



Augustine of Hippo: A Biography

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This classic biography was first published thirty years ago and has since established itself as the standard account of Saint Augustine's life and teaching. The remarkable discovery recently of a considerable number of letters and sermons by Augustine has thrown fresh light on the first and last decades of his experience as a bishop. These circumstantial texts have led Peter Brown to reconsider some of his judgments on Augustine, both as the author of the *Confessions* and as the elderly bishop preaching and writing in the last years of Roman rule in north Africa. Brown's reflections on the significance of these exciting new documents are contained in two chapters of a substantial Epilogue to his biography (the text of which is unaltered). He also reviews the changes in scholarship about Augustine since the 1960s. A personal as well as a scholarly fascination infuse the book-length epilogue and notes that Brown has added to his acclaimed portrait of the bishop of Hippo.

Augustine of Hippo: A Biography Details

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Petruccio Hambasket IV says

If you're a student of history, and have been forced to read any previous Peter Brown, you will know that his usual writing style amounts to stuffing an overwhelming chunk of ideas into a very small amount of pages. What would take one historian 50 pages to explain, Brown can perfectly synthesis in 5. His use of language is intensely precise and rigorously academic (a quality that in practice should make his writing seem stuffy if not for the sheer breadth of his ideas).

Augustine of Hippo: A Biography is not the usual Peter Brown. The typically dense and highly complex pattern of writing that one has come to expect is, to the readers delight, relaxed in this study. Instead, we get a comparatively 'plain' language investigation into the infinitely interesting life and mind of St. Augustine: a man so complex (and important), that if it weren't for Brown's name on the cover, you might be amazed at how it could have been left complete at a mere 500 pages. I am not trying to be flippant when I say that this might be the greatest biography ever written; it is without a doubt the best personal study of any Late Antique figure. Brown exposes the changing shades of Augustine's psychology with breathtaking clarity and analysis, a feat that at the same time gives us an immense understanding of the Roman world that is falling to pieces all around him. Augustine's African upbringing, his various intellectual explorations (Manichaeism/Neo-Platonism), the Donatist controversy, the death of Monica and the conception of *The City of God*; it's all there, displayed with brilliant scrutiny and an ease of understanding that makes it clear the author has an exhaustive comprehension of his subject. For me it's always a rare delight when a far removed historical figure can be plucked out of the fog of time and displayed without bias in such an insightful fashion. The closest example of this type of work I can think of is Marguerite Yourcenar in her *Memoirs of Hadrian*. Unlike Yourcenar, however, Brown doesn't have to resort to imaginative writing to give us an intimate understanding of Augustine of Hippo, and each time I read this book the affect is like that of revisiting an old friend.

Furthermore, it should be noted that Brown doesn't get bogged down in the theological aspects of Augustine's life. This isn't because he isn't well versed in these subjects (he is a leading religious scholar), but rather because he chooses to take the more rounded approach. This allows those who have minimal interest in the intricate religious debates to also enjoy the study. It removes the clutter of certain theology (although obviously not all) and gets to the fundamental purpose of the biography. This is a source of some criticism among various scholars, but even those that shake their head at Brown's lack of intricate religious detail cannot find much at fault with his end result. This is a model biography and a scholarly triumph. Read it even if you don't care about Augustine and I promise you'll be sucked into this fascinating Roman world.

Scott says

The past is a foreign country. When we read history, we shouldn't seek to necessarily read moral tales and place ourselves at the helm. Instead, we must seek to have humility and strive to understand the characters in their place and time.

I had to constantly remind myself of this when reading Peter Brown's magisterial biography of Augustine of Hippo, or known affectionately by most as St. Augustine. Brown's prose and integration of source material in

this biography is remarkable. At times, even beautiful. Yet, all that being said, this was an incredibly difficult book to read. Augustine is one of the most brilliant - if not **the** most brilliant - minds in the history of the Christian church, compiling a massive amount of intellectual material over the course of his life. The reader of Augustine needs to proceed with caution. Thus, doing justice to Augustine's legacy in under 500 pages is an accomplishment in and of itself. But within these 500 or so pages is not loose musings or thoughts but sentences loaded with thoughtfulness. Peter Brown writes with heavy prose. Readers beware.

All in all, this is an incredible book, but in attempting to traverse the mountain of Augustine's thought, by way of Peter Brown's leading, don't be surprised if you get altitude sickness - I know I did. The views are stunning but only if you can handle the headaches.

