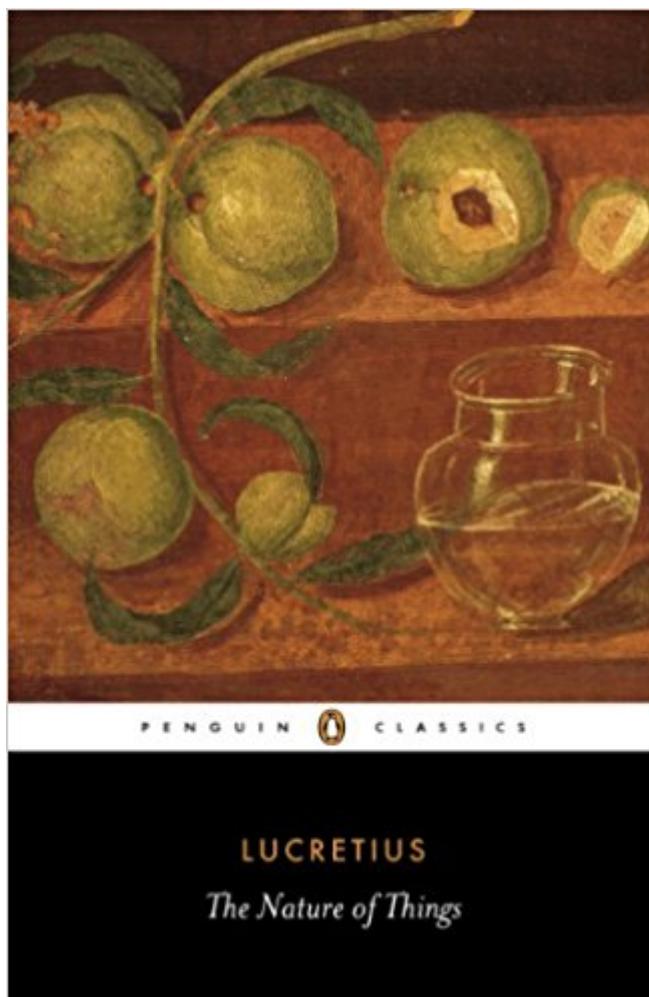


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# The Nature Of Things (Penguin Classics)



## Synopsis

The acclaimed new translation of the classic poem at the heart of Stephen Greenblatt's The Swerve. Lucretius' poem *On the Nature of Things* combines a scientific and philosophical treatise with some of the greatest poetry ever written. With intense moral fervour he demonstrates to humanity that in death there is nothing to fear since the soul is mortal, and the world and everything in it is governed by the mechanical laws of nature and not by gods; and that by believing this men can live in peace of mind and happiness. He bases this on the atomic theory expounded by the Greek philosopher Epicurus, and continues with an examination of sensation, sex, cosmology, meteorology, and geology, all of these subjects made more attractive by the poetry with which he illustrates them. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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## Customer Reviews

One of the most extraordinary classical translations of recent times -- Peter Stothard \* Times Literary Supplement \* A.E. Stallings's brilliant recent translation -- Eric Orrmsby \* Wall Street Journal \*

Titus Lucretius Carus (who died c. 50 BC) was an Epicurean poet writing in the middle years of the first century BC. His six-book Latin hexameter poem *De rerum natura* survives virtually intact, although it is disputed whether he lived to put the finishing touches to it. As well as being a pioneering figure in the history of philosophical poetry, Lucretius has come to be our primary source of information on Epicurean physics, the official topic of his poem. A. E. Stallings (translator) was born in 1968. She grew up in Decatur, GA, and was educated at the University of Georgia and Oxford University in classics. Her poetry has appeared in *The Best American Poetry* (1994 and 2000) and has received numerous awards, including a Pushcart Prize (*Pushcart Prize Anthology XXII*), the 1997 Eunice Tietjens Prize from Poetry, and the third annual James Dickey Prize from Five Points. Richard Jenkyns (introducer) is a professor of classics at the University of Oxford, a Fellow of Lady Margaret Hall, and the author of a number of books, including *Dignity and Decadence: Some Classical Aspects of Victorian Art and Architecture* and *The Victorians and Ancient Greece*.

