

Reviews: *Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely*

Author Andrew S. Curran, professor and award-winning Historian

"Engrossing biography...sustained with appealing clarity and energy."—**WASHINGTON POST**

"...[A] fine book...Curran does a terrific job...makes a strong and convincing case..."
—**NEW YORKER**

"....This publication history is elegantly untangled by Mr. Curran, whose clear style and interest in the psychology of it all transforms it into a lively narrative...One is left mulling over Mr. Curran's phrase "the art of thinking freely."—**WALL STREET JOURNAL**

"....What he offers is the most accessible version of the lie and work of this protean figure who trained for the priesthood and ended up questioning every image imaginable orthodoxy...[an] Excellent account..."—**NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS**

"Curran...remind[s] us just what a radical Diderot was in his time." —**NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW**"

"...[a] marvelous account of the philosopher's life and work...much more than a biography...Curran renders in vivid detail the social and intellectual life of 18th-century France. —**PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, STARRED REVIEW**

"Sometimes you stumble upon a book and think, Why didn't I know about this before now? In *Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely*, Andrew Curran's spirited biography, Diderot emerges from the page as not just an Enlightenment philosopher, a contemporary of Rousseau and Voltaire, and the lead writer of the *Encyclopédie*—he also steps out as a truly free thinker and master of dissent, even for today's times".—**AMAZON BOOK REVIEW**

Named one of Kirkus Reviews' Best Books of 2019

Named as a Best Book of the Month during January 2019 for Amazon

Named one of Kirkus Reviews' "11 Early 2019 Books We Love"

Named a Best History Book of January by Amazon Book Reviews

Finalist: 2019 American Library in Paris Book Award

Open Letters Review: The Best Books of 2019: Biography!

Shortlisted for the Elizabeth Longford Prize for Historical Biography

"Engrossing biography...sustained with appealing clarity and energy, Curran reveals how this son of devoutly Catholic parents came to question the existence of God and how, from that radical premise, Diderot went on to question the legitimacy of the established church, the monarchy, sexual mores, aristocratic privileges, the slave trade and European colonization...Indeed, readers of this biography are likely to be impressed by the scope of Diderot's thought and by his courage, as he risked persecution to ask and answer taboo questions, thereby making it easier, and safer, for us to do the same."

—**WASHINGTON POST**

"...[A] fine book...Curran does a terrific job...makes a strong and convincing case... Diderot exists in memory to show that materialism can be miserable or it can be magical. It all depends on the material, and on the light."

—**NEW YORKER**

“...[A] critical biography...The Encyclopédie was not explicitly radical or anticlerical, but as Mr. Curran points out, it slyly knocked religion from its pedestal by treating entries on matters of faith on a parity with entries on glass-blowing or letterpress printing. The publication of the Encyclopédie involved a long scuffle between editors, printers, the Jesuits, the state, the official censor, King Louis XV’s mistress and the contributors, who were often at variance among themselves. This publication history is elegantly untangled by Mr. Curran, whose clear style and interest in the psychology of it all transforms it into a lively narrative...One is left mulling over Mr. Curran’s phrase “the art of thinking freely.” The cultivation of such fearless open-mindedness was indeed an art, not a form of political evangelization, and whether or not you agree with anything Diderot ever said, you are bound to be exhilarated by his creativity.”

—**WALL STREET JOURNAL**

“Making sense of these mercurial works is not easy, and situating them in such a life as Diderot’s is even more challenging, so it is remarkable that in *Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely* Andrew Curran succeeds admirably in both regards... What he offers is the most accessible version of the life and work of this protean figure who trained for the priesthood and ended up questioning every image imaginable orthodoxy...[an] Excellent account...”

—**NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS**

“Curran...remind[s] us just what a radical Diderot was in his time.”

—**NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW**

“...[a] marvelous account of the philosopher’s life and work...much more than a biography...Curran renders in vivid detail the social and intellectual life of 18th-century France. Curran discusses Diderot’s education by the Jesuits and initial intention of becoming a priest, the publication of his first influential text, *Pensées philosophiques*, his resulting imprisonment (which Curran sees as a formative experience), and his decades-long labor on his masterpiece, the *Encyclopédie*. This last is typical of Curran’s thorough approach: readers learn about the financial and political aspects of publishing such an expansive work...and its political impact...Equally fascinating are Curran’s summaries of Diderot’s remarkable contributions as art critic, playwright, and sexologist...Readers will be left with a new appreciation for Diderot, of his wide-ranging thought, and of his life as an expression of intense intellectual freedom.”

