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At The Existentialist Caf  : Freedom, Being, And Apricot Cocktails



Synopsis

From the best-selling author of *How to Live*, a spirited account of one of the 20th century's major intellectual movements and the revolutionary thinkers who came to shape it. Paris, 1933: Three contemporaries meet over apricot cocktails at the Bec-de-Gaz bar on the rue Montparnasse. They are the young Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and longtime friend Raymond Aron, a fellow philosopher who raves to them about a new conceptual framework from Berlin called phenomenology. "You see," he says, "if you are a phenomenologist, you can talk about this cocktail and make philosophy out of it!" It was this simple phrase that would ignite a movement, inspiring Sartre to integrate phenomenology into his own French humanistic sensibility, thereby creating an entirely new philosophical approach inspired by themes of radical freedom, authentic being, and political activism. This movement would sweep through the jazz clubs and cafés of the Left Bank before making its way across the world as existentialism. Featuring not only philosophers but also playwrights, anthropologists, convicts, and revolutionaries, *At the Existentialist Café* follows the existentialists' story from the first rebellious spark through the Second World War to its role in postwar liberation movements such as anticolonialism, feminism, and gay rights. Interweaving biography and philosophy, it is the epic account of passionate encounters - fights, love affairs, mentorships, rebellions, and long partnerships - and a vital investigation into what the existentialists have to offer us today, at a moment when we are once again confronting the major questions of freedom, global responsibility, and human authenticity in a fractious and technology-driven world.

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Customer Reviews

In the opening scene of *At the Existentialist Café*, philosopher Raymond Aron says to his friend Jean-Paul Sartre, "If you are a phenomenologist you can talk about this cocktail and make philosophy out of it." After reading this book, I say, "If you are Sarah Bakewell, you can take existentialism and make sense out of it." The existentialist themes of freedom, political activism, and "authentic being" became watchwords of the middle and late 20th century. When I first encountered existentialist writing, I was simultaneously entranced, repelled, and confused. (Bakewell tells us that even Beauvoir said that when she and Sartre tried to read Heidegger's lecture "What is Metaphysics?", "we could not understand a word of it.") Not only did the existentialists not always agree with each other, sometimes they did not even agree with themselves. National Book Critics' Circle Award winner Bakewell's clear writing and carefully researched portrayal of the context in which existentialism developed gave me a much better understanding of this school of thought that both influenced and reflected most of the last century. In addition to providing a lucid discussion of the various expressions of existentialist philosophy, Bakewell really brings to life the thinkers behind it. Names like Husserl, Heidegger, Beauvoir and lesser known figures in their milieu became real people. One of my favorite chapters introduced me to "the dancing philosopher" Merleau-Ponty, whose personality was as engaging as his thinking. Unlike Beauvoir and Sartre, "journalists did not quiz him about his sex life---which is a shame, as they would have dug up some interesting stories." Photos throughout the book were a nice complement to the narrative.

It is well known that technology has reached the point where we are often better known by the almighty computer than we know ourselves. Although my Vine queue sometimes mystifies me (WHY as a 76-year-old woman whose youngest grandchild is in high school am I continuously being offered baby products?), it turns out that Sarah Bakewell's *At the Existentialist Café* is a tremendous gift to my reading experience. It didn't take me long to realize why I was offered this book, despite my previous total lack of involvement with any formal study of philosophy. I recently purchased several books relating to Edith Stein, the Jewish existential philosopher and student of Husserl, who converted to Catholicism; became a nun; was martyred at Auschwitz; and recently canonized. Indeed, Bakewell's book, much to my delight, more or less begins with a discussion of the phenomenological approach to philosophy of Husserl, and cites Stein's dissertation on

Empathy, which is one of the books I purchased. In any event, Bakewell's book is a magnificently crafted narrative that really defies any narrow classification. Yes, it deals with modern philosophical trends such as Phenomenology, Existentialism and Transcendentalism going all the way back to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. In addition, it is a historical description of the circumstances surrounding the development of philosophy and its interaction with the political scene before, during and after the rise of Nazism and WWII. Furthermore, it is a series of wonderfully insightful biographical vignettes of the major authors of that era, with special focus on Sartre and Beauvoir. A book with this scope could turn out to be deadly dull, incredibly complex, or hopelessly academic. It is none of these things.

Sarah Bakewell's *At the Existentialist Café* is, like its title, entertaining and glib. It consists largely of anecdotes about and shallow intellectual histories of its major figures. Her heroes are Beauvoir, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, roughly in that order. Her summaries of the various philosophical positions rarely dig any deeper than the familiar commonplaces of each of them: Husserl's epoch, Sartre's existence precedes essence, Heidegger's investigations into Dasein and Being-in-the-World, for example. This is in no way a probing book. It could prove useful as a way of stimulating more insightful or complex readings in the original writings of each of them, but its own summaries remain doggedly superficial. Its bias is clearly toward Beauvoir and Sartre. Some of the consequences of that bias are troubling. She rightly excoriates Heidegger for not only his Nazi affiliations, but for the even more important Nazi-like implications in much of his thought, though there are far better and more probing studies of this problem in Heidegger's work, like Charles Bambach's *Heidegger's Roots*. But, though she rightly denounces Sartre for his support of some "odious" regimes, she nearly forgives him for that since his support was motivated by a wish for human freedom. The philosophical entanglement Sartre found himself in while promoting both freedom and engagement is one Bakewell discusses, but once again the treatment remains superficial and little detail is offered. A man who talked a lot about freedom and yet supported Stalin, Mao, and even Pol Pot shouldn't be forgiven for his sins quite so easily. About the famous disagreements between and falling out of Camus and Sartre she says too little. Camus, it seems to me, she discusses shabbily.

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