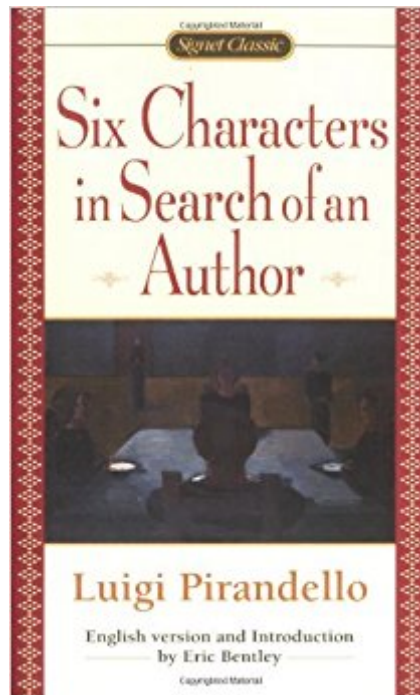




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Six Characters In Search Of An Author (Signet Classics)



Synopsis

Winner of the Nobel Prize in 1934, Luigi Pirandello was one of the most original and powerful dramatists of his time—•the playwright par excellence of the conflict between illusion and reality. His plays dramatize with force and eloquence the loneliness and isolation of the individual both from society and from himself. • In *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, his greatest work, these themes are played out with characteristic brilliance. First performed in 1921, the play concerns six living characters—•family members embroiled in their own human drama—•who come to a theater and demand that the manager and his actors stage their life story. Filled with both humor and despair, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is Pirandello—•s most extraordinary achievement—•as it explores the fundamentally absurd and tragic nature of the human condition. • This Signet Classic edition includes an introduction by Eric Bentley, the widely acclaimed writer, translator, and international theater authority.

Book Information

Series: Signet Classics

Mass Market Paperback: 112 pages

Publisher: Signet (May 1, 1998)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0451526880

ISBN-13: 978-0451526885

Product Dimensions: 4.2 x 0.3 x 6.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 2.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars 11 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #212,710 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #10 in • Books > Literature & Fiction > Dramas & Plays > Regional & Cultural > European > Italian #55 in • Books > Reference > Writing, Research & Publishing Guides > Writing > Play & Scriptwriting #79 in • Books > Arts & Photography > Performing Arts > Theater > Playwriting

Customer Reviews

Text: English (translation) Original Language: Italian

Luigi Pirandello was born of rich, middle-class parents in Girgenti (Agrigento), Sicily, on 28 June 1867. As a young man he studied at the Universities of Palermo, Rome, and Bonn, where he gained

his doctorate in 1891. His first published work, *Mal giocondo* (1889), was a collection of poems. It was followed by other volumes of poems, critical essays, novels, short stories, and over forty plays. In 1894 he married Antoinetta Portulano, the daughter of his father's business associate. Financial disaster and a severe illness brought on by the birth of their third child drove his wife to a hysterical form of insanity. Only in 1918, when her presence in the family constituted a real threat to their daughter's safety did Pirandello agree to have his wife committed to an asylum. The enormous emotional strain he felt at this time is reflected in the intense pessimism found in his work.

Pirandello's first real success in the theatre came about in 1921 when *Six Characters in Search of an Author* was performed. *Henry IV* followed the next year and confirmed his position as a playwright. In the following years Pirandello travelled abroad extensively. He embarked on a career as a producer and in 1925 founded his Art Theatre in Rome. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1934 and died in Rome on 10 December 1936.

Six characters in Search of an Author is all about character development, both with the family that experienced the tragedy and the members of the theater tasked with bringing it to life. For the most part, this development works. However, like most plays, it doesn't translate that well to book format. The lines don't really have any emotional description (X spoke excitedly, her eyes gleaming), so they really need the actors reading them to give them life. Without that, it's just an OK story.

Are you in need of some characters for a story? Well, you are in luck, for here are a couple of them right here, six characters as a matter of fact, in search of an author who will write their story. It's quite simple, too, all you need to do is write down and then act out the story that they have already. Go ahead, it's quite fun. A mother, a father, a son, a stepdaughter and a couple of other children as well. Quite an interesting lot they are, and with a fascinating story to tell as well. Go ahead, it's perfectly safe; what can go wrong here? (Everything, as a matter of fact. Beware the characters and beware the story, it will give you chills.)