Lane Severson says

Peter Brown is a beautiful writer. Even if you have no interest in Augustine, you could read this book and simply be lost Brown's command of language. However, this is the defining biography of Augustine. Brown has gone back and updated this book towards the end of his career. This is a gift to the world. Brown covers Augustine as a philosopher, theologian, Bishop, man, son and father. This is a long read, but it certainly belongs on your to read list.

Próndr says

There are some problematic aspects to Brown's biography of Augustine of Hippo, most of which, if not before, becomes apparent in the Epilogue included in the revised edition: "We should remember that in the 1960s some of the best work on the thought of Augustine stressed those moments where he appeared to have changed his mind on important matters. These studies examined the manner in which Augustine's progressive absorption of the Christian Scriptures, his pastoral experience and his wrestling with the issue of grace and free will led him to surrender his earlier outlook on the nature of society, on the role of upper-class culture and on the potentialities of human nature. His thought changed, slowly but surely, in pace with the changes of his circumstances. As a result of these studies, I believed that it was possible ... to seize 'that crucial area where external and internal changes touch each other'. A sense of human movement in a figure usually identified with all that was most rigid and unmoving in Catholic dogma was what my biography strove to convey." (pp. 489-90)

It is quite noticeable in his book that Brown strives to make Augustine consistent in his development, and not the least, to describe an interplay of internal and external change. However, this also seems to have led to a case of 'myopia' on Brown's part in several areas; the logic of '*a happened externally at the time of x, consequently b happened internally at the time of x*' is rather simplistic, and though it might lead to guessing right in some instances, in others it may end up getting things spectacularly wrong. In addition, I did find Brown to be a bit simplistic also in his sheer admiration of Augustine, who he unhesitatingly describes as a genius, not that he is uncritical in this treatment of him, but his criticism comes more as 'asides' - as a sort of afterthoughts - rather than being fully integrated into the main treatment of his subject.

"I have lost nothing," Brown writes, "over the years, of my original fascination with the rise of Christianity in the late Roman world. But, on looking back, I would say that I was unduly fascinated by the role played in this development by the Christian bishops. They were not the only agents in this process. At the time,

however, it was natural to look first and foremost in their direction. My training as a medievalist at Oxford had placed the issue of episcopal authority at the very centre of my interests. It was important for me to know how Augustine had contributed to the formidable hegemony of the Catholic Church in medieval Europe. His dealings with the Donatists and his ready acceptance of the use of Imperial laws to suppress Donatists, pagan and heretics posed the problem as to whether, if at all, Augustine merited the invidious title of 'theorist of the Inquisition'. That question, which any medievalist must at some time or other pose of Augustine, challenged me to reconstruct, without prejudice and without the distorting effects of hindsight, the exact social circumstances of late Roman Africa. In so doing, I attempted to recover the social and moral constraints within which Augustine wielded a weight of authority that was so formidable in theory and so far from overpowering in practice. (p. 491)

Brown at times tends to treat the local conditions in North Africa as incitements for Augustine to write as he did on various topics. Again, he might be right in some instances, yet Augustine's eager correspondence with friends and other clerics all over the Roman world as well as his monastic community in Hippo doesn't make this an obvious approach. "He arranged that he would never be alone.. Even [in] his most intimate experience of contemplation.." (p. 194) – It is a bit ironic that I picked up this book precisely because of one thing that Brown describes well, namely Augustine's neoplatonist approach, but then find myself agreeing with Henry Chadwick's judgement, that this is a 'biography without the theology' – a judgement Brown accepts as fair (p. 495.) He goes on to write:

"Yet, looking back, I would put the matter somewhat differently. What was lacking in my book was not so much 'philosophy' or 'theology'... It was, rather, a sense of the wider background of late antique religion and thought that gave weight and seriousness to many themes with which Augustine grappled, even if these were themes for which it was not so easy, in the 1960s ... to bring ... into our own times. Thus my preoccupation with those themes that could be communicated in modern terms led me to pass over the density and the challenging strangeness of many aspects of the late classical and early Christian thought-world in which he lived.

Now, however, we are in a better position to place Augustine against that wider landscape than we had been in 1961. This is due in part to the fact that, in the period between 1967 and the present, the study of Augustine has been overtaken ... by a veritable coming-of-age of the study of late antique Christianity and of late antique polytheism as a whole."