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MORE PRAISE for DIDEROT AND THE ART OF THINKING FREELY

“...absorbing...Curran vividly portrays Diderot as a brilliant man filled with contradictions and passions who acted as a central figure in the advancement of intellectual freedom.”

—**BOOKPAGE, STARRED REVIEW**

“A lively biography of Denis Diderot, provocateur, polymath, and central figure in the French Enlightenment... Curran gamely sifts through the mountain of Diderot’s output—he was a prolific art critic, lead writer of the *Encyclopédie*, and an inveterate correspondent—without for a moment making it feel burdensome. Rather, he ably balances the details of Diderot’s life with thoughtful considerations of the source and depth of his philosophical byways, taking his more peculiar ideas seriously but not literally. Curran’s mission is served by his subject’s wealth of experiences: In addition to his run-ins with state and religious leaders, he found a patron and intellectual sparring partner in Catherine the Great and corresponded with Benjamin Franklin before the American Revolution his writings helped inspire. As Curran writes, Diderot argued that kings and religious leaders “were complicit in running a massive illusion factory”; a more skeptical world may be Diderot’s greatest legacy. An intellectually dense and well-researched yet brisk journey into one of history’s most persuasive dissenters.”

—**KIRKUS REVIEWS, STARRED REVIEW**

"Sometimes you stumble upon a book and think, Why didn't I know about this before now? In Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely, Andrew Curran's spirited biography, Diderot emerges from the page as not just an Enlightenment philosopher, a contemporary of Rousseau and Voltaire, and the lead writer of the Encyclopédie—he also steps out as a truly free thinker and master of dissent, even for today's times. Although he had many followers, including Catherine the Great, Diderot chose, probably wisely, to record some of his most provocative thoughts in unpublished novels. Author Curran uncovers these writings for us, sifting through Diderot's thoughts and arguments, adding context, and sweeping us up in Diderot's words, his times, and his ideas. It is a relatively fun read and a fascinating journey. For a philosopher living during the Enlightenment, Denis Diderot sure was a Renaissance man."

"Sometimes you stumble upon a book and think, Why didn't I know about this before now? In Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely, Andrew Curran's spirited biography, Diderot emerges from the page as not just an Enlightenment philosopher, a contemporary of Rousseau and Voltaire, and the lead writer of the Encyclopédie—he also steps out as a truly free thinker and master of dissent, even for today's times.—**AMAZON BOOK REVIEW**

"This enjoyable biography of French philosopher Denis Diderot engages with the life of this man who was imprisoned for his atheism — and with his ideas, which brashly challenged beliefs about religion, race, royalty, sex and morality."

—**NEWSDAY**

"Andrew Curran has written a fascinating biography of Enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot – one of history's most famous contrarians – and how his personal struggles informed his views."

—**BUSINESS INSIDER**

"The story of how this reprobate became one of the most significant intellectual forces of the French Enlightenment is a central theme of Andrew S. Curran's *Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely*. Curran writes in the long shadow of Arthur M. Wilson's *Diderot* (1972), one of the most thorough and eloquent biographies of any eighteenth-century figure... His [Curran's] fluent and spirited book surpasses its predecessor in finding a center of gravity in the Enlightenment's most kaleidoscopic thinker... Curran makes a persuasive case that Diderot's mercurial temperament and writing style expressed not a lack of character or discipline but rather an unwavering intention to think (and feel) freely, to allow himself to consider every thesis and register every emotion without constraint."

—**NEW REPUBLIC**

"In his new biography, *Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely*, Andrew S. Curran clearly relishes investigating his subject's contradictions. A lively, informed, often witty book, it explores Diderot's personal history, from his disenchantment with religion, to his hustling to produce the *Encyclopédie*, to his complicated friendships with philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Russian ruler Catherine the Great. But a standard-issue biography didn't quite work for Curran, who split the book into roughly two halves, one emphasizing Diderot's life, the other his ideas."

—**KIRKUS REVIEWS, interview with Andrew Curran**

"A new generation deserves a new Diderot, especially given the sharp relevance of his concerns and fierce honesty of his voice. In *Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely*, Andrew Curran has stepped up to the challenge. A French scholar who has written widely on Diderot, Curran offers a clear and compelling account of this magnificent but mercurial thinker...Curran does an admirable job in fleshing out his subject's youth. He rightly focuses on the tension between Diderot père and fils...With confidence and care, Curran traces Diderot's breathtaking intellectual itinerary. He does a fine job in explaining why the *Encyclopédie* was so revolutionary — think of it as the 18th-century's internet — and why, without Diderot's unflagging commitment (he wrote some 5,000 of the entries), courage (he refused to move the operation to more clement climes, even though he lived under the threat of imprisonment), and cleverness (including the ploys used to undermine the orthodox entries

he was forced to publish in its pages), the 28-volume work would never have seen the light of day. He also provides cogent and insightful accounts of some of Diderot's own books, both those that were his and his alone, like D'Alembert's Dream and The Nun, and those he wrote in collaboration with others, most notably the Abbé Raynal's History of the Two Indies... His [Curran's] book is a worthy successor to those of Wilson and Furbank, and serves as a powerful reminder that Diderot's rightful place is under the Panthéon's dome — if only to annoy both Voltaire and Rousseau."

