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Review of Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings

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Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life


Eiland (Massachusetts Inst. of Technology) and Jennings (Princeton Univ.) present the reader with an interesting look at the life of German philosopher, critic, and essayist Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), best known for his reflections on and social criticism of Germany during the world wars. Much of Benjamin's work went unpublished during his lifetime, which was cut short fleeing from Nazis early in World War II. Although insightful, his work transcends classification, straddling poetry, philosophy, and social commentary during a time when dissemination of new ideas was stilted. The biographical information presented here is compelling and engaging. Eiland and Jennings successfully relate Benjamin's priorities and interests, while contrasting these personal facts with the world-changing events of the same era--events that at times, the authors make clear, seemed far away from Benjamin's life. As this is a biography, the authors discuss but do not offer substantive analysis of Benjamin's scholarly work.

VERDICT This excellent resource for scholars interested in Benjamin or life during the turn of the century is recommended for academic libraries and all libraries with World War I and World War II collections.