



The Hemlock Cup: Socrates, Athens and the Search for the Good Life

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We think the way we do because Socrates thought the way he did; in his unwavering commitment to truth and in the example of his own life, he set the standard for all subsequent Western philosophy. And yet, for twenty-five centuries, he has remained an enigma: a man who left no written legacy and about whom everything we know is hearsay, gleaned from the writings of Plato, Xenophon and Aristophanes. Now Bettany Hughes gives us an unprecedented, brilliantly vivid portrait of Socrates and of his homeland, Athens in its Golden Age.

His life spanned “seventy of the busiest, most wonderful and tragic years in Athenian history.” It was a city devastated by war, but, at the same time, transformed by the burgeoning process of democracy, and Hughes re-creates this fifth-century B.C. city, drawing on the latest sources—archaeological, topographical and textual—to illuminate the streets where Socrates walked, to place him there and to show us the world as he experienced it.

She takes us through the great, teeming Agora—the massive marketplace, the heart of ancient Athens—where Socrates engaged in philosophical dialogue and where he would be condemned to death. We visit the battlefields where he fought, the red-light district and gymnasias he frequented and the religious festivals he attended. We meet the men and the few women—including his wife, Xanthippe, and his “inspiration” and confidante, Aspasia—who were central to his life. We travel to where he was born and where he died. And we come to understand the profound influences of time and place in the evolution of his eternally provocative philosophy.

Deeply informed and vibrantly written, combining historical inquiry and storytelling Alan, *The Hemlock Cup* gives us the most substantial, fascinating, humane depiction we have ever had of one of the most influential thinkers of all time.

The Hemlock Cup: Socrates, Athens and the Search for the Good Life Details

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Life Bettany Hughes

From Reader Review The Hemlock Cup: Socrates, Athens and the Search for the Good Life for online ebook

Rick says

Interesting, inconsistently engaging contextual biography of Socrates by a popular British classicist, The Hemlock Cup presents Socrates as both a product and anomaly of his times. He rises in democratic Athens but falls in the paranoid politics of Imperial Athens. Tared with the Sophist brush by popular opinion, an opinion that Aristophanes helped forge in his comedy, The Clouds, the philosopher of the nettlesome questions was bound for exile or doom. The book is authoritative but disjointed and some passages read like a voice over for a documentary, casual and unnecessary in a text. Hughes at her best is very good but the episodic nature of the book's organization disrupts its own narrative momentum. So enjoy the sustained sections on Athenian education, court system, warfare. Enjoy the set pieces regarding Plato, Alcibiades, Pericles and Aspasia, and other major figures of the Golden Age, but prepared for flat spots. It's informative always, fascinating often, but not as successful as it might have been.

Kevin says

Socrates was forced to kill himself in 399BC via drinking poison (hemlock) because he was found guilty of corrupting the youth of Athens and disrespecting the Gods. He was a philosopher during the 'Golden Age' of Classical Greece, a time during the fifth century BC that saw Athens and the Hellenistic World develop a new, libertarian ideology called 'Democracy', an ideology (although that term was very new) that saw our Western societies of the present day adopt and herald. Not only was Socrates a philosopher, he also served as an Athenian Hoplite - a sort of 'citizen soldier' and saw active duty in the Peloponessian Wars that eventually saw Athens succumb to Sparta and end its Golden Age.

Bettany Hughes' book has many layers. Yes, it is primarily concerning the life of Socrates, interspersing various quotes from famous Greeks such as Plato that have been ascribed to him, detailing his life, loves, teachings and eventual trial and murder, but she also paints around his life detailing the period she is concerned with - Classical Greek society. It is not a straight biography of one mans life, rather it reads as a historical study of this period (the fifth century BC). She explains the rise of the 'polis', the dawn of the first ideological state based around a libertarian and democratic ethos, explaining about how almost anyone could have a say in the Agora (of course if they were not a slave...), which was a kind of forum or meeting place if you like. She also reminds us that, despite it egalitarian veneer, there was, below the surface of their idealistic society, still slavery and exploitation of lower castes, quite severe exploitation of Women (whose places was seen primarily as being in the home), racism or a severe form of xenophobia that allowed Athens to demand monetary tribute from other Greek City States and basically, despite its almost romantic artistic brush strokes that have been idealised and painted throughout the ages, was still a very brutal period of history.