Throughout this book, Brown treats paganism almost as if it is dead already: "It seems as if Augustine were demolishing a paganism that existed only in libraries. In fact Augustine believed quite rightly, that he could best reach the last pagans through their libraries. In this, the City of God reflects faithfully the most significant trend in the paganism of the early fifth century. The partially disinherited generation of a Volusianus had sought to invest its religion in the distant past. They were fanatical antiquarians. They preferred every form of religion and philosophy that could boast a *litterata vetustas* - an immemorial origin preserved for them in literary classics. It is just this *vetustas* which Augustine dissects. He intercepts the pagans in their last retreat to the past: he will expose the tainted origins of the cults that were most ancient, and that figured most in the classics; he will play upon the inconsistencies, and hint at the secret incredulity of the writers who preserved this past, their poet, Vergil, their antiquarian Varro." (pp. 303-4)

To me, the "secret incredulity" of the pagan writers appears far more preferable than the often blatant credulity of their Christian counterparts. Brown, however, doesn't concern himself with such matters. Pagans, to him, were not only antiquarians, but *fanatical* at that. It is this type of lightweight argument, or rather, it is entirely lacking in argument, so let's call them superficial statements, that at times made it difficult for me to take Brown seriously. Here's another example dealing with an entirely different topic: "When he turned to Paul after 394, he fastened on two passages in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians: "What have you that you did not receive? If you received it, why do you boast as if it did not come to you as

a gift ? ... and then, as it is written: 'Let him who glories, glory in the Lord'.'

Those two phrases were central for every subsequent statement of Augustine's view of grace. For in them Augustine had found 'the antidote to Christian élitism'. [quoting W.S. Babcock, 1982] We can now see from those of the Dolbeau sermons which have the best possibility of having been preached at Carthage in 397, that Augustine set about immediately, in the first years of his episcopate, to apply an 'antidote to élitism' at every level of Christian experience. They were sermons of hope, and, decisively, sermons of equality. No group was untouched by the grace of God. For there was no effort, no matter how humble, that did not depend as absolutely upon the free gift of God's grace as did the most spectacular manifestation of 'charisma'. All believers were equal because all were equally 'poor.'" (p. 509)

He *immediately* set out; he fastened on those two passages *after 394*. This quote is from Brown's recent epilogue; again a similar case where the argument is completely lacking. Lo and behold, Augustine, the great promoter of predestination, hastened to apply this "antidote to élitism" he had found in Paul's Letters! - Since Paul was of crucial importance for Augustine's conversion (as described in his Confessions), he would have read Paul closely in the years following his conversion in 386, and likely ever after. Grace was of paramount importance to Paul, and surely this influenced Augustine to continue to develop this view. - My meaning is that providing a reference doesn't mean you can leave out the argument and wider context. It needs some fleshing out.

I've been reading a biography of Paul of Tarsus more or less simultaneously with this book, and it struck me that there is one particular area where I wish Augustine would have read Paul more closely, namely regarding celibacy. Barbarian that I am, I wish I could have been able to give Augustine this piece of advice, not that he would have given much thought to the word of a pagan, but it might have been something that could have made him think twice before developing his pernicious doctrine of original sin. F.F. Bruce writes in his 1969 biography of Paul: "Unless one had a special vocation—a charisma, as he [Paul] calls it? [1 Corinthians 7:7] —for celibacy, any attempt to adopt this condition was contrary to nature and would expose them to the very kind of temptation which they abhorred." – Charisma; gift, or talent. That Augustine lacked just that talent, no one who has read his Confessions can doubt. In fact, many a Catholic priest seem to have lacked it, and so I found it all the more interesting to consider that the apostle had a both wise and common-sense approach to just that matter. - "For Augustine, the present world was always overshadowed by a great sadness. Married couples should walk, regretfully, through the recognizable ruins of a perfect sexuality devastated by Adam's pride." (p. 502) The sadness was Augustine's own, and it makes it even sadder that he bequeathed this sadness to posterity through his doctrine.

Back to Hippo – and a different area of repression:

"Now, in Hippo, Augustine was again exposed to what he regarded as his previous besetting weaknesses. For a bishop was a figure of authority. If he was to be effective, he had, at least, to be admired; he must concern himself with his reputation... Augustine, indeed, had to draw on aspects of his own character that he had always regarded with infinite disquiet. In Book Ten of the Confessions, he faced this fact with exceptional honesty: he may no longer be vengeful when insulted, but love of praise, the need to feel admired and loved by others, still caused him to be 'roasted daily in the oven of men's tongues' One feels that the tensions that sprang from his relations to others, his need to influence men, his immense sensitivity to their response to him, were far more deeply rooted and insidious, than the more obvious temptations of greed and sexuality. His acute awareness of the motive-force of a 'love of praise' in his ecclesiastical rivals, the Donatist bishops, and in the ancient, pagan Romans, shows both how vividly he had experienced the emotion in himself, and how sternly he had repressed it: for 'no one who has not declared war on this enemy can possibly know how strong it is'." (pp. 200-1)

This "love of praise" is a theme that will be figure prominently in one of his best known writings. You have

to find the parallel yourself, Brown doesn't refer back to this when it appears about 100 pages ahead.

