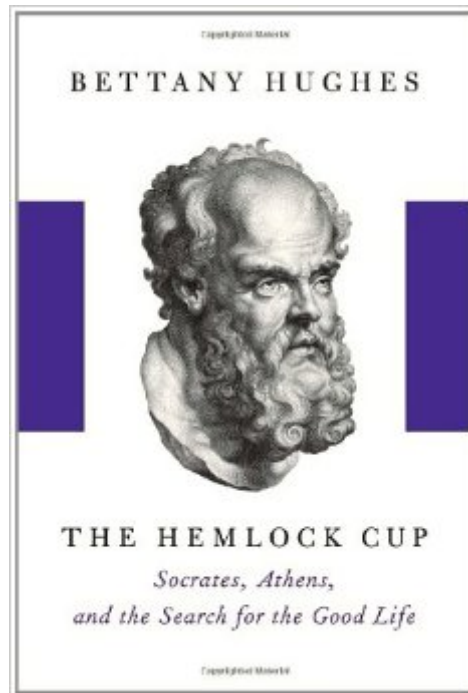


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The Hemlock Cup: Socrates, Athens And The Search For The Good Life



Synopsis

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 a century 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 "Ian, 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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

If you were walking the marketplace of Athens a couple of millennia ago, you might have been accosted by an ugly man who wanted to talk to you. He wouldn't have anything to sell, he would just want to ask questions. Not questions like how to get to the upcoming festival or who you supported for civic leaders. He would want to know about truth, about love, about justice, and about how we could know anything about such subjects when he professed that he himself was no expert, and in fact he didn't have any answers himself, just questions. This would have been Socrates, and as everyone knows, his questions were to get him into trouble and cost him his life. Socrates talked about the founding ideas of philosophy, and although he didn't write anything down, his dialogues and speeches written down by Plato (they cannot have been transcriptions) have been the talk of philosophers ever after. Bettany Hughes is a historian focusing on antiquity, not a philosopher, and her book *The Hemlock Cup: Socrates, Athens and the Search for the Good Life* is a surprisingly detailed biography of Socrates and a history of the turbulent Athens of his times. It succeeds wonderfully in both spheres. Hughes is a brilliant explainer, taking a long-ago and strange land and brightly communicating it to us moderns; for example, when she writes about the trial of Socrates and how a poet testified against him, she tells us, "The glitterati and their lackeys were turning against the irritating gadfly." She does not write an informal biography and history; this is a large book, full of notes and her own translations of ancient texts. It is, however, far from dry; the city and the philosopher are dazzlingly brought to life in these pages. Socrates was born around 469 B.C.

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