The book is well researched - there are pages of references and notes in the back of the book, an incredible bibliography and she is familiar with all of the epochs poets, writers and philosophers. Bettany Hughes writes in a fluid, captivating style - short segments and short chapters split into Acts make the book immeasurably readable, not too academic (or at least not too dry) but shows that she has done her research and her love for both the protagonist and era she writes about. Saying this however, I think I preferred her first study of Helen of Troy (her first book) - but that maybe is just a personal preference. Regardless, Classical Greece, the birthplace of our Western Democracy, the conflict between the city-states is a period of Ancient History I know so little about, as well as knowing limited facts about who Socrates was, so really,

'The Hemlock Cup' was informative and useful. I eagerly await another Television history study of Socrates coming from her book.

Laura says

From BBC Radio 4 - Book of the Week:

Written by Bettany Hughes. We think the way we do because Socrates thought the way he did. His aphorism 'The unexamined life is not worth living' may have originated twenty-five centuries ago, but it is a founding principle of modern life.

Socrates lived in a city that nurtured the key ingredients of contemporary civilisation - democracy, liberty, science, drama, rational thought- yet, as he wrote nothing in his lifetime, he himself is an enigmatic figure. "The Hemlock Cup" tells his story, setting him in the context of the Eastern Mediterranean that was his home, and dealing with him as he himself dealt with the world.

Episode 2: The young Socrates listens to the great thinkers of Athens and begins to form his own philosophical thoughts on life.

Episode 3: War engulfed much of Socrates' life. Now a young man, he must take up his sword and fight for his beloved Athens.

Episode 4: Socrates debates with the young men of Athens, suggesting that their future may lie in a simpler life of good.

Episode 5: The Spartans break down Athenian walls and Socrates is barred from associating with the city's youth. His card is marked.

Socrates was a soldier, a lover, a man of the people. He philosophised neither in grand educational establishments nor the courts of kings but in the squares and public arenas of Golden Age Athens. He lived through an age of extraordinary materialism, in which a democratic culture turned to the glorification of its own city; when war was declared under the banner of democracy; and, when tolerance turned into intimidation on streets once populated by the likes of Euripides, Sophocles and Pericles.

For seventy years he was a vigorous citizen of one of the greatest capitals on earth, but then his beloved Athens turned on him, condemning him to death by poison. Socrates' pursuit of personal liberty is a vibrant story that Athens did not want us to hear. But Bettany Hughes has painstakingly pieced together Socrates' life, following in his footsteps across Greece and Asia Minor, and examining the new archaeological discoveries that shed light on his world. "The Hemlock Cup" relates a story that is as relevant now as it has ever been.

Abridged by Libby Spurrier

Reader: Bettany Hughes

Producer: Joanna Green

A Pier production for BBC Radio 4.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00wdf44>

Brian says

If you're looking for a wider historical-cultural-economic context on Socrates' Greece, look elsewhere. If you're looking for a book that will immerse you in the world of Socrates' Athens, as this one attempts--but fails--to do, keep looking.

If you simply want to learn about ancient Greece, you might be able to from this book, if you knew absolutely nothing about it before, and if you have the patience to glean single kernels of basic knowledge from between 500+ pages of Hughes's bloated attempts at prose-poetry. I have to admit it's well researched, or at least that the author knows a lot about ancient Greece, so it's not impossible to learn from it, if you want to invest the time.

If you can read a sentence made up of two independent clauses linked by a comma and not notice anything wrong with it or if you actually use the word "orientated" without intending any irony, you might be able to worry through this book. If you don't understand that such breakdowns in grammar are symptomatic of a breakdown in logic (and Socrates was nothing if not an exacting logician), not to mention a breakdown in copy editing, then this book is for you!

Hughes doesn't come off as insulting her reader's intelligence so much as she seems to flatter it unjustifiably. As far as I can tell, people who appreciate The Hemlock Cup don't want to learn about or understand Socrates or his time so much as they want to bask, uncomprehending, in the glow of the meaningless verbal effluvia of an intelligent Romantic poet. Or that of a very poetic professor of antiquities, possibly, and her six-pound book.