“He agreed with his contemporaries on two important points: the moral history of the Roman people was more important than the naked 'facts of life' of the Roman conquests; and the moral qualities of the Romans had made their Empire, if not uniquely privileged and deserving to last forever (as was the case for pagans), at least better than any of its predecessors... By allowing himself to be challenged by these exempla, Augustine transforms the Roman view of their own past... he emerges with a single, all-embracing explanation: the Romans had been moved to an outstanding show of virtue by one force alone, by an overweening love of praise: "They were, therefore, "grasping for praise, open-handed with their money; honest in the pursuit of wealth, they wanted to hoard glory." This is what they loved so wholeheartedly; for this they lived, for this they did not hesitate to die: all other lusts, they battened down with this overwhelming desire.' ... Augustine's average man was a very frail creature indeed. He was a slave to social custom. Even the greatest thinkers of the pagan past, it seemed to him, had capitulated to this force: they had hidden their true views... The irrational is also very close: the devotion of the crowds can make idols seem to move; a mysterious 'lower realm of feelings' can make a man put his own sense of being alive into a dead copy of the human form. Men need 'authority': they need to be shaken from their habits and irrational tendencies, by a firm, persuasive challenge from above. (...)

For Augustine believed in demons: a species of beings, superior to men, living forever, their bodies as active and as subtle as the air, endowed with supernatural powers of perception; and, as fallen angels, the sworn enemies of the true happiness of the human race. Their powers of influence were enormous: they could so interfere with the physical basis of the mind as to produce illusions ... always ready to swoop, like birds, upon the broken fragments of a frail and dissident humanity.” (pp. 308-10)

Augustine's 'City of God' is clearly not for the faint of heart.

Further back in his book, Brown deals with Augustine's approach to 'Disciplina': “..when Augustine had become a priest he had retained some optimism about the power of man's free will: the act of faith was still an act of conscious choice ... He had attempted to reform popular piety at this time... by persuasion and by removing habits that gave rise to false opinions, he might turn a congregation of unthinking Christians into good, 'spiritual' Catholics. Now he was less sure.

There seemed to be a great disparity between human circumstances and intentions, and the invincible purpose of an omnipotent God. The ability of the Catholic Church to expand rapidly by force if needs be, came to depend less on what a mere, conscientious bishop might judge to be practicable. (...)

For a Donatist, Augustine's attitude to coercion was a blatant denial of traditional Christian teaching: God had made men free to choose good or evil; a policy which forced this choice was plainly irreligious. The Donatist writers quoted the same passages from the Bible in favour of free will, as Pelagius would later quote. In his reply, Augustine already gave them the same answer as he would give to the Pelagians: the final, individual act of choice must be spontaneous; but this act of choice could be prepared by a long process ... which might even include fear, constraint, and external inconvenience ... Augustine ... summed up his attitude in one word: disciplina... In the Old Testament, God had taught His wayward Chosen People through just such a process of disciplina... The persecution of the Donatists was another 'controlled catastrophe' imposed by God, mediated, on this occasion, by the laws of Christian Emperors ... no more than a special instance of the relationship of the human race as a whole, to its stern Father, who would 'whip the son He receives', and indiscriminately enough at that; like the man who beat his family every Saturday night 'just in case.'” (pp. 232-3)

The suppression of the Donatists, after being branded heretics in the 'Edict of Unity' of 405, happens around 4 years after Augustine finished writing his 'Confessions' – yet it seems a long way from the “sensitive soul” he gives expression to in that work. Nevertheless, Peter Brown can't view him as being other than consistent:

“A man who had recently analysed, with evident fascination and horror, the strength of the motives that had once led him, in his teens, to a quite gratuitous act of vandalism by stealing pears, would not be likely to underestimate the dangerous force of the 'sweet taste of sinning'..” – “Augustine may be the first theorist of the Inquisition; but he was in no position to be a Grand Inquisitor.” (pp. 235-6)

Brown returns to the topic of the Donatists in the Epilogue: “In a sermon on the difference between 'true' and 'false' Christians, a Donatist bishop pointed out that although Pharaoh had attempted to kill the children of the Israelites in Egypt, he had never dared to attempt to make them change their religious beliefs, as the Catholics were doing to his own flock in Africa!” (p. 486)

Manicheans, Donatists, Pelagians, pagans, Augustine deals harshly with each in turn, and while it is true, as Brown points out, that he “was in no position to be a Grand Inquisitor” it is easy to get the impression that given the chance to fill such a position, he would probably not have declined.