—**LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS**

"In Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely, Andrew S. Curran emphasizes Diderot's own patience with his most complex thought. "That [Diderot] refrained from publishing (or taking credit for) his most forward-thinking ideas during his lifetime was not simply a matter of avoiding persecution," a threat that first presented itself when he was jailed in 1749 for the intemperate materialism of his pamphlet Letter on the Blind..." In Curran's lucid biography, writing "for the drawer" also fulfilled Diderot's complicated sense of a future when he would be more fully understood—an assertion that, it must be said, relies more on the philosopher's visionary confidence in the rightness of his project than on prophecies worked out in any single text...Curran is particularly attuned to the theme of illusion in Diderot's life and work, and how some of Diderot's most powerful conceits, like Mongogul's ring, compelled hidden and silent things to reveal themselves and speak...As he points out, one of the most astonishing things about the book is that Diderot philosophizes about matters of the utmost importance to a freethinker—the small but real spaces for action available to us in a deterministic universe—but refrains from pointing this out to the reader directly. Instead, this happy little lesson on freedom and autonomy comes through our "reading and laughing," which, Curran notes, is what the philosophical experience is all about. Diderot may have left many messages in a bottle for his future readers, but at a time when determinism is more dogmatic than ever and we feel more and more constrained, this one might wind up being the most precious of all—and most welcome."

—**BOOKFORUM**

"...Curran...has produced a tell-all of Diderot's life from his writings to his numerous women, from his political activities to his close friendship with Catherine the Great...very well researched, leaving no stone unturned, covering all the territory of the times, both foreground and background...learned and lucid...Curran has unearthed quite a number of fascinating gems of information."

—**NEW YORK JOURNAL OF BOOKS**

"Like many of his fellow philosophes, Denis Diderot was both a broadly talented thinker and a prolific writer. Over the course of his intellectual life, he produced important bodies of art criticism, philosophical essays, scientific studies, plays, and novels. He's best known, of course, as the co-founder and chief editor of the Encyclopédie (published 1751–72), the Enlightenment's essential tome. Andrew S. Curran's critical biography, Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely, untangles many of the historical intricacies surrounding the publication of this text, and it grapples dexterously with the ramifications of Diderot's more original philosophy, such as that expressed in Rameau's Nephew, perhaps his most important independent project."

—**NEW CRITERION**

"...Marvellous and eye-opening... [Diderot] remains relevant in 2019, in a Europe in which the notion of democracy has come into question."

—**CATHOLIC HERALD**

"splendidly written and illustrated...Curran is a smart biographer who allows his subject to be human, failing to take responsibility for his actions and embracing existence."

—**FREE INQUIRY**

"Curran's book, *Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely*, is a brilliant, sparkling affair that courses over every major and minor incident in Diderot's remarkable life, treating the *Encyclopédie* (which Curran characterizes as "the most thankless chore of his life") with the attention it warrants but throwing a refreshing amount of emphasis on the huge pile of other writings that Diderot generated throughout his life, including, infamously, extensive writings of an atheistic bent, as when he frequently tortured the bedrock concepts of the Church that still ruled his country and his world... Curran sets him firmly in his own time, but the most charming aspect of *Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely* is the flattering way it bows low to its own modern-day readers, right here in the 21st century. In writing about those voluminous and far less-known pieces of Diderot prose, Curran imagines a reader-relationship that spans centuries instead of only social strata...It's an appealing picture, certainly, particularly given how badly the 21st century could use a free thinker like Diderot. Lacking the man, we're fortunate at least to have this fine, cheering book."

—**OPEN LETTERS REVIEW**

"Curran sets out to breathe life into the old bones. He succeeds in resurrecting a thinker who during his lifetime was both admired and hated and who, since his death, has been trivialised and misunderstood... Drawing on new archival research as well as recent reconstructions of texts never previously discovered or thought to have been lost (such as the nearly seven hundred pages Diderot wrote anonymously into the work of a friend), Curran provides a fascinating panorama of the life and struggles of a freelance author and intellectual heretic in 18th-century Paris . . .The author of two previous books, one on Diderot and the other on the Enlightenment, Curran is a deft narrator with an excellent eye for the telling detail. . .Curran manages admirably to resurrect Diderot as an original thinker whose intellectual independence not only cost him dearly but was also too much to cope with for later generations of French citizens looking for a national icon suitable for statues and school books."

