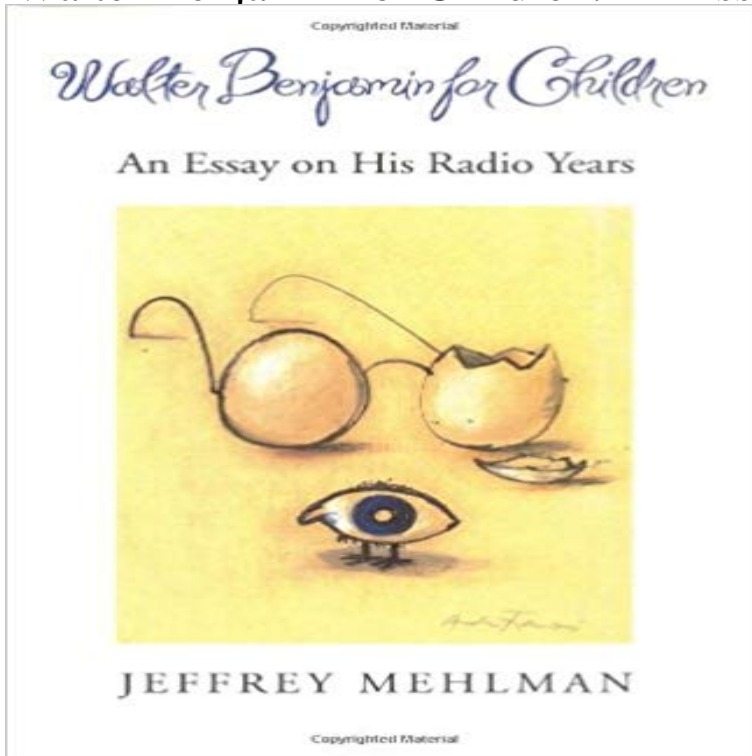


Walter Benjamin for Children: An Essay on his Radio Years



In light of the legendary difficulty of Walter Benjamin's works, it is a strange and intriguing fact that from 1929 to 1933 the great critic and cultural theorist wrote--and broadcast--numerous scripts, on the order of fireside chats, for children. Invited to speak on whatever subject he considered appropriate, Benjamin talked to the children of Frankfurt and Berlin about the destruction of Pompeii, an earthquake in Lisbon, and a railroad disaster at the Firth of Tay. He spoke about bootlegging and swindling, cataclysm and suicide, Faust and Cagliostro. In this first sustained analysis of the thirty surviving scripts, Jeffrey Mehlman demonstrates how Benjamin used the unlikely forum of children's radio to pursue some of his central philosophical and theological concerns. In *Walter Benjamin for Children*, readers will encounter a host of intertextual surprises: an evocation of the flooding of the Mississippi informed by the argument of *The Task of the Translator*; a discussion of scams in stamp-collecting that turns into *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*; a tale of bootlegging in the American South that converges with the best of Benjamin's essays on fiction. Mehlman superimposes a dual series of texts dealing with catastrophe, on the one hand, and fraud, on the other, that resonate with the false-messianic theology of Sabbatianism as it came to focus the attention and enthusiasm of Benjamin's friend Gershom Scholem during the same years. The radio scripts for children, that is, offer an unexpected byway, on the eve of the apocalypse, into Benjamin's messianic preoccupations. A child's garden of deconstruction, these twenty-minute talks--from the perspective of childhood, before an invisible audience, on whatever happened to cross the critic's mind--are also by their very nature the closest we may ever come to a transcript of a psychoanalysis of Walter Benjamin.

Particularly alive to that circumstance, Mehlman explores the themes of the radio broadcasts and brilliantly illuminates their hidden connections to Benjamin's life and work. This lucid analysis brings to light some of the least researched and understood aspects of Walter Benjamin's thought. It will interest and provoke literary theorists and philosophers of culture, as well as anyone who hopes to understand one of this century's most suggestive and perplexing critics.

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