Lucretius missed being translated in full by any of the classic English early modern translators: Chapman, Dryden, Pope. (Dryden did tantalizing selections) So it's fitting that Stallings goes back to those roots with a translation in rhymed fourteeners (think ballad form: da-dum, da-dum, da-dum, da-dum/da-dum, da-dum, da-dum, in couplets). There are a number of reasonably good translations available, including Latham's reliable prose in the older Penguin Classics edition, but this is the most ambitious modern attempt at a full, poetic translation of what is both (in Latin) a marvelous, sonorous epic poem and a fascinating account of Epicurean philosophy (serious, scientific, respectful of the gods but the opposite of conventional piety, mordantly disrespectful of love and politics).

The Roman poet and ancient physicist, Lucretius, c. 50 BC, wrote this epic poem, beautifully metered and rhymed (and translated into English with equal brilliance) about the nature of the universe. The central theme is atoms and particles and their conduct. He revealed a stunning understanding of atoms that would be proven largely accurate with the massive microscopes that were developed in the 20th Century. He also foreshadowed Darwin and his *Evolution of the Species* (1859) and the observations of great paleontologists, such as Steven Jay Gould in his *Wonderful Life* (1989). Lucretius poignantly observed: "Though the atoms are in constant riot the universe itself seems to be standing still and quiet." A precursor or speculations by

physicist Steven Hawking (A Brief History of Time. 1988), Lucretius cites the Greek philosopher, Anaxagoras (450BC), who observed: “All matter is infinitely divisible and motionless until animated by the mind.” The conundrum perhaps greater than the causes of the universe is this: Is the mind the only reality? This possibility increasingly emerges in the writings of history philosophers and today astrophysicists. Can it be any wonder that many subscribe to Emile Coué “Auto Suggestion: My Method” and the many books on self-hypnosis (e.g., “A Practical Guide to Self-Hypnosis” by Melvin Powers), and the current wave of similar “brain” books by doctors of many kinds (“The Brain That Changes Itself” by Doidge). Lucretius paved the way, and he did it in classic poetry. It’s thrilling to sample the genius-minds from ancient times. 5 Stars BookAWeekMan (leeglovett.com).

This is a clean and neat edition, readably printed and well organized with what I think is about the optimum amount of explanatory notes. The translation is into idiomatic modern English which results inevitably in some anachronistic phrases, but that is a small price to pay for its clarity and the absence of unnecessary exoticism. Readers who are interested in understanding the Classical views of the world could do very well starting with Lucretius in this translation.

Before a person could consult the nearest library or computer to explain the natural phenomenon of human existence, it was left to the individual to use either religion or careful reason (philosophy). Although many of his insights are now outdated, his method of inquiry and reasoning is still far more nuanced and perceptive than that of the modern man, despite all of his technological advantages. The modern man has arguably become less insightful as the burden of proof has been transferred from the individual to the professional scientific community. The Nature of Things is a beautiful excursion into the nature of perception. Based on nothing but insight and logic, Lucretius aims to explain the mysterious systems of life and matter. In addition, he provides a brave and pioneering rebuke of religion.

This translator uses modern vernacular English, and I love it. Timeless ideas, expressed in good conversational language. Should be on every young person’s reading list. I’m sure it’s on every right-wing nut’s burn list, too -- all the more reason to read it and think.

Up till now I've found Lucretius's stated intention to sweeten his philosophy with poetry somewhat ironic, since the translations I've looked at were a little on the bitter side. (And I'm no Latinist.) But this: this is a translation one can read with thoughtful amusement and utter delight. Almost as soon as I opened the book, I found myself pacing around my living room and kitchen, reciting aloud Stallings's wonderful heptametric couplets. This is a Lucretius you will read for fun.

Respecting the Kindle edition only: I find the formating of this translation to be faulty and troublesome. Individual lines of poetry are run together into a paragraph format, making it more difficult to notice the structure of the poem and the balance of its thoughts. Take a look at the preview of the Kindle edition and you'll see exactly what I mean. I find this unacceptable in a Kindle format, and plan to return my copy. I can't imagine this was not noticed by the producers of the Kindle edition. I think this never should have made it to publication in its present format.

I downloaded this book after reading "The Swerve - How the world became Modern" by Stephen Greenblatt. Lucretius' work was a central reference, and I read it to see first hand the world from this Epicurean's point of view. It is remarkable how the Epicurean's world-view foreshadowed the work of such such scientific bright-lights as Copernicus and Galileo and Newton and Darwin and Einstein. Lucretius' lacked an understanding of the structure of the atom and of gravity and magnetism; but he did get the general outlines of the physical universe right. The Epicureans, of course, were condemned by the Greek religious idealists, whose world view is based on fantasies and supposition and not by empirical evidence.

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