—**OPEN LETTERS REVIEW**

"Given its glowing reception so far, Curran's book with its unique glorification of skepticism is expected to continue to draw readers both today and in the years ahead."

—**BROADWAY WORLD**

"It may be a long time before Diderot's complicated legacy is fully understood, which makes Andrew S. Curran's new biography, *Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely*, a timely exercise, especially helpful for those of us not steeped in philosophy. He humanizes Denis Diderot by uniting the public intellectual and the secret one known to his daughter and a few avid supporters... Curran makes a very good case for Diderot as a champion of liberal ideas about sexuality, learning, freedom, limited monarchy and the abolition of slavery."

—**HUDSON REVIEW**

"Curran's portrait of the man and his work reveals that there is so much more to him than editor of the *Encyclopédie* and author of *The Nun* and *Jacques the Fatalist*. Diderot was a sexologist, an anti-colonialist, an art critic; a genius and a man with feet of clay. This timely biography is also an exploration of the Age of Enlightenment... Curran's biography is a triumphant work; it is detailed, and meticulously researched, this study tells us about the man and his work. About the many strings to his bow, reminding us he was more than the author of the *Encyclopédie*. Curran captures the complexity of the man, the contradictions that, for me, make him all the more human and important as a philosopher. Curran captures the genius, but also the complex contradictory man, his sometimes reactionary views on sexuality, for instance, although he was bound by the belief that: "Nothing that exists can be against nature or outside nature..." This book encapsulates the social and intellectual life of the century, in France and in a wider European context. Showing how the work of Diderot, Rousseau and Voltaire coloured the age... Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely is an intelligent and highly readable biography."

—**NB MAGAZINE**

"And after reading the book, I am, as Curran promised in the prologue, stupefied by Diderot."

—SAN FRANCISCO BOOK REVIEW

“So why read Diderot today? In the prologue to his exhaustive and refreshingly well written biography, Andrew S Curran describes Diderot as “the most relevant of Enlightenment philosophers”. In the epilogue, he spells out in what this relevance consists: “Although Diderot is undoubtedly the steward of the age of the *Encyclopédie*, he is also, paradoxically, the only major thinker of his generation who questioned the rational perspective that is at the heart of the Enlightenment project.” Here, Curran points to another paradox, which lies in the current revival of interest in the Enlightenment. When liberals turn to Enlightenment thinkers today they do so for intellectual reassurance and moral comfort.”

—NEW STATESMAN

“Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely entertains. Lively in tone and briskly recounting the philosophé’s 71 years, it gives a good sense of the man, his tribulations and his labour as the principal force behind the Enlightenment’s quintessential work, the *Encyclopédie*. Curran’s book is dotted with black and white reproductions of prints...It provides the necessary contexts, be they familial, religious, or political, to make itself accessible to a readership unfamiliar with the age and its famed movement of ideas. More than a biography, it constitutes a stepping stone into the French Enlightenment.”

—HISTORY TODAY

“An exuberant exploration of this endlessly fascinating writer

—we need our Diderots now more than ever.”

—Sarah Bakewell, *New York Times* bestselling author of *At the Existentialist Café*

“A thrilling narrative that grants the reader an intimate look at Diderot’s life and intellectual development. Its impish tone and conversational quality remind us of those ‘fireplace conversations’ that Diderot saw as one of life’s greatest pleasures.”

—Elena Russo, author of *Styles of Enlightenment*

“Why read about Diderot’s life today? Because his philosophy was about life. Because this philosopher’s thinking is very much alive, today more than ever. And because this biography is brimming with life—ideas of life and the life of ideas.”

—Éric Fassin, author of *Populism Left and Right*

“*Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely* not only offers an absorbing sketch of life in eighteenth-century France; it provides dazzling insight into critical issues including the existence of God and freedom of speech. Among the many things that this book accomplishes, it gives readers a taste of the emancipatory power of philosophy.”

—Thierry Hoquet, author of *Revisiting the Origin of Species: The Other Darwins*

“*Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely* weaves together biography and intellectual history to tell a compelling tale. Following the *philosophé* from his childhood as a cutler’s son to his service, late in life, as a cultural attaché to Catherine the Great, Curran shines new light on Diderot’s major writings by situating them in their personal, cultural, and political contexts. Along the way, Curran recaptures the radicalism of the monumental *Encyclopédie* and other texts that are now cornerstones of the Enlightenment canon but were condemned as dangerous—even blasphemous—by church and state alike in the 1700s.”