Jud Barry says

If the ancient Athens of your imagination is a collection of white marble buildings and dead white males in white togas, you owe it to yourself to read this book, which shows the Athens of Socrates's day to be a vivid, cacophonous place where the statues--as numerous as the crowds of people in the agora--and buildings are painted metallic and day-glo colors, where beauty in human form (especially the unclothed male form) is a sign of divine favor, where divine favor upon divine favor must be continually sought through services to a growing pantheon of deities, where a sense of the superiority of the Athenian democratic scheme asserts itself in imperialistic aggression that dooms the entire enterprise. The life of Socrates is intertwined with the rise and fall of Athens--he is a veteran of her wars, he hones his philosophy in daily conversation with her people, and he dies at the hands of religious conservatives looking for scapegoats for the city's fall from grace.

The author's reconstruction of history is interspersed with notes on her visits to present-day Athens and to the museums that house the clues to the way it used to be. In effect, she puts individual puzzle pieces together with a dramatic rendering of the entire puzzle. I found this juxtaposition to make for fascinating reading.

mixal says

I was really looking forward to this book and initially it met my expectations, but after a while I spotted some historical inaccuracies which made me wonder how pervasive it is in the book. Later on it became obvious that the author had an agenda, she wanted to prove how visionary Socrates was and therefore she

made him as appealing to today's tastes as possible. Quite a substantial part of the book was trying to argue that Socrates was a feminist and that this was one of the reasons why he was eventually so hated. Even if it was true that he treated women with more respect, I do not think it was very important aspect of who he was (unless you have an agenda like the author of the book). Granted, it shows what were his priorities and that he was open-minded. But it was not a political gesture. Overall, all that the author describes about Socrates ends up as a cultural event. That makes it probably very digestible for the target audience, but it also makes it very empty. Finally, the whole parallel between Socrates' life and the life of Athenian democracy was very repetitive and tiring. 2 stars.

Ken says

This book is an incredible accomplishment, exhaustively researched and notated, weaving together knowledge from an incredible array of sources such as Thucydides, Xenophon, and Plato, as well as contemporary research and archaeology. It weaves a compelling story and picture of the places and people of Golden Age Greece. I've always been a Hellene-ophile and feel like I've been looking for this book since I was a kid. I'm not a historian, though, so I can't comment on the accuracy of the book's historical depiction. The notes and bibliography are exhaustive and will serve as an invaluable source for further reading and exploration. I think I appreciated the book more having already read a reasonable amount of the literature from this period, but it has made me want to go back and re-read many works, such as Thucydides, Euripides, and some of the dialogs of Plato, especially the Symposium, Apology, and Phaedrus. Also a great source for launching further explorations into the archaeology of ancient Athens, as well as for contemplating the philosophy of Socrates and all descendant philosophical traditions.

John David says

i was put off at first because of the way the author drops in references about her real life visits to the sites mentioned; i hate when the flow of the story is broken like that. i've never read a biography and i was hoping for more of a novel type of book, but it didn't take long to get used to the style. in the case of attempting to understand socrates' life, the normal goal of an author - to allow the reader's imagination to shape the world - would have failed miserably. now that i've finished it, i can look back and see that the way she does it really was the best way. it isn't a story, it was a description of a dude's life, and her interruptions really are necessary. they force you to think about what's happening in more than one way, and that's what it takes to get a good picture of what life and culture may really have been like two and a half millennia ago.

in other words, it took me a while to get used to the style, but now i appreciate it. other than my personal initial disagreement with that one aspect of style, the prose is very well composed and i love her complete lack of timidity in her choice of words. things like "...a word better left to the imagination" or "...herm, well, you get the point" would have totally interrupted the flow. the athenians weren't afraid to use the necessary words, so neither must a historian be.

as for socrates himself, the fact that i even started this book shows how interesting i thought he would be, and the fact that i finished it should tell you how interesting i continue to find him and his world.

i wholeheartedly recommend a study of socrates' life and ideas, and this book is an excellent place to start or continue that journey.

Brenda says

I wish I had read this book before my Open University A219 module. It contextualised so much of the course content. Socrates was born at the dawn of democracy, he fought in and survived many of the battles of the Peloponnesian War. This book brought home the tactics employed first to ensure the smooth running of the state, then the driver for empire / enslavement of the region.

Half way in I really went off Aristophanes; till then one of my favourite playwrights - it's easy to see where the Nazis learned the knack of making those you fear figures of fun thus diminishing them in other's eyes. Mine was a Kindle book, as such the timelines towards the end of the book were rendered unreadable.

Bettany Hughes truly highlights the nineteenth century construct that was democratic Athens.

