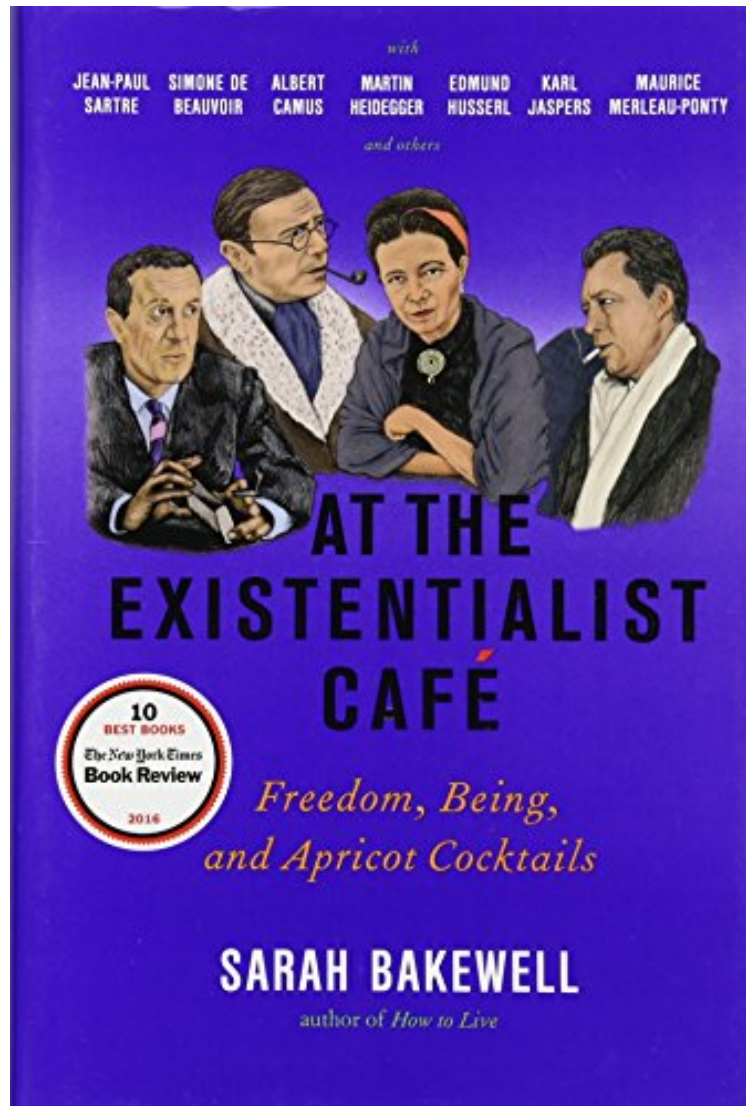


[Free] At the Existentialist Caf: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails with Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Others

At the Existentialist Caf: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails with Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Others

Sarah Bakewell

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Sarah Bakewell : At the Existentialist Caf: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails with Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Others before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised At the Existentialist Caf: Freedom, Being,

and *Apricot Cocktails* with Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Others:

132 of 134 people found the following review helpful. Weaving history, biography, and philosophy
By Angie Boyter
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 existentialist 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 Caf* biography, history, or philosophy. What I will definitely call it is worth your time. This book could be a contender for another major award.
152 of 161 people found the following review helpful. Magnificently crafted; an absolute treasure
By Trudie Barreras
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 Caf* 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.
200 of 220 people found the following review helpful. An entertaining but glib reading of an important period in Continental philosophy
By Drew Odom
Sarah Bakewell's *At the Existentialist Caf* is, like its title, entertaining and glib. It consists largely of anecdotes about and shallow intellectual histories of its major figures. Her heroes are Beauvoir, Sartre, and

