

Synopsis

Walter Benjamin was one of the most original cultural critics of the twentieth century. *Illuminations* includes his views on Kafka, with whom he felt a close personal affinity; his studies on Baudelaire and Proust; and his essays on Leskov and on Brecht's Epic Theater. Also included are his penetrating study "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," an enlightening discussion of translation as a literary mode, and Benjamin's theses on the philosophy of history. Hannah Arendt selected the essays for this volume and introduces them with a classic essay about Benjamin's life in dark times. Also included is a new preface by Leon Wieseltier that explores Benjamin's continued relevance for our times.

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Customer Reviews

Benjamin is one of the few 20th century philosophers who can convey profound thoughts in language that isn't at all opaque. His sentences are always perfectly clear - no pretentious literary or Marxist jargon (thank God). The only thing that makes it slow reading is that you always want to stop, put the book down, and think about what he's just said. For example, a passage from his essay on Kafka: "The definition of it which Kafka has given applies to the sons more than to anyone else: "Original sin, the old injustice committed by man, consists in the complaint that he has been the victim of an injustice, the victim of original sin." But who is accused of this inherited sin - the sin of having produced an heir - if not the father by the son? Accordingly the son would be the sinner. But one must not conclude from Kafka's definition that the accusation is sinful because it is false. Nowhere does Kafka say that it is made wrongfully. A never-ending process is at work here, and no

cause can appear in a worse light than the one for which the father enlists the aid of these officials and court offices . . . 'This is not opacity for the sake of being opaque; he is trying to get at something incredibly complex, something that (unlike most literary criticism) actually helps you appreciate Kafka and understand him a little better. Benjamin doesn't peel away layers of an onion to arrive at a single shining insight; he presents a simple idea, expands on it a little, and lets you put on the layers of complexity yourself. Read these essays carefully, and it will be obvious why entire schools of thought have sprung up around single paragraphs, why people have devoted their lives to figuring out the ramifications of a single sentence . . .

I picked up this book primarily for the purpose of reading Benjamin's critically acclaimed essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", as well as for his darkly poetic - and even apocalyptic - "Theses on the Philosophy of History". These essays are among Benjamin's most highly esteemed and are the last two selections in the book; regardless of whether you start with them or with the first essay, "Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting", you are likely to be drawn into Benjamin's literary world quite quickly. In many ways, Benjamin's writing style is quite unassuming; reading even his most profound insights is like reading a letter from an old friend. His writing comes in layers; one must make time to savor his presence. This book covers a range of subjects, from critical literary essays (the aforementioned "Unpacking My Library", as well as essays on Kafka, Baudelaire and Proust), to more hermeneutical reflections ("The Task of the Translator"), to straight up philosophy/theory ("The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and "Theses on the Philosophy of History"). The 51 page introduction by Hannah Arendt is absolutely fantastic. It does not simply provide an overview of Benjamin's life, but sets that life within the culture of early 20th century Germany, focusing especially on the time between the two World Wars. She notes the influences of Zionism and Communism (and Marxism) on Benjamin's thought, as well as the broader cultural influence of a quasi-secularized Judaism in a culture where non-baptized Jews were still kept out of university teaching posts. Her introduction, like Benjamin's own writing, contains deep touches of the intimately personal (she selected the various essays that make up this volume).

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