Storyjunkie says

The Hemlock Cup is actually three narratives in one book: the physicality and history of Athens during Socrates' life, a largely-guesswork biography of Socrates, and a guided tour through the digs in modern Greece that resulted in the foundations for a lot of Bettany Hughes' supposition.

Each chapter is riveting, engaging, and makes me want to look things up so that I can know more. Taken as a whole, the piece is disjointed and jumpy, uneasily sitting between the history of Athens and the after-image of Socrates.

It's odd the things she explains to her readers and the things she doesn't, often seeming as if she's forgotten to put in a parenthetical statement or footnote in a number of passages (the introduction of Alcibiades was particularly frustrating to me). I was left with the feeling that she wrote some chapters with an academic audience in mind, and others with a popular audience in mind.

Thomas says

With her breezy informal style it's hard not to picture Hughes walking through some of the sites she describes, narrating the book as if it were one of her television productions. The travelogue aspect can be a bit intrusive, but I rather enjoyed it. Her goal is to put the trial of Socrates in historical context, so detailed descriptions of the sites where Socrates walked is surely appropriate, if not always enlightening.

This is not a purely scholarly affair; the book is written for the same folks who would watch her shows, though it is far more detailed and focuses on the mystery that is Socrates. She draws from all the familiar sources (Plato, Xenophon, Aristophanes, Diogenes Laertius) but spends a fair amount of time on the archaeological evidence, and takes some fascinating side trips into the erotic life of Socrates and the lives of women in fifth century Greece. Down to earth and thorough.

Courtney Johnston says

Earlier this year I read and loved Annabel Lyon's *The Golden Mean*, a work of fiction that gave the reader a fleshy, human, vulnerable Aristotle.

Bettany Hughes's biography of Socrates (who she describes as a 'donut' subject - a rich and tasty topic with a great big whole in the middle right where the subject ought to be) does something similar, bringing to life a Socrates who is heavysset, hairy, slovenly, physically very different from the golden youths who trailed him around Athens and - tried to, at least, possibly - share his bed.

That 'possibly' is key; Socrates left no written texts of his own (distrusted the written word, which couldn't be interrogated, couldn't talk to you as you read). So historians rely on his contemporaries - his devoted students Xenophon and Plato and the satirical playwright Aristophanes - and later texts, and archaeological evidence, trying to piece a life together.

Hughes does a wonderful job of taking us along on her historical ride, both by evoking the Athens Socrates lived and - worked? spoke? theorised? philosophised? - in, and by sharing her sources, and her excitement in tracking down shards of pottery and fragments of papyrus and standing on the sides of motorway off-ramps where great battles took place.

Because Socrates' life can only be guessed at, Hughes draws for us instead a picture of the world he lived in, and places him squarely in it. The 'Socrates might have's' and 'It is likely that he's' are palatable in this context; the opening of the book, where we follow Socrates on his walk to his trial along the streets of Athens, is a masterful piece of writing, filled with utterly visualisable detail.

After three hundred of so pages, the detail starts to overwhelm. I no longer needed to be told about feet slapping, dust rising, sweat dripping. Hughes notes at one stage that Greek statuary was not the milky marble our modern eyes link to Classicism, but brightly, hotly coloured - this book becomes a bit like that, relentless in its addition of yet more decoration to the already richly evocative.

That said, boy, did I learn a lot, and enjoyably. Here are some of the highlights:

Aristotle's famed quote 'Man is a political animal' makes a whole different kind of sense when you think of 'polis' as the city state, made up of a community that has agreed upon shared rules and responsibilities.

The Athenians had a mania for posting public notices: "Papyrus chits, graffiti, stone-carved stelai communicating new laws, fines, religious summons, would have been found everywhere in the city." The charges against Socrates were strapped to a railing beside a row of statues, and possibly painted onto a nearby wall - a source centuries later said traces of the charges were still visible.

The first temple on the southwestern steps to the Acropolis belonged to Peitho, a goddess I've not heard of before - the wily and powerful goddess of persuasion. She is worshipped across the city, she is the daughter of Aphrodite or Fate, her priestesses had seats of honour at Dionysos's theatre when Athen enacted itself; prostitutes are her servants. Peitho is essential to the new democracy, because now men must shape each other and the world around them with words. Peitho's twisted child is *pheme*, a word that gives us 'fame' today, but in Socrates' time meant rumour.

Peitho also shows us the danger of words that are persuasive but empty - the words of the sophist, the rhetorician for hire. Socrates: "If you continue to delight in clever, idle arguments you'll be qualified to combat with the sophists but never know how to live with men." In the end, in court, Socrates could not persuade, and *pheme* and fame condemned him.

