

Berlin Childhood around 1900

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Begun in Poveromo, Italy, in 1932, and extensively revised in 1938, *Berlin Childhood around 1900* remained unpublished during Walter Benjamin's lifetime, one of his "large-scale defeats."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.

Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) was the author of many works of literary and cultural analysis.

Howard Eiland is an editor and translator of Benjamin's writings.

"Conceived in the early Thirties, the *Berlin Childhood* belongs in the orbit of that primal history of the modern world on which Benjamin was working during the last thirteen years of his life. It forms the subjective counterpart to the masses of materials brought together for the project on the Paris arcades. The historical archetypes he wished to lay out in their social-pragmatic and philosophical provenance in the study of Paris were to be illuminated by lightning flashes of immediate remembrance in the *Berlin* book, which throughout laments the irretrievability of what, once lost, congeals into an allegory of its own demise. For the images this book unearths and brings strangely near are not idyllic and not contemplative. Over them lies the shadow of the Third Reich. And through them dreamily runs a shudder at the long forgotten."-Theodor Adorno, 1950 afterward to *Berlin Childhood* in *Über Walter Benjamin*

"[*Berlin Childhood around 1900*] 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."-George Cohen, *Booklist*

"Now is the time to read Walter Benjamin, when doors to the future are slamming shut

around us and freedom dribbles out of a modern life that is squeezed by masses of information delivered at high speeds and by a rigid morality that circumscribes behavior, movement and thought...He intended his memoir Berlin Childhood Around 1900 as a goodbye to a city he loved but knew he could never again inhabit. Begun in Spain and Italy in 1932, it was finished in 1938 but wasn't published until 1950, 10 years after he died of an intentional overdose of morphine while fleeing the Gestapo. Benjamin regarded the book as a series of "expeditions into the depths of memory," an act of "digging" for the future."- Susan Salter Reynolds, Los Angeles Times Book Review

"Benjamin has an affecting approach to the vicissitudes of childhood, exhibiting pleasure and regret at once...Benjamin was acutely aware of history--the history of ideas, the history of violence and fear, the history of commerce and objects. He annotated mentally whatever he saw, then dwelt on it till it became meaningful, maybe incandescent. He tried to see everyday life through the eyes of a mystic."-Robert Fulford, National Post

"Benjamin was a consummate polymath who wrote with erudition, playfulness, and compassion...In Berlin Childhood around 1900, Benjamin turns his scalpel on his childhood, Berlin, and the capricious faculty of memory...The reader stands awestruck as Benjamin flits effortlessly from memory to memory, from his mother's sewing box to the otter's cage at the Berlin Zoological Garden, seemingly unaware of the catastrophic shadow looming over him. In Benjamin's hands, the most pedestrian moments of an inward-facing, bourgeois childhood become revelations about discipline and ideology...As with Kafka, Benjamin's prose shines most brightly through the language of parable, the cliched, but somehow unexpected aphorism...His province is the truth we always knew but could never quite put into words, the eerily reminiscent description."-Michael Lukas, Tikkun

"Fifty years after its posthumous publication in German, this tidy volume of urban vignettes--memories of imperial landmarks and family vacations, school libraries and the arrival of the household telephone--has earned its own afterlife. The later writings of Roland Barthes are obvious descendents, and even Jacques Derrida's final fixations on hospitality and his native Algeria bear its trace, however unconsciously...[Here are] some of the most marvelous performances of a master stylist...Berlin Childhood around 1900 finally functions like all excavations of lost time: the little boy may be innocent, the remembered milieu yet to be complicated, but the effect is unquestionably narcotic."- Jonathan Liu, Harvard Book Review

"Berlin Childhood is not only an autobiographical text by the literary critic, historian and philosopher Walter Benjamin. Describing Berlin around 1900 from the point of view of a child that is introduced into the customs and way of life of society, it also explores a whole era in a nutshell, as Benjamin did on the grand scale in his Arcades Project. And, not least, this book examines the structure of an individual memory and its relation to history."- Barbara Sattler, Metapsychology

"The Proustian ideal of the redemption of 'lived experience' lies at the heart of Benjamin's idiosyncratic memoir, Berlin Childhood around 1900...In Berlin Childhood he offers us a cityscape of the German capital as seen through the eyes of a precocious and

impressionable youth. He revisits his favorite childhood haunts--the zoos, swimming pools, grammar schools, parks and railway terminals--and milks them for utopian potential... In a sense, Benjamin regarded childhood much as he did modern literature: as an invaluable repository of utopian longings and dreams in an age of industrialized degradation. Berlin Childhood represents his own Proustian effort to recapture lost time, a time that any revolution worthy of the name would seek to restore."-Richard Wolin, The Nation

"Walter has been our philosophy pin up boy for a while now and this book is another jewel in his crown. An autobiography as a series of vignettes that concentrate on memory and how we understand not just ourselves but the cities and places we live in. Underlines the works he produced later in life with a profoundly personal understanding. Brilliant."-Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, Bookshop Catalogue

"Comprised of thirty prose pieces separated by montage-like headings, Berlin Childhood provides a series of intimate glimpses into Benjamin's bourgeois Jewish upbringing. Some of the most heartbreaking scenes include Christmas Day at his grandmother's house, ice skating, visiting an otter at the zoo, catching butterflies, searching for peacock feathers, and wandering around the streets. In these glimpses of an irretrievable past, homesickness is tangible...The new and brilliantly executed translation by Howard Eiland is of the final 1938 version."-Eric Bulson, Times Literary Supplement

Other Books

Doing Children's Geographies, Doing Children's Geographies provides a useful resource for all those embarking on research with young people. Drawing on reflections from original cutting-edge research undertaken across three continents, the book focuses on the challenges researchers face when working with children, youth and their families. The book is divided into three sections. The first section provides alternatives to some of the difficulties researchers face and highlights methodological innovations as geographers uncover new and exciting ways of working. The second part specifically addresses the issues surrounding children and youth's participation providing critiques of current practice and offering alternatives for increasing young people's involvement in research design. Finally, the book broadens to a consideration of wider areas of concern for those working with children and youth. This section discusses the nature of childhood in relation to research, the place of emotions in research with young people and the process of undertaking applied research. This book was previously published as a special issue of Children's Geographies

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