

Glad to the Brink of Fear

author: James Marcus

2026-08

Synopsis

author	James Marcus
readBy	Graham Winton
inLanguage	english

An engaging reassessment of the celebrated essayist and his relevance to contemporary audiences.

More than two centuries after his birth, Ralph Waldo Emerson remains one of the presiding spirits in American culture. Yet his reputation as the starry-eyed prophet of self-reliance has obscured a much more complicated figure who spent a lifetime wrestling with injustice, philosophy, art, desire, and suffering. James Marcus introduces listeners to this Emerson, a writer of self-interrogating genius whose visionary flights are always grounded in Yankee shrewdness.

This Emerson is a rebel. He is also a lover, a friend, a husband, and a father.

Having declared his great topic to be "the infinitude of the private man," he is nonetheless an intensely social being who develops Transcendentalism in the company of Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, and Theodore Parker. And although he resists political activism early on—hoping instead for a revolution in consciousness—the burning issue of slavery ultimately transforms him from cloistered metaphysician to fiery abolitionist.

Drawing on telling episodes from Emerson's life alongside landmark essays like "Self-Reliance," "Experience," and "Circles," Glad to the Brink of Fear reveal show Emerson shares our preoccupations with fate and freedom, race and inequality, love and grief. It shows, too, how his desire to see the world afresh, rather than accepting the consensus view, is a lesson that never grows old.

"Of all of Emerson's biographers, James Marcus is the first to make the man and his thought come alive in the present. His Emerson is a marvel—a skeptic and an apostle, a creature of flawed feelings and noble ideals, a lover, a mourner, a wit, and a visionary. How lucky we are to encounter him through Marcus's wonderfully exact and affable prose."

Merve Emre, Wesleyan University, contributing writer at The New Yorker

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