



Derrida: A Biography

Benoît Peeters , Andrew Brown (Translator)

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) 

Derrida: A Biography

Benoît Peeters , Andrew Brown (Translator)

Derrida: A Biography Benoît Peeters , Andrew Brown (Translator)

This biography of Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) tells the story of a Jewish boy from Algiers, excluded from school at the age of twelve, who went on to become the most widely translated French philosopher in the world – a vulnerable, tormented man who, throughout his life, continued to see himself as unwelcome in the French university system. We are plunged into the different worlds in which Derrida lived and worked: pre-independence Algeria, the microcosm of the École Normale Supérieure, the cluster of structuralist thinkers, and the turbulent events of 1968 and after. We meet the remarkable series of leading writers and philosophers with whom Derrida struck up a friendship: Louis Althusser, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean Genet, and Hélène Cixous, among others. We also witness an equally long series of often brutal polemics fought over crucial issues with thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, John R. Searle, and Jürgen Habermas, as well as several controversies that went far beyond academia, the best known of which concerned Heidegger and Paul de Man. We follow a series of courageous political commitments in support of Nelson Mandela, illegal immigrants, and gay marriage. And we watch as a concept – deconstruction – takes wing and exerts an extraordinary influence way beyond the philosophical world, on literary studies, architecture, law, theology, feminism, queer theory, and postcolonial studies.

In writing this compelling and authoritative biography, Benoît Peeters talked to over a hundred individuals who knew and worked with Derrida. He is also the first person to make use of the huge personal archive built up by Derrida throughout his life and of his extensive correspondence. Peeters' book gives us a new and deeper understanding of the man who will perhaps be seen as the major philosopher of the second half of the twentieth century.

Derrida: A Biography Details

Date : Published 2012 by Polity (first published 2010)

ISBN : 9780745656151

Author : Benoît Peeters , Andrew Brown (Translator)

Format : Hardcover 629 pages

Genre : Philosophy, Biography, Nonfiction, Theory, Literature, Autobiography

 [Download Derrida: A Biography ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Derrida: A Biography ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online Derrida: A Biography Benoît Peeters , Andrew Brown (Translator)

From Reader Review Derrida: A Biography for online ebook

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

Reviewed by Marc Farrant in review31, "Someone like me - an old prof.":
<http://review31.co.uk/article/view/10...>

An excerpt:
<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles...>

btw, the Derrida film is of rather questionable value. But since it's a film, it goes down easy.
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0303326/?...>

The Eagleton review:

"Even so, the Cambridge backwoodsmen were wrong. Derrida, who died of cancer in 2004 urging his friends to affirm life, was no nihilist. Nor did he want to blow up western civilisation with a stick of conceptual dynamite. He simply wished to make us less arrogantly assured that when we speak of truth, love, identity and authority, we know exactly what we mean."
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/...>

Another review:

"Or perhaps like James Joyce. As Peeters rightly points out, Derrida never really got over his first encounter with Finnegans Wake, and in many ways it became the model for his understanding - not that there is anything to understand, of course - of the text at large. Everything was a labyrinthine amalgam of languages, a towering Babel of puns and glossolalia."
<http://www.literaryreview.co.uk/marti...>

Tim says

I am tempted to recommend this to everyone.

But failing that, I certainly recommend it to anyone with any interest in Derrida. It transforms and enriches one's view of him.

I can hardly be bothered to acknowledge that it is itself a type of book that in his work he can sometimes seem to, as his gang say "put into question". Fine. So what?

In any case, one of the innumerable merits of this book is to make it apparent (I nearly said "clear") just how little Derrida the man resembles Derrida the imagined author of his texts (his difficult, obscure, tantalising and frustrating texts, in which the gobsmacked and exhausted reader is often left wondering whether it's possible that JD has in fact just deconstructed himself up his own normale superieure ass).

Anyway silly comments aside, this was gripping, moving, humanising - at times all-too-humanising, in that

Derrida's feet of clay are also presented: infidelities, rivalries, grudges.

