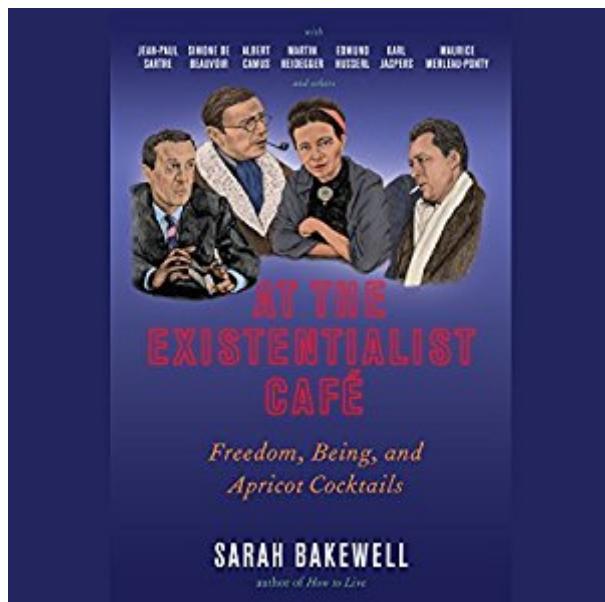


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At The Existentialist CafÃ©: Freedom, Being, And Apricot Cocktails



Synopsis

Earphones Award Winner (AudioFile Magazine) 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 cafÃ©s 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 CafÃ©* 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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In the opening scene of *At the Existentialist Caf *, 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 existential 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. My favorite, which is on the last page of the book, shows Sartre and Beauvoir together laughing and obviously enjoying life, a stark contrast to the angst usually associated with the existentialists. The existentialists' lives spanned almost the entire twentieth century: World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War with its threat of nuclear attack. They were profoundly affected by what was happening around them and to them. Bakewell does an excellent job of showing how, as Merleau-Ponty put it, both their lives and ideas were "contingent"---at the mercy of historical events and other changes they could not control. It was heart-wrenching to envision Edmund Husserl fleeing the German persecution of the Jews while his former friend and student served as a leading apologist for the Nazis. In the final chapter, Bakewell lets the reader in on some of her own feelings about existentialism and the existentialist figures, from her original fascination thirty years ago to how her feelings shifted in the

course of writing the book. It was an excellent summation that gave me more insight into the author as well as the philosophy and people she writes about. I'm not sure whether to call *At the Existentialist Cafeteria* biography, history, or philosophy. What I will definitely call it is worth your time. This book could be a contender for another major award.

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 Cafeteria* 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. It almost reads like a novel, and smoothly interweaves both factual and analytical material, bringing the various individuals who are highlighted to vivid life. There are excellent illustrations, scattered throughout the text. Although they are not captioned in the uncorrected proof copy provided for review, they fit so well with the narrative that it is easy to see how they connect. Again due to the uncorrected proof format, the extensive notes provided at the end are not annotated in the text, which made it easy for me as a non-scholarly reader to simply read through with ease, but with confidence that if I wanted to check any sources, that information IS available. Finally, Bakewell provided a multi-page *cast of characters* which gave thumbnail bio data on everyone mentioned in the book, which I consider extremely valuable. I consider myself both blessed, and

extremely enlightened; this book is a treasure.

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