[I have to say, this book made me want the Greek gods and goddesses and godlets even more. Perhaps if I were Catholic I could pick my own personal saint, but wouldn't it be nice to be able to pick someone like Peitho to focus your thoughts on, align your action with, placate and cajole?]

Democracy flourished on the back of slavery, particularly the 20,000 slaves who toiled in Athens' silver mines. It is estimated that young and middle-aged male citizens (or just 'citizens', really) spent three quarters of their day at the gymnasiums, preparing for competition, war, admiration and religious festivals. Of which there were *a lot*: a festival every day of the year bar one.

Archaeologists have not yet found an aristocratic area of Athens from this period - it was an intimate little city, and people did not lead (outwardly) ostentatious lives. Prostitutes rubbed up against politicians - no doubt helpful if you were looking to arrange a 'middle of the day marriage'.

The 'Academy' and the 'Lyceum' were names of exercise grounds - a lovely origin. Socrates though was given to philosophising in the street and in shops rather than in gyms or private homes, where he might have been paid for his thinking.

Theatre was massively important to the Greeks - it brought them closer to the gods. And it was fundamental to the way Athens functioned - "art" wasn't something separate from life, but as integral as "society" or "politics". When the Athenians invaded Syracuse and foundered just outside the city limits, the Sicilians who defeated them revenged themselves by packing the soldiers in tight then forcing them to recite lines from Euripedes until they fell from exhaustion or were cut down.

Finally, hemlock was an expensive drug. A bloodless crucifixion (blood was polluting) was the choice of execution for slaves and common criminals - hemlock poisoning was for a better class of people. Although the Romantic painters might have depicted Socrates with a large cup:

All most men needed was a small measure - a solution that would fit into an eye-bath; a number of modest phials of just such dimensions survive (there are two rows of them in the Agora Museum). Black-glazed, rough-cast, they are straightforward, functional objects.

Bettie? says

she often lists from thesaurus, which comes over as rather affected, and grates after a while; one fallen star right there.

R4 Monday - book of the week. TRAILER

blurb - *Written by Bettany Hughes. We think the way we do because Socrates thought the way he did. His aphorism 'The unexamined life is not worth living' may have originated twenty-five centuries ago, but it is a founding principle of modern life.*

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science, drama, rational thought- yet, as he wrote nothing in his lifetime, he himself is an enigmatic figure. "The Hemlock Cup" tells his story, setting him in the context of the Eastern Mediterranean that was his home, and dealing with him as he himself dealt with the world.

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Abridged by Libby Spurrier Reader: Bettany Hughes

Producer: Joanna Green A Pier production for BBC Radio 4.

Nikki says

I got Bettany Hughes' books because when I graduated from my BA, she was awarded an honorary fellowship by my university. So naturally, after her speech, I was curious about her work. My problem with her book on Helen of Troy was mostly the organisation, and I had that problem again too; she begins at the end of Socrates' life, jumps forward and back with foreshadowing, tells you about people's deaths and then mentions them again a few pages later...

I can also imagine that a lot of people would find it a dry read. I found Socrates fascinating, learning about his character; I was sometimes doubtful about how Hughes could really have pieced together certain details about him. There's plenty of references and so on in the back of the book, but then there's also careless mistakes like referring to Elektra and Ismene's brothers. (It's Antigone, not Elektra. Wrong tragedy, wrong tragedian.) That makes me a little unsure of how to take it all — and of course, Socrates didn't write down his philosophy in the way that Plato or Aristotle did, so everything we have is second or third hand anyway.

An interesting book, at any rate, but not as fascinating as the one on Helen. I actually read it while reading Jo Walton's *The Just City*, to which it makes an interesting non-fictional companion!

Originally posted here.

Robert Case says

This book is a must read for anyone who enjoys learning about the Bronze Age or reading historical fiction about that era. Socrates was such a prominent figure. His legacy has survived, resonating soundly into the present. This book makes his impact understandable. It contains delightful descriptions and scenes of this one man's life in all of its aspects; the soldier, lover, husband and philosopher. Bettany Hughes writes powerfully about the role of women and slaves in democratic Athens. Her attention to detail is spot on. I

especially enjoyed her infrequent ramblings about geology and volcanism when describing the islands of Melos and Delos. I will read this book again someday.