I actually postponed starting this book, which my mum gave me nearly a year ago, because I have an aversion to long books and also because I started to think maybe my Derrida days were over. But I was as they say gripped from the start - early years in the Jewish community of Algeria - and even more drawn in by his early grapplings with the literary and philosophical canons and the French academic world. Once it got to the times where he was churning out the great texts I first knew him by: *Writing and Difference*, *Speech and Phenomena*, *Margins of Philosophy* - it was like, pardon the comparison, putting on 3D glasses.

It's rightly been said that Peeters doesn't attempt to assess or engage with Derrida philosophically; on the other hand, it's clear from the way he tells it that he's read Derrida extensively and intelligently.

If you only read one biography of a recently deceased French intellectual this year (or this lifetime), I recommend this one.

Emily says

A surprisingly engrossing read, I thought. It had gotten good reviews, and Derrida is a significant figure, he was all the rage when I was in grad school, etc., so I got it then put it to the side for ages. Anyway, he knew or met or was friends or enemies with EVERYONE, it seems, in Europe and/or in the literary theory game. The shifting alliances were part of the appeal, as was Derrida himself: he comes across as unexpectedly likeable, despite the affairs, the weirdness surrounding his child with his mistress, the hypersensitivity. His friendship with de Man and his response to the scandal when de Man's WWII-era journalism for a Nazi paper becomes more understandable. And the author does a pretty good job of describing the various academic battles and Derrida's work without chasing his tail and getting all meta-discursive as he does so. Not to mention some reasonably juicy stories I hadn't known of, like Derrida's arrest in Prague and the fisticuffs he got into with Bernard-Henri ("God may be dead, but my hair is perfect") Levy.

Michael Zimecki says

Derrida was a pompous snob whose ideas have infected the world of academic literary criticism. His disciples are uniformly unable to express themselves clearly, and their students no longer know how to read, as close reading skills are not favored by disciples of Derrida. The biography gives some insight into Derrida and one of his pupils, Avital Ronnel, who is currently at the center of a Title IX case at NYU involving a gay, male graduate student who claims he was both sexually harassed and sexually assaulted by Ronnel. NYU agreed with him on the harassment charges and Ronnel has been suspended from teaching. (None of this has kept other Derrida followers from rushing to her defense.) In any event, the book provides some insight into Derrida's cult-like status and Ronnel's relationship with Derrida, whom she worshipped and who, in turn, treated her like a member of his own family. (She promptly had an affair with his son.) While the bio does give readers a sense of Derrida's neediness and infatuation with himself and his own ideas, it falls short in exposing the utter vacuity of Derrida's philosophy.

Alex Obrigewitsch says

A great biography. Biography itself is such a slippery thing when speaking of a philosopher and Derrida

knew this. in many ways it has no matter at all for the work of the thought and yet it is also of prime import to know the man who speaks the thoughts, who writes the attempts at teasing out the unsaid. A man the world will sorely miss for years to come.

S says

It was like reading a novel. Of course, this is perhaps Derrida's greatest contribution, at least to my own reading strategies, to the degree that I've tried to come to terms with theory, even if Derrida didn't have a direct influence on this: the capacity to read (and perhaps interpret) one genre as another. Though, and this is what hurt, similar to DFW's biography: philosophers and writers are not saints; though, alternately and more optimistically: but saints may be philosophers and writers.

Jonfaith says

A text remains, moreover, forever imperceptible. Its laws and rules are not, however, harbored in the inaccessibility of a secret; it is simply that they can never be booked, in the present, into anything that could rigorously be called a perception. one of my favorite Derrida quotes.

One holiday season in another lifetime I bought a biography of Henry Miller for my best friend Joel. Being weedy undergrads we had dashed through the Tropics and were prone to crass public pontifications on the Sublime: oh brother. Just before that New Year's Joel told me he would never be a writer, not after reading the letters of Miller reproduced within the biography. I felt a similar awe this week when devouring Peeter's massive treatment of Derrida and the inclusion of the wide ranging correspondence the philosopher painstakingly ground out seemingly day after day. The tome is a bit fawning and there is a great deal of repetition.