Luigi Pirandello was not the first avant-garde playwright of the modern era whose work provoked outrage. Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* of 1896 comes to mind, but by 1921 Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936) was well on his way to notoriety. A novelist and poet as well as a playwright, Pirandello's work often questioned the nature of truth, reality, and illusion, and *SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR* became for many his ultimate theatrical statement. The play is presented on a largely bare stage with

various set pieces, props, and drops. The cast size is a bit variable, and several roles could be played by either man or woman; in a general sense, however, the play requires five men, five women, two children (a boy about eleven; a girl about five), and other minor players. There are no unusual props, but certain portions of the play would benefit from a *mysterioso* style. It is performed in three acts. The play begins by presenting a working stage, where a theatrical director and his players are rehearsing a play by Pirandello himself. The director ridicules; he will later admit he regrets having agreed to stage it. In the middle of the rehearsal, the stage door opens and six people walk in: The Father, The Mother, The Son, The Step-Daughter, The Little Boy, and The Little Girl. With The Father as their central spokesman, they declare that they are characters created but then abandoned by a writer who did not finish his work. They have come to the theatre to demand they be performed. The director and actors are at first amused, then astonished, and then somewhat outraged, but after hearing bits of their story, the director believes it would make a better play than the one he is presently doing. He agrees to try to stage it. The story the characters present is convoluted and hinges on an incident in which the Father visits a house of prostitution and very nearly has sex with his step-daughter, who he does not recognize. The director attempts to have the characters play out various scenes while having the prompter take down the dialogue and having the actors study the characters, but they run into a series of unexpected issues. Each character tends to remember various incidents differently, and they often demand specific sets and props that the theatre does not have for rehearsal. When the actors attempt to play the scenes, the characters ridicule them, declaring they are in no way like themselves. As the play progresses, Pirandello layers questions about truth and reality, and the answers he gives to these questions is essentially that there is no answer, no way to discover any absolute. When it debuted much of the audience booed and jeered (many shouted "madhouse!"), but the play and its ideas were so startling that it quickly achieved a significant status and launched Pirandello to international acclaim. (In 1934 he received the Nobel Prize for Literature.) By today's standards, however, the play is even more problematic than it was in 1921. Much of the script is in the form of long and often philosophical monologues, generally from The Director, The Father, and The Step-Daughter as they argue back and forth. I have not seen the play performed, and it may play very differently, but the script reads as somewhat dry. It is a landmark, at the very root of existentialistic and absurdist drama, so it should be read and studied, but it is perhaps better left to academics.

GFT, Reviewer
In Memory of Jackie Wilson

Luigi Pirandello's "Six Characters in Search of an Author" premiered in Rome in 1921 to audience shouts of "Maricomio!" ("Madhouse!"). Perhaps few of the theatregoers realized that the "madhouse" they had witnessed was a watershed in the history of drama. While many of the innovations of "Six Characters" may now seem commonplace, Pirandello's innovative, iconoclastic masterpiece marked a break from traditional dramatic structures and stage settings, a break which enabled twentieth century drama to develop along self-reflective imaginative lines much different than its predecessors. As Eric Bentley, the play's translator, notes in his introduction to this edition, "this was the first play ever written in which the boards of the theatre did not symbolize and represent some other place, some other reality." "Six Characters" is set in a theatre where a director, his stage manager and a group of actors are about to rehearse another of Pirandello's plays, "The Rules of the Game". The curtain is up, the stage is empty of props and background, and the lights illuminate the bare wall at the back of the stage. It is an austere setting, a kind of theatrical analogue to the blank sheet of paper an author faces each day he sits down to write. Suddenly, this austerity, this mundane theatrical rehearsal, is interrupted by the unexpected arrival of six characters--a father, a mother, a son, a stepdaughter, a boy, and a little girl. They are six characters who have lives, who have stories to tell, but whose dramatic text has not been written. They need an author. As Pirandello says in his 1925 introduction to the play: "Every creature of fantasy and art, in order to exist, must have his drama, that is, a drama in which he may be a character and for which he is a character. This drama is the character's *raison d'être*, his vital function, necessary for his existence." The play proceeds, with the six characters relating fragmentary scenes of incidents in their lives, scenes which are accompanied by commentary, quarrels, dialogue, and interaction among the characters and between the characters and the actors. A kind of theatrical hall of mirrors, the actors who view these characters become, in effect, an audience. The actors are also, however, the actors who will be called upon to play the parts of the six characters in the dramatic text which is being created in their presence. For these actors and these characters, the stage becomes more real than the world. "Six Characters in Search of an Author" is a remarkable work of imagination, both in its structure and its dialogue. It is comic and absurd, tragic and ponderous. The play is a work of original genius; the text (like its characters) is open to multiple interpretations and meanings. As one character says, in an appropriate Pirandellian bit of dialogue: "[t]herein lies the drama . . . in my awareness that each of us thinks of himself as one but that, well, it's not true, each of us is many, oh so many, according to the possibilities that are in us."

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