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Berlin Childhood Around 1900



Synopsis

Begun in Poveromo, Italy, in 1932, and extensively revised in 1938, *Berlin Childhood* around 1900 remained unpublished during Walter Benjamin's lifetime, one of his "large-scale defeats." Now translated into English for the first time in book form, on the basis of the recently discovered "final version" that contains the author's own arrangement of a suite of luminous vignettes, it can be more widely appreciated as one of the masterpieces of twentieth-century prose writing. Not an autobiography in the customary sense, Benjamin's recollection of his childhood in an upper-middle-class Jewish home in Berlin's West End at the turn of the century becomes an occasion for unified "expeditions into the depths of memory." In this diagram of his life, Benjamin focuses not on persons or events but on places and things, all seen from the perspective of a child--a collector, flaneur, and allegorist in one. This book is also one of Benjamin's great city texts, bringing to life the cocoon of his childhood--the parks, streets, schoolrooms, and interiors of an emerging metropolis. It reads the city as palimpsest and labyrinth, revealing unexpected lyricism in the heart of the familiar. As an added gem, a preface by Howard Eiland discusses the genesis and structure of the work, which marks the culmination of Benjamin's attempt to do philosophy concretely.

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Customer Reviews

"Perhaps the mingling of the forgotten with the dust of our vanished dwellings is the secret of its survival," writes Benjamin in his beautiful book about the small things he remembers from his

childhood in Berlin. Writing in Italy in 1932, Benjamin felt he might never again see the city of his childhood. Through descriptions of furniture, rooms, buildings, parks, objects and the slight interactions between boy and world, Benjamin explores the dichotomies of longing, remembering and forgetting. During his lifetime, Benjamin published several versions of the book, two of which (the 1932-34 and final versions) are included. Faithfulness to earlier editions leaves the book without a narrative arc, but doesn't detract from the artful mastery of the prose, which is preserved in the translation: "In addition to the upper region of the box, where these spindles nestled side by side, where the black needlebook glimmered and the scissors lay sheathed in their leather pockets, there was the dark underground, the chaos, in which the loosened ball of thread reigned supreme, and in which pieces of elastic bands, hooks, eyes, and scraps of silk were jumbled together." An introduction written by Peter Szondi in 1961 sets up a comparison with Proust's masterwork, and it is indeed easy to see traces of the influence in tone, stylistic mannerisms and theme. Like *Remembrance of Things Past*, this is a work that deserves to be rediscovered by every generation.

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Written in the early 1930s, this book did not appear in its entirety until 1950, 10 years after the author's death. At least four versions of the text were written, as Benjamin failed in his attempt to publish it as a book in Germany and Switzerland. Many of the individual pieces, however, appeared in newspapers, 26 pieces from December 1932 through September 1935, usually under a pseudonym. Occupying less than 70 pages in the two-volume edition of Benjamin's *Schriften*, it is a series of miniature portraits conjuring up people, objects, streets, and interior scenes that reveal his childhood in a wealthy, assimilated Jewish family in Berlin's West End at the turn of the century. In the letter to Gershom Scholem in 1932, Benjamin notes "these childhood memories are not narratives in the form of a chronicle, but individual expeditions into the depths of memory." Benjamin is a writer who deserves our full attention.

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Benjamin is one of the foremost thinkers on culture. He writes in an exquisite style that offers texture to the lucidity and intricacy of his enigmatic thought. *Berlin Childhood* is a significant accomplishment both in his oeuvre and amidst the turmoil of his circumstances. There are definite connections between this text and his study of Proust. In some senses they explore similar questions with different but not contradictory realisations. *WB* is pleasure to read and bears

rereading time and time again.

I read this book for a literature class. The short pieces are almost in poetic prose. They are vignettes about the author's youth in Berlin. Benjamin had to escape from Berlin because he was Jewish, and he then killed himself when he was denied passage out of Europe. The stories in this book are terse, full of images almost in a journalistic style, and they let us draw our own conclusion. But some knowledge of European history between the two wars definitely helps in understanding the mood of this book.

The Zeitgeist(s) of Benjamin's time are clear in this piece. It's excellent for use as a poetic introduction into the Berlin *Bildungsroman* or as a research tool for symbolic relationships between man-world.

I love memoirs. This one is soooo interesting and quite well written. The photos make it even more interesting

Dense with redeeming sections.

There were probably "greater" books written in the last century, but there are none that I would miss more, more regret not having read--that does not make narrative, logical sense, so I think I have to stick with it...

Brief reminiscences, poignant moments, evocative places in the early life of Walter Benjamin. Written from exile and dreaming of home, with its painful moments, and curious delights. Beautifully written and translated.

Lethal translation

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