What remains puzzling about the Derrida Mystique is how he struggled from outside the Academy to gain entry, and was instantly disavowed by it once inside, even as his acclaim was peer recognized just as quickly. Such is a *spur* to an inquiry on the University as bulwark or some such. Indeed an entire Derrida-as-Aporia surfaces in protean detail, many divergent and somewhat elusive. How did he feel about his image? Why did he brand it? Why then was he disappointed? The same goes his sense of Friendship and Secrecy; these were two major concepts for him. Their application is likewise fascinating.

There will no doubt be better, more informed approaches in the future, once more letters are released and matters become less immediate.

Joni says

a chronicle, not a portrait; a show of traces, not a life. no breathing person emerges from the privacies detected, scenes reported, or letters quoted here. derrida remains constantly moving, obscure like an animal. he writes, responds, moves in circles, is spoken of, thinks, is marginalized, loves, suffers, plans, lives, broods. but no explanatory arch is built over these lists of doings, giving the series of instances a coherent mood, sounding the meaning of the evidence conclusively for us to grasp it whole like a theme or a melody. no personality emerges from the pages: the object, loved and loathed, honored and controversial,

remains hidden behind the material impress he left on the record and the minds he came to touch during his life. despite this shadowing and the tediousness of it all, the text is a success. by describing derrida acting, disguised in his doings, and by laying out his life in stale detail, naively summarising episodes without commenting on them in the slightest, always holding his distance, peeters saves the mystery. of this respect levinas would approve. no flavor, but rich in facts. informative with no insight whatsoever. a book to rush through when rest is delayed. give it a try lest haunting ensue

Emahunn Campbell says

I wept after I read what is called a biography. One - being I - hold somewhat fastidiously to literary genres that are fixed but shake as a result of their tight rigidity. Benoit Peeters gives more than a biography of the most important (professional) philosophy of the second part of the twentieth century - the term, the genre cannot be sloppily applied to such a tour de force of literary and, dare I say?, life excellence. The works sheer, unadulterated brilliance illuminates in magnificent, radiant colors, Peeters meticulous, thoughtful use of language, his sensitivity to his subject (how ironic!), and his understand of political and personal (also political) contexts from Derrida's "dark" birth (he was darker than most of his peers) as a French Jew in Algeria in the year 1930 to his all-too-sudden death in 2004.

But even such charmingly crafted works contain blemishes - some subtle, others not-so-much. There are times when the author mischaracterizes particular fields such as postcolonial studies, queer theory, and subaltern studies, attributing founders such as Gayatri Spivak and Judith Butler erroneously as the sole originators of these now influential fields. There is, on another note, too much speculative conclusions drawn explaining Derrida's bouts of depression. At times, Peeters performs what it seems like all biographers enjoy doing (it pains me to write this about such a work of art his book will surely be once set before different pairs of eyes): he assigns personal turmoil Derrida experiences in his later years to his extramarital affair and the birth of his bastard son, Daniel. Surely this had some influence - this cannot be discounted; yet, his travels, overwhelming work schedule, and global import was a deliciously dangerous cocktail all geniuses consume for the sake of work that is greater than them, greater than us.

The arrival - or the run - to Derrida's death is tough to encounter. A full 542 pages of text to be read (this does not include footnotes, etc), one labors through this lucidly written book as if Derrida has broken his commitment to secrets. But even in his secrets exposed, there are more secrets to be revealed: the secrets have secrets, the dreams have dreams, the texts have (con)texts, and nothing exists outside these...

Steven Peterson says

Born Jackie Derrida in Algeria, he changed his name to Jacques after beginning his academic career. The book traces his early years, including facing challenges as a Jew in French Algeria during World War II. The challenge of any book on Derrida is to provide a sense of both the person and his ideas. And Derrida's ideas are not always easy to grasp. Indeed, Michel Foucault once referred to Derrida as "obscurante terroriste." That is, Derrida's work was obscurely written--and when one missed what Derrida meant, he would attack said individual. Hence, obscure terrorist.