“With Augustine's victory over Pelagius, in the 420s, what had been the shadow of his own 'Lost Future' – associated with the sad abandonment of a classical view of the human capacity for self-improvement - fell across the entire tradition of Western Christianity. Many scholars are now prepared to claim, partly on the strength of my own description of Augustine's changes of mind in the 390s, that those changes caused a sinister fissure to open up between a sunnier, because more 'classical', form of early Christianity and an early medieval world dominated by doctrines of original sin and by an insistence on the all-powerful and inscrutable workings of divine grace. I myself do not agree with such extreme interpretations. But scripta manent.” (pp. 497-98)

That this would be an “extreme” interpretation, is an opinion Brown is entitled to hold, yet it is only an opinion. Scripta manent. – Still, this is mostly a very erudite and also well written book, though I find I have to beg to differ on some points. It also seems to me that he fails to see, or at least to point out, some aspects of his subject that should have been fairly obvious (even in the 1960s.) He does keep good track of Augustine’s neoplatonic approach, which what I was looking for in this book in the first place, so let me end this already far too long review with a quote from this book that perhaps shows Brown at his best:

“Augustine's extraordinary capacity to construct from his reading of Neo-Platonic material an entirely new sense of the inner life of the individual was achieved at a cost. He allowed the Platonic sense of the majesty of the cosmos to grow pale. Lost in the narrow and ever fascinating labyrinth of his preoccupation with the human will ..., Augustine turned his back on the mundus, on the magical beauty associated with the material universe in later Platonism. ... Augustine would never look up at the stars and gaze at the world around him with the shudder of religious awe that fell upon Plotinus, when he exclaimed: 'All the place is holy' ... Plotinus went on to write of the cosmos: 'and there is nothing in it which is without a share of soul.' Augustine pointedly refused to share this enthusiasm. He viewed the Platonic notion of a World Soul ... as an uninteresting and basically unnecessary speculation: if such an entity existed at all, all that mattered was that it should not be worshipped instead of God... Something was lost, in Western Christendom, by this trenchant and seemingly commonsensical judgement. The common sense of the ancients had been different. Seven hundred years had to elapse before the Platonists of Chartres recovered, through their own speculations on the anima mundi, a sense of the density and significance of the natural world which the notion of an ever active World Soul had guaranteed in classical thought.” (p. 504)

Matt Pitts says

I thoroughly enjoyed immersing myself in the life and world of Augustine through Brown's landmark biography. There is a reason why it has remained the standard life of Augustine for over 45 years.

The epilogue, which was not a part of the original biography, includes two chapters reflection on the advances in Augustine scholarship since Brown first wrote. The first focuses on the significance of the discovery of two groups of manuscripts - one of sermons and another of letters - that have occurred since Brown first wrote. The second is more reflective on Brown's own cultural and scholarly milieu in the 1960's and how that influenced his writing as well as how scholarship has changed and advanced since then. This final chapter is a marvelously honest and humble self-reflection, perhaps in the spirit of Augustine's own *Retractions*.

A highly respected work that does not need my commendation but which I offer nonetheless.

Ted Rohe says

I think this is a great Biography of Augustine, but I wish there was some more focus and clarification on Augustine's theology. I think I will have to explore some more books on that specifically. However, Brown does focus on aspects of Augustine's Theology and it is interesting to see it in contrast to many views of Augustine today. Overall very good and I learned a lot.

Nathaniel says

The best thing about Peter Brown is that he's an historian writing a biography. Sounds obvious, right? But he's not a psychologizing, or moralizing, or theologizing. He's historicizing.

This biography from the late '60s (his new edition left the original pretty much intact, and just added a preface and epilogue with information about recent discoveries of sermon texts and letter transcriptions, with the attendant implications in thought), was among the first to situate such a major figure from antiquity in the contemporary social, political and organizational structures. You can see, from almost the first moment of reading it, why this book influenced so many subsequent authors and editors: the scene is lively, the setting complex, and the tone--well, if it's not conversational, it's at least collegial. You get the feeling that he's not trying to instruct you in something, but that he's exploring terrain with you. It may be a place where he's spent much time, but he's just as interested in developing new insights as you are.

