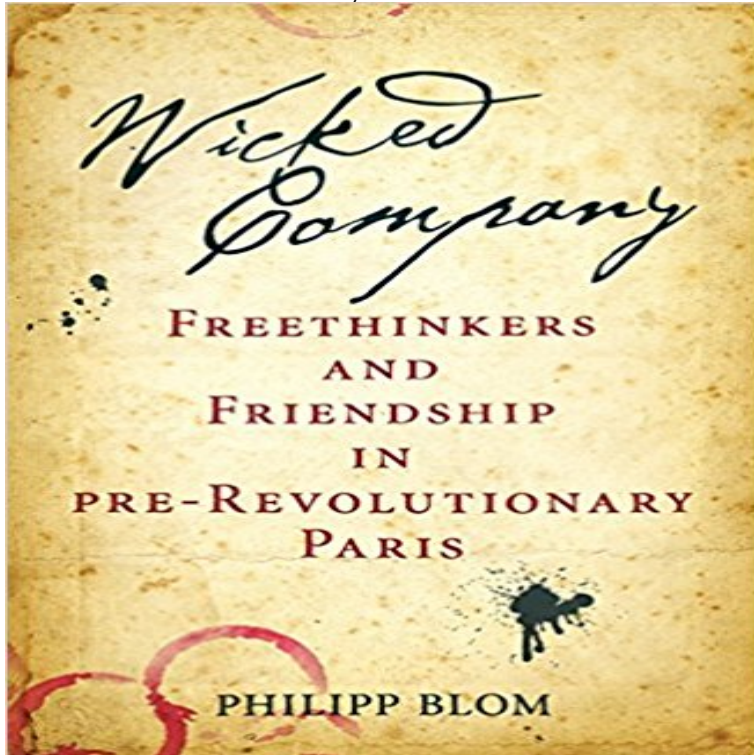


Wicked Company: Radical Freethinkers and Friendship in Pre-Revolutionary Paris



Imagine the world's most brilliant and charismatic people around one dinner table, the greatest philosophers, novelists, scientists, actors and political activists - and imagine them joking one moment and then immersed in intense discussion broken by bursts of laughter. Imagine also that this astonishing company was defined not only by who is at the table, but by what they say: opinions radical enough to land them all in prison. The decade-long flourishing, in the 1760s, of friendship and radical philosophy in Baron Holbach's Paris salon is a seminal moment in Western history, a moment of astonishing radicalism in European thought, so uncompromising and bold that its vision has still not been fully realised. Frequented by a group of men and women who were united by their love of intellectual freedom, by their contempt for the conventional and often by the danger of persecution into which they put themselves, Holbach's house became the epicentre of freethinking, a place like no other in eighteenth-century Europe. The guests would talk until deep into the night, dreaming up a bold, new way of doing things, of thinking about the world and about society - a way we have come to call modernity. The book focuses on the early life of four young men, two philosophers (Hume and Rousseau) and two philosophes (Diderot and Holbach) as they set out with a mixture of desperation and optimism to travel and study. Philipp Blom's new book dazzlingly combines biography with the history of ideas and the birth of modernism.

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