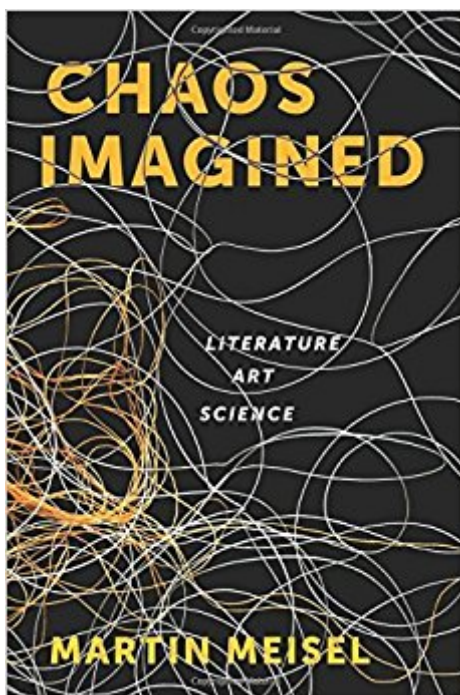# Chaos Imagined: Literature, Art, Science

Synopsis

The stories we tell in our attempt to make sense of the world, our myths and religion, literature and philosophy, science and art, are the comforting vehicles we use to transmit ideas of order. But beneath the quest for order lies the uneasy dread of fundamental disorder. True chaos is hard to imagine and even harder to represent, especially without some recourse to the familiar coherency of order. In this book, Martin Meisel considers the long effort to conjure, depict, and rationalize extreme disorder, with all the passions, excitements, and compromises the act has provoked. In seven chapters—"Shaping Chaos,â • "Nothing and Something,â • "Number,â • "Carnival,â • "War,â • "Energy,â • and "Entropyâ •—Meisel builds a rough history from major social, psychological, and cosmological turning points in the imagining of chaos. He uses examples from literature, philosophy, painting, graphic art, science, linguistics, music, and film, particularly exploring the remarkable shift in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from conceiving of chaos as disruptive to celebrating its liberating and energizing potential. Discussions of Sophocles, Plato, Lucretius, Calderon, Milton, Haydn, Blake, Faraday, Chekhov, Faulkner, Wells, and Beckett, among others, are matched with incisive readings of art by Brueghel, Rubens, Goya, Turner, Dix, Dada and the futurists. Meisel addresses the revolution in mapping energy and entropy and the manifold impact of thermodynamics. Known for his pathbreaking studies of literature, drama, and the visual arts, Meisel uses this chaotic frame to elaborate on larger concerns of purpose, mortality, meaning, and mind.

Book Information

File Size: 4611 KB

Print Length: 606 pages

Page Numbers Source ISBN: 023116632X

Publisher: Columbia University Press (January 12, 2016)

Publication Date: January 12, 2016

Sold by:Â Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B018DWI4Y0

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Not Enabled

Customer Reviews

Chaos Imagined: Literature, Art, Science by Martin Meisel is a masterful work that serves as both a history (of sorts) of the concept of chaos as well as detailed analyses of various texts to illustrate how perceptions were expressed and eventually changed.This is not a simple read but it is quite accessible to anyone who likely is interested in an interdisciplinary volume about chaos. It is not so much a difficult read as it is a broad read which invites readers to ponder what they have just read and to possibly (re)read the texts under discussion. This is a wonderful book to work through slowly with a blank journal at hand.The depth and breadth of Meisel's knowledge is impressive, providing excellent explanations of scientific material while also offering superb analyses of literary and philosophical texts. In doing so he manages to avoid excessive jargon (it cannot be completely avoided, some topics simply need their specialized vocabulary) but his explanations excel in the areas that require specialized terminology.Chaos underwent a significant change in how it is perceived in the 18th and 19th centuries, as Meisel illustrates remarkably. It went from disruptive and associated with evil or bad while order was its opposite, perceived as good and desirable. Chaos then became more closely associated with the freedom of potential, in no small part due to understanding that the world is more chaotic than it is ordered.I would hesitate to put this into the pop category of science-themed books that are so useful for the general public, but I do think it would be enjoyable to most who like those works. Because the author ranges over so many areas (literature, science, art, film, etc) there are many opportunities for a reader to find an interesting avenue into the topic, which makes this an ideal volume for those who like to think deeply as well as broadly.Reviewed from a copy made available by the publisher via NetGalley.

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