For example: he reports on the inscriptions on gravestones current at Augustine's time, and connects that to the cultural attitudes and emphases that he might have met, combated, or assumed. He compares the inscriptions from Northern Africa to the inscriptions in Southern Europe, and both to those in the Middle East. Weaving this thread throughout the chapters, along with details about diet, transportation, fashion and entertainment, helps him build a convincing case about the character of Augustine himself, his changes in temperament and the development of his relationships, both with allies and enemies. Just when you start to wonder what he's missing, he critiques his own argument in the epilogue!

Simply a great read: stunning in scope, utterly original in bent, and still joyful in depth.

Peter N. says

(I read the old edition.) Titanic is the word that came to mind as I read. Augustine, his theology, his philosophy, his pastoral ministry, his interaction with the state, his defenses of orthodoxy come alive in this wonderful biography by Peter Brown. Brown emphasizes Augustine's intellectual labors and how his thought matured over the years. I was especially convicted by his love for his flock and his compassion towards them. Brown's discussion of the Donatist controversy and the Pelagian controversy were excellent. I never realized how much passion Augustine had and how deeply he felt certain things. I did not come close to absorbing all that was discussed, but what I got was exciting. Two specific things came out of the reading: First, I want to think better and deeper. Second, I want to get Augustine's sermons.

Cat says

I read the old version, which was fine. Augustine spanned the gap between the classic world and the emerging world of the middle ages. He started life as a Manichee and flirted with neo-platonism before settling down to life as the bishop of Hippo in Roman Africa. His was a very "Roman African" kind of career (a phrase which meant nothing to me before this book). Roman African Christianity was a "purer" form that was less influenced by decadent Roman/Italian ways. In fact, the main schism of Augustine's time, the Donatists, had split from the Catholic church over the issue of Christian collaboration with Roman pagan authorities.

Throughout his career Augustine stood for the religion of church and parishioner (as supposed to the religion of the monasteries). His theology emphasized original sin and supported baptism at birth. Humans needed Christianity as a weary traveller needs an inn.

He was a prolific writer, but always anchored his writing in current events. For example, City of God was written after the sack of Rome by Alaric the Visigoth (love those names) sent patrician Romans (who were Pagans) scurrying to Africa for succor.

I felt I got a better sense of the "life and times" of Augustine as supposed to his thought and ideas. Not that I have a problem with that. Augustine is an important transitional figure between the classical and christian worlds, and his times give the reader of what it was like to live during the fall of the western roman empire.

I recommend it for people interested in Augustine himself or the time period in general.

Melora says

Brilliant! I had this on my shelf for a year before I got to it – the size and subject matter just seemed a bit daunting – but it turned out to be engrossing and readable. Brown is a wonderful writer (though his style includes more use of commas than I am accustomed to), and he does a beautiful job balancing the personal details of Augustine's life with the history of the period. I would assume that most readers going in to this would have a basic familiarity with traditional Roman religion, the history of the late Roman Empire, and with the major controversies within the Church in this period, but even without this background I think this book would be enjoyable (though more challenging. For example, the Donatist controversy comes up quite a bit before Brown goes in to it in detail. Similarly with Pelagianism. And Platonism. But when he does get to

explaining things, he does it wonderfully well!)

I love the way Brown draws connections between various of Augustine's writings, tracing the development of his ideas along with the events of his life and the changing circumstances of the Church. I hadn't realized before this what an incredibly rich body of work Augustine had left, and Brown uses excerpts from his letters, sermons, pamphlets, and books throughout.

My copy of Augustine of Hippo is the New Edition with An Epilogue, published in 2000, which updates the 1967 edition with an Epilogue consisting of two chapters – “New Evidence” and New Directions.” In “New Evidence” he discusses how the 'Divjak letters,' 27 letters by Augustine found in a manuscript discovered in 1975, and the 'Dolbeau sermons,' 26 sermons, found in 1990, have added to historians' understanding of the period and of Augustine's thought, and also how they have changed his (Brown's) thinking on Augustine. “New Directions” is more personal. In this chapter he describes how his own thinking on Augustine has changed since he began his research in 1961. Both the study of the newly found documents and his own maturing over the thirty years or so have given him a more nuanced and sympathetic understanding of Augustine, and particularly of the apparently severe, elderly Augustine. Not to say that Brown's presentation of Augustine in the 1967 biography is unnuanced or unsympathetic at all, but that he now sees compassion and kindness in places where he previously saw only rigidity.

For an example of the tone of “New Directions”....

