I have often wondered for what good end the sensations of Grief could be intended.

-- Thomas Jefferson

Jefferson suffered during his life from periodic bouts of dejection and despair, shadowed intervals during which he was full of gloomy forebodings about what lay ahead. Not long before he composed the Declaration of Independence, the young Jefferson lay for six weeks in idleness and ill health at Monticello, paralyzed by a mysterious malady. Similar lapses were to recur during anxious periods in his life, often accompanied by violent headaches. In Jefferson's Demons, Michael Knox Beran illuminates an optimistic man's darker side -- Jefferson as we have rarely seen him before. The worst of these moments came after his wife died in 1782. But two years later, after being dispatched to Europe, Jefferson recovered nerve and spirit in the salons of Paris, where he fell in love with a beautiful young artist, Maria Cosway. When their affair ended, Jefferson's health again broke down. He set out for the palms and temples of southern Europe, and though he did not know where the therapeutic journey would take him or where it would end, his encounter with the old civilizations of the Mediterranean was transformative. The Greeks and Romans taught him that a man could make productive use of his demons. Jefferson's immersion in the mystic truths of the Old World gave him insights into mysteries of life and art that Enlightenment philosophy had failed to supply. Beran skillfully shows how Jefferson drew on the esoteric lore he encountered to transform anxiety into action. On his return to America, Jefferson entered the most productive period of his life: He created a new political party, was elected president, and doubled the size of the country. His private labors were no less momentous...among them, the artistry of Monticello and the University of Virginia. Jefferson's Demons is an elegantly composed account of the strangeness and originality of one Founder's genius. Michael Knox Beran uncovers the
maps Jefferson used to find his way out of dejection and to forge a new democratic culture for America. Here is a Jefferson who, with all his failings, remains one of his country's greatest teachers and prophets.

Features:
* Notes:

My Personal Review:
This book is a Bildungsroman: the Education of Thomas Jefferson. It's the story of how Jefferson struggled to form himself into a man capable of action--the story of his "paideia," as the author would have it, in a bow to his subject's lifelong love of the Greeks. JEFFERSON'S DEMONS describes the mysterious ways the Sage of Monticello educated himself and learned to tap his most profound creative instincts. Like so many great men, Jefferson was engaged in an ongoing conversation with the great men of the past, with Montaigne, Homer, Solon, Tacitus, Milton, Isaiah, Socrates, Jesus. Beran lets the reader overhear these conversations, and he shows us how Jefferson drew on them both in his private life and his public work. The author's richly allusive style is itself an instrument in the communication of his vision of Jefferson: there are passages in the book in which the prose has less affinity with the rhythmically and spiritually flat prose of the present than with that of the Caroline and late Elizabethan prose-stylists. This startling use of language and metaphor prepares the reader for the book's major reassessments of whole tracts of Jefferson's thought. The book provides a nuanced reading of Jefferson's "Whig" and "Tory" qualities, shows how deeply immersed Jefferson was in a Virginia culture of decadent feudalism, and contains an ingenious reading of the connection between Jefferson's "sentimentalism" and the mediaeval romance of the rose. Jefferson's architecture emerges as something more deeply felt than the pasteboard classicism it is often taken to be; and Beran ties his analysis of Monticello and the University of Virginia to his discussion of how Jefferson tried to reconcile his civic republican ideals (the communitarianism of the classical city-state, the Greek polis) with his commitment to Whig liberalism, with its emphasis on liberty of trade, liberty of the press, and liberty of conscience. I loved this book. It's a splendid account of Jefferson's self-culture and his attempts to apply the lessons he learned in the young American Republic, and it enlarges the number of intellectual debates in which Jefferson participated and through which he must examined. But the book's most important message is an intensely personal one. Jefferson spoke hopefully of the "progress to be made under our democratic stimulants until every American is potentially an athlete in body and an Aristotle in mind." Beran shows the reader how Jefferson, in trying to realize this potentiality in himself and in others, aspired to the Greek ideal of the statesman who is also an educator, one who can help people to know themselves and do their work.

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