Derrida's youth and early academic training were characterized by bouts of depression and anxiety. He had some reverses in his academic career, but overcame them.

He began to write as his academic career began. The book discusses his friendships--and his conflicts with

others. And sometimes both: He and Jurgen Habermas were notoriously scathing toward one another's work, until they developed a *modus vivendi* in later life. The conflicts between Foucault and Derrida are depicted, too. Just so, his friendships with scholars such as J. Hillis Miller and Paul De Man are chronicled. We learn of his family life and of his complex personal life.

Then, of course, there is his work. His concept of "differance" is pretty accessibly presented. Lay readers will have a good sense of the importance of the idea. Deconstruction? The notion is first presented and is not so easy to get a handle on, although by repeated discussion over the course of the book, readers should "get it." Indeed, one of the greatest challenges with this book is trying to get a sense of Derrida's works. And he was very prolific, authoring many books, publications, and lectures.

Want to get a sense of one of the most important thinkers of the latter part of the 20th century? This is the resource for you.

Grady says

Blending Biography with Philosophy: A Daunting Task

Benoît Peeters has taken on a challenge in deciding to write a biography of Jacques Derrida (1930 - 2004), a French philosopher, born in French Algeria. He developed a form of semiotic analysis known as deconstruction. His work was labeled as post-structuralism and associated with postmodern philosophy.

As writer/critic Andy Martin as said, `Benoît Peeters has cut through a lot of the myth and mystique surrounding Derrida. There is probably more illuminating information here - and correspondence - than has ever been made public before. That in itself is a major achievement. But sometimes Peeters reminds you a little too much of one of the master's seminars. You want to shout out: 'Yes, but can you now say what you actually think about all this?!' (and 'Do you think you could keep it brief this time?'). In another way this book is about as un-Derridean as it is possible to be. It begins with his birth (to French-Algerian, Jewish parents) and childhood (he was a would-be footballer, like Camus, and a boy racer who lost his driving license), and it ends with his death in Paris (in 2004). At school Jackie is already being advised to abstain from a 'tendency to complication' and 'superior verbalism'. It's all very linear and teleological - in other words, the kind of text that Derrida himself would probably have scorned. But it's none the worse for that. In form, Peeters is refreshingly anti-Derridean; at the level of discourse, he remains enormously sympathetic - sometimes with too much emphasis on the pathetic. Peeters's Derrida is vulnerable, sensitive, prone to bouts of melancholia, neurotic, hypochondriac, and verging on suicidal. During one period of his life he develops a phobia of flying. He is as tormented and torn as his prose. This is Derrida the poetic soul.'

At 630 pages taking on the experience of diving in to Peeter's DERRIDA is a pledge of time. So much of the philosophy and writings of Derrida are complex in and of themselves and reading another's interpretation seems at times to add to the verbosity without enhancing the understanding. But as Peeters so well states in his Introduction, `So this biography has refused to exclude anything. Writing the life of Jacques Derrida means writing the story of a Jewish boy from Algiers, excluded from school at the age of twelve, who became the French philosopher whose works have been the most widely translated throughout the world; the story of a fragile and tormented man who, to the end of his life, continued to see himself as `rejected' by the French university system. It means bringing back to life such different worlds as pre-independence Algeria, the microcosm of the École normale supérieure, the structuralist period, and the turbulent events of 1968 and afterwards.'

The book is as complete as one would wish and it adds pages of photographs of Derrida and the people who

influenced his thinking and his life. Peeters does not avoid the controversial issues such as the phallogocentric argument: Logocentrism is the term Derrida uses to refer to the philosophy of determinateness, while phallogocentrism is the term he uses to describe the way logocentrism itself has been genderized by a "masculinist (phallic)" and "patriarchal" agenda. Hence, Derrida intentionally merges the two terms phallogocentrism and logocentrism as "phallogocentrism". There are no stones unturned, if only at times for a peak; there is simply so much material to cover and Peters does it well.