“There is a harshness in my judgements on the old Augustine which the indulgent reader should put down to a young man's lack of experience of the world. Since then I have come to know bishops. Some can be saintly; many are really quite nice; and most are ineffective. They are as ineffective, that is, in the face of a confidently profane world, as Augustine and his colleagues are now revealed by the Divjak letters to have been in their own time. Augustine's writings and the examples of his activities in Africa may have contributed decisively to the formation of Catholic Christendom in Western Europe. But fifth-century African bishops did not live in such a Christendom. They were far from being the undisputed spiritual leaders of a society 'in which church and state had become inextricably interdependent'.” (pg 492)

I read the Epilogue before I started the rest of the book, and I recommend this order, although I suppose the fact that Brown chose to make it an “epilogue” rather than a “prologue” suggests he would not agree with me.

There were so many marvelous passages from Augustine here that picking one is hard, but this one (and I include Brown's words to make the situation clear) nicely conveys what makes him so loveable...

“Not every man lives to see the fundamentals of his life's work challenged in his old age. Yet this is what happened to Augustine during the Pelagian controversy. At the time that the controversy opened, he had reached a plateau. He was already enmeshed in a reputation that he attempted to disown with characteristic charm: 'Cicero, the prince of Roman orators,' he wrote to Marcellinus, in 412, 'says of someone that “He never uttered a word which he would wish to recall.” High praise indeed! – but more applicable to a complete ass than to a genuinely wise man... If God permit me, I shall gather together and point out, in a work specially devoted to this purpose, all the things which justly displease me in my books: then men will see that I am far from being a biased judge in my own case. ... For I am the sort of man who writes because he has made progress, and who makes progress – by writing.’” (pg 354)

Nick says

I was somewhat skeptical that this book would be worthwhile, having been through the confessions a number of times and having Augustine's life story pretty much together in my own head. I thought an Augustine biography would be redundant, having already read the one written by the saint himself. For some reason, the stupidity of this attitude did not make itself aware immediately; fortunately, it only took the first few pages of Brown's book to disabuse me of my philistinism.

Brown's research is meticulous; he sculpts broad, arcing narratives within each section of Augustine's life, peppering the plot with abundant references to the man's letters and sermons, situating them within the rich context of provincial, African Christianity. The persistent and simultaneous tug of contemplative inclinations against pastoral, practical controversies within the flock is standard stuff of ancient ecclesiastical biographies, but Brown was able to get out of the way with enough tact to let the details of Augustine's personal story stand up in clear but ornate relief against the backdrop of 5th century Hippo, Carthage, and Rome. The two great controversies of Augustine's life--over Donatism and Pelagianism--stand like pillars on either side of his episcopal ministry, and I realized that prior to this biography I hadn't understood what was at stake in either of them, having approached them through an exclusively theological lens. Brown bestows a measure of flesh and blood on the controversialists, for which I am quite grateful. Learning of Augustine's own development, from an intense, almost rigorist neophyte to a venerable man of affairs deeply acquainted with the mysterious nature of human sin, softened the portrait of this brilliant and devoted Christian without diminishing any of his greatness. The melancholy of the crumbling late Roman empire overrun by invasion after invasion struck me with consistent force, and gave me a sense of the tragic feeling of futility that must have gnawed at those with responsibility to preserve and hand on civilization.

Augustine's literary executor, Possidius, said upon his death that "I think those who gained most from him were those who had been able actually to see and hear him as he spoke in Church, and, most of all, those who had some contact with the quality of his life among men." Having read this biography does little to ameliorate our lack of experience of him, but does inspire a deep desire to be faithful to the graces of one's own life, no matter where they lead, in confidence that the contribution one single person can make in all this madness is worthwhile, no matter how small.

C. Çevik says

Okudugum en iyi Augustinus biyografisi. Tumuyule antik kaynaklara dayanan bir kitap oldugu icin gonul rahatligiyla ciddi calismalarda kullanilabilir. Referanslar sayfa altinda veriliyor, gayet iyi bir kitap.

Jacob Aitken says

A very difficult read, but easily the standard secondary source on Augustine. The broad contours of Augustine's life are well-known, but Brown places them within a theological framework. He takes intellectual themes from controversies in Augustine's life (thus the Latin-ish chapter titles) and retells the story around these themes. It makes for somewhat difficult reading at times, but it is very illuminating.

I cannot imagine a better work that more neatly captures Augustine's **sitz im leben** than this work. He demonstrates Augustine's philosophical commitment to neo-Platonism by noting how many in Augustine's time, including the man himself, were embarrassed (initially; evidence suggests Augustine later worked himself out of this embarrassment) by the "earthiness" of the Old Testament. Of course, that is just one

example.