—Laura Auricchio, author of *The Marquis: Lafayette Reconsidered*

“This superbly written and impeccably researched book recreates with vivid details the life and works of the most irrepressible mind of the Enlightenment. Analyzing Diderot’s relentless pursuit of freedom in an era of censorship and fanaticism, Curran uncovers the multiple facets of his genius and his relevance for our times. Thanks to this book

Diderot's voice is sure to be silenced and overlooked no more."

—Ourida Mostefai, author of *Rousseau and L'Infame: Religion, Toleration, and Fanaticism in the Age of Enlightenment*

"Denis Diderot was many things—freethinking philosophé, tireless encyclopedist, trenchant art critic, iconoclastic dramatist, daring sexologist, spirited dialogist, and intimate adviser to Catherine the Great—and Andrew Curran brings them all vividly to life in this enlightening and engaging book."

—Michael Massing, author of *Fatal Discord: Erasmus, Luther, and the Fight for the Western Mind*

"In this lively and elegantly crafted portrait of one of the eighteenth century's greatest minds, Curran gives us a Diderot at once true to his times and intensely relevant to our own. It is a book that will both enlighten and entertain specialists and general readers alike."

—Darrin M. McMahon, author of *Happiness: A History*

"Andrew Curran has given us a spirited and wide-ranging new biography of the brilliant Encyclopédiste, bringing to life his complicated relationships and the ideas he explored throughout his protean intellectual career."

—Leo Damrosch, author of *Eternity's Sunrise: The Imaginative World of William Blake*

"Curran narrates with verve the story of Diderot's life, but also his late masterpieces, unknown in their own time and written for posterity. *Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely* gives us, as hoped, a Diderot for today."

—Sophia Rosenfeld, author of *Common Sense: A Political History*

"One of the most creative and intriguing thinkers of eighteenth-century France comes to life in Andrew Curran's new biography of Denis Diderot. In this bibliographical *tour de force*, Curran shows us a protean writer who stands for the French Enlightenment, an age whose greatest writers took up the challenge—and embraced the pleasure—of 'thinking freely.' Rigorously researched and engagingly written, Curran's book deftly paints the vivid picture of a multi-faceted and daring thinker who constantly raised essential questions about what it means to be human."

—Daniel Brewer, University of Minnesota

"..to the extent that Diderot is known to the general public, it is almost exclusively in relation to the Encyclopédie, which he would have regretted. With *Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely* Andrew Curran is out to change that. In this well-written and researched book we learn about the many sides of Diderot. We learn that, despite producing a huge volume of writing on a wide variety of topics, he was best known as a talker. We learn that he anticipated parts of Darwin and Freud, that he wrote against slavery, favored the American revolution and viewed Europe's colonization of Africa and other places as criminal. . . [T]his is a fantastic book about a deeply interesting person. I recommend it to anyone interested in the man or in this period of history or philosophy."

—Peter Flom, MEDIUM

"It may be a long time before Diderot's complicated legacy is fully understood, which makes Andrew S. Curran's new biography a timely exercise, especially helpful for those of us not steeped in philosophy. He humanizes Denis Diderot by uniting the public intellectual and the secret one known to his daughter and a few avid supporters... Curran makes a very good case for Diderot as a champion of liberal ideas about sexuality, learning, freedom, limited monarchy and the abolition of slavery."

—HUDSON REVIEW

"In this refreshingly accessible biography, historian Andrew S. Curran scratches beneath the surface to paint a fascinating portrait of the man behind the radical. A living paradox, Diderot was both an atheist and aspiring

priest, pragmatist and hopeless romantic... Yet he remained steadfast in his pursuit of knowledge and fight for intellectual freedom. Essential reading in a post-truth era when the freedoms he fought so hard for are being threatened and insidiously suppressed."

—**FRANCE TODAY**

"[Diderot] lived a life of prodigiously creative brilliance, captured here with verve and deep erudition by Curran...Andrew S. Curran is a professor of history at Wesleyan University in Connecticut and the author of two other remarkable and prize-winning books, one on the mental constructs of physical monstrosity in Diderot's writings, the other on 'scientific' constructions of blackness and race at the time of the Enlightenment. This latest book is equally fine, a wonderfully readable as well as expert introduction to Diderot's life and work."

—**AUSTRALIAN BOOK REVIEW**