Grady Harp

Christine Cordula Dantas says

I could never read Derrida. Even after studying a few introductory books. Then, I found this biography by B. Peeters. It was time to learn about the man, his life. I was not expecting to learn about deconstruction et al., though, and I didn't. I might not be able to understand Derrida the same way, now that I have closed this excellent book. But now I know why. And it does not matter. I am certain that I will be able to read him differently now. It took me more than a year to finish his biography, with long lapses here and there, because of other projects and constraints. But this is a very clearly written text, which facilitates the return from long pauses. I highly recommend it, specially if you still hope to give Derrida a "chance". It does take time to read him. Possibly, a lifetime. This is, perhaps, his ultimate underlying intention.

Roman Clodia says

Exhaustive and sympathetic without being hagiographical

There is, of course, something deeply ironic, even paradoxical, about writing a biography of Derrida, reconstructing the man from the texts, fragments and traces of narrative written by Derrida himself, and the people who knew him - texts which always have a belated status. Peeters, who was himself a postgraduate working under Barthes, is fully aware of this poignant incongruity and tackles it upfront in his introduction.

What he offers us here is an exhaustive and sympathetic biography of Derrida, the man as well as the philosopher, thinker and writer. He is respectful of Derrida's wife and avoids any kind of intrusive voyeurism when it comes to Derrida's relationships with women, while acknowledging the importance of women - as friends, colleagues, fellow intellectuals as well as lovers - in Derrida's life.

The movements of this book are, primarily, intellectual ones, focusing on the development of Derrida's thought, from his early education (some of his first school reports are unintentionally comic - who knew that Derrida was quite so bad at Latin unseens as a schoolboy!) through his publishing and academic career, to his untimely death in 2004.

In some ways, a biography of Derrida also has to be a 'biography' of left-wing French political and intellectual thought from the second world war into the 21st century, and Peeters is attentive to the role Derrida plays here - from his early experiences of Vichy anti-Semitism in Algeria, to his nuanced responses to September 11.

Above all, for someone who has only dipped into Derrida in terms of his impact on critical theory and literary studies, this conveys a strong sense of his personality: affectionate, loving, sometimes fragile, always

striving, never content to just accept, and very alive.

Derrida isn't always well served by translators (not always their fault) or interpreters, and his own writings are, necessarily and self-consciously, difficult as he struggles to articulate a philosophy of writing. This biography has left me eager to go back to Derrida's own texts - a fine outcome and one of which Peeters should be proud.

Hermes says

Behind the impregnable texts we find the man, whose life was equally enigmatic, secretive, significant, and at the same time very *real*, rich, and not-so-relaxing: not necessarily the suave playboy Sam Weber mistook him for at the airport.

... From the streets and cinemas of El Biar, to the insights of professors' reactions to his essays in school, his "publicational" friendships, the recountings of his sons, the correspondences, the surroundings and goings-on around, behind, and before his more experimental works like *Glas* and *La carte postale*, etc. Especially rewarding, in terms of the digressive yet very human aspect (and this is philosophically interesting) of "anecdotality," some of which was already revealed in the 2002 film *Derrida*, is the "Portrait of the Philosopher at Sixty," which hints at his everyday interests and tastes: in clothes, film, music, cars, jokes, etc.

As Jean-Luc Nancy said of *La carte postale* (or, rather, the "Envois") that "this text touche[d] [him], [...] it does nothing but that, touching (and reaching its destination, too), it's a text of tact and skin" (p. 312)—so too is this book very touching.

Robert Nisbet says

A complex but authoritative account of Derrida's works & life. Background & archive research at it's very best.

Perhaps layout of book could have been improved with text boxes providing 'summaries/key points' when relaying information about Derrida's books, articles etc. Defining clearly his contribution to contemporary thinking & to whom such was addressed to.

An illustrated 'time line' of his life, including family, dates of publications, lecture tours would have assisted the reader in keeping track with this 'workaholic philosopher'.

Benoit Peter's book places Derrida as a philosopher of our time & for the future.

Interesting insights as to the French higher education system