More recent editions of this book (current printing previous printings) take into account not only recent scholarship on Augustine, but recent archeological finds of some of Augustine's letters and sermons. Peter Brown is the undisputed master of classical antiquity and this book clearly shows it.

Nick says

This is an incredibly detailed biography of Augustine. Peter Brown uses Augustine's writings and other sources of the period to create a biography which must be considered the authoritative work on Augustine. It is a difficult read at times and I read this over a period of time, taking it slowly. However, it was certainly worthy the effort.

Czarny Pies says

Peter Brown's Augustine of Hippo is a brilliant tour-de-force that will delight any reader familiar with the history of theological thought or the late Roman empire. It recounts the life and intellectual struggles of a fascinating person, elucidates the writings of an important philosopher and gives a brilliant portrait of African society in the fifth century.

The first thing to understand is that Brown has written a true biography; not a speculation of the life of man known through his actions and a few written sources. Brown had the full range of material necessary to compose a true history of the public and private man. At his disposition were voluminous writings, sermons and letters from the pen of Augustine plus numerous other contemporary sources. In the epilogue to the second edition of his book Brown writes: "'Augustine appeared to me to be one of the few figures of late antiquity of whom a biography could be written. His writings were extensive, vivid and most important of all securely dated. But there was more to it than that. ... He showed how it should be done, not only in his Confessions but in his many letters.'" (p. 488) In other words, Augustine put enough of himself in his Confessions and letters that the modern biographer can recreate the inner man at the different stages of his life which is what Brown does and in brilliant fashion. His book contains the same charms as David McCulloch's life of Harry Truman or Jean Tadie's biography of Proust.

One does however need to know a little about the subject before starting. I had taken a course on the late Roman empire as an undergraduate for which I had read excerpts from the City of God and later read Augustine Confessions on my own. This was enough of an introduction to allow me to enjoy Brown's book. I would not recommend it to anyone who had not read the Confessions and some sections of the City of the God.

I was initially impressed at how well Brown explained the Confessions. He assures the reader that the book even when read in the original Latin has the feel of being a work of the eighteenth century. It lacked any stylistic precedents in the classical era and thus tremendously surprised the readers of its era. Brown however insists that Augustine's Confessions were truly intended to be what the title indicated. They were written as the exercise of a Christian trying to understand his own weaknesses so as to become a better Christian. Rousseau's Confessions in which he takes a bizarre pleasure in parading his at times perverse behaviour before the public may be written in the same style but have different objectives.

Brown presents Augustine as a thinker who was exposed to many ideas and thought deeply about them. He received a Classical education of the Roman era. He was briefly a Manichee and then spent most of his professional career as a Catholic bishop fighting two heresies: Donatism and Pelagianism. Augustine's great

achievements for posterity were to unite Platonism with Christianity and to lay the ground work for Calvinism through the development of the doctrine of predestination. The achievement of Brown's book is that it gives the reader an understanding of the intellectual context that Augustine was educated and lived in as well as explaining how Augustine's works affected what followed.

Brown in the first Edition of his book acknowledges that there is some truth in the accusation that Augustine was the great theologian of the inquisition. In his writings, he examined Pelagianism and Donatism carefully refuting them in the finest detail. As a bishop, he used the full judicial, military, and police power of the empire to suppress these two heresies. In the first Edition, Brown argues that while Augustine used physical coercion it was still the verbal arguments that gave him the greatest pleasure. In the Epilogue to the Second Edition, Brown suggests that new letters discovered since the publication of the first edition suggest that Augustine was in fact saddened by what he felt was the need to resort to physical force to solve intellectual problems.

Brown also feels that St. Augustine's concept of predestination was extremely close to that which Jean Calvin developed from St. Augustine's writings. The difference that Brown sees is that while the Calvinists simply insisted that there was an elite "elect" predestined for salvation, St. Augustine despaired at how deeply sin was embedded in his nature and concluded that he could only achieve salvation through God's grace. Thus, the Calvinists at times appear to gloat over those who are not predestined for salvation, St. Augustine simply argued that he could not without God's help overcome his own sinful nature. The critics in his time pointed out to Saint Augustine that his doctrine may have had some merits in a society that was predominantly Christian but that it considerably missionary effort in that missionaries in order to win converts in non-Christian society need a message of hope not despair. St. Augustine was not moved. Peter Brown's *Augustine of Hippo* is a wonderful book. It does require a basic familiarity with St. Augustine's work but for those who possess such a familiarity, it is a treasure trove of insight and pleasure.