Merleau-Ponty, roughly in that order. Her summaries of the various philosophical positions rarely dig any deeper than the familiar commonplaces of each of them: Husserl's epoch, Sartre's existence precedes essence, Heidegger's investigations into Dasein and Being-in-the-World, for example. This is in no way a probing book. It could prove useful as a way of stimulating more insightful or complex readings in the original writings of each of them, but its own summaries remain doggedly superficial. Its bias is clearly toward Beauvoir and Sartre. Some of the consequences of that bias are troubling. She rightly excoriates Heidegger for not only his Nazi affiliations, but for the even more important Nazi-like implications in much of his thought, though there are far better and more probing studies of this problem in Heidegger's work, like Charles Bambach's *Heidegger's Roots*. But, though she rightly denounces Sartre for his support of some "odious" regimes, she nearly forgives him for that since his support was motivated by a wish for human freedom. The philosophical entanglement Sartre found himself in while promoting both freedom and engagement is one Bakewell discusses, but once again the treatment remains superficial and little detail is offered. A man who talked a lot about freedom and yet supported Stalin, Mao, and even Pol Pot shouldn't be forgiven for his sins quite so easily. About the famous disagreements between and falling out of Camus and Sartre she says too little. Camus, it seems to me, she discusses shabbily. It is one of those many places where her overall glibness and willingness to settle for the biographically anecdotal do injustice to the deeper issues involved. This is no place for me to review them. But many readers and thinkers have come to see Camus, like Raymond Aron, another thinker Bakewell treats unfairly, as more significant writers than either Beauvoir or Sartre, in part because they remained at least in part true to that other French tradition of the humanist enlightenment. Sartre, on the other hand, in later life gave his support to the anti-humanism and irrationalism that was in part the movement in French thought that followed him, even though in many ways it contradicted his own earlier positions. Bakewell has every right to state her own preferences, of course. But her reasons for them seem to me too easy, especially when she is forgiving a man (and Beauvoir, too) for his support of murderous, violent regimes because he did so out of desire to realize greater human freedom. The one word 'odious' is hopelessly insufficient. Her treatment of many other important French thinkers of the day are even more shallow. Her reading of Gabriel Marcel, for example, would seem to consist of little more than a glance at one of his book's titles. I don't mean that remark to be taken literally, of course, but it has some truth to it. And I think her book would have been improved if it had considered along side the men and women it does discuss some of the countervailing philosophies in France, Maritain's for example. It might have complicated her readings usefully. I find the near absence of Paul Ricoeur puzzling. His name is mentioned only once. Yet he was the true inheritor of Husserl in France, albeit of a somewhat later generation. Still, much of his work overlapped the time in which Sartre and many of the others were still writing. Of course, it would be hard to write anecdotally about Ricoeur. His life was his work. There's nothing to gossip about. Yet he was probably France's greatest philosopher during his lifetime. It is odd to find him here essentially absent since Bakewell's book does, to some extent, find its origins in phenomenology. At the Existentialist Caf is at times entertaining, even ingratiating. It's a quick read. If one knows little to nothing about these thinkers, it could form a valuable introduction. But it is no more than that, and for a deeper understanding a reader should look elsewhere, especially to the writers themselves. Sartre's and Camus' fiction, for example, deserves far profounder readings than Bakewell offers here, even *The Road to Freedom*, despite Sartre's tendency to write about his characters less for themselves or what they might be but as examples of what his philosophy wants to say. Sartre was always a tendentious writer of fiction; Camus never was. Still, both man in their novels and stories were often more ambiguous writers than they were when writing philosophy or essays, Camus's much better and far more valuable today than Sartre's however. What Bakewell offers instead is mostly plot summaries and introductory interpretations, as if she were addressing a high school or first year college class. But that is how her book works throughout. It means to popularize. It is an insufficient goal, even when it works. See, for one more example, her writing on Arendt and Jaspers. There is far more to both than one would ever conjecture if all one had to go on was Bakewell's words. This is not a bad beginning, if one does not know these thinkers. But it often gives the wrong idea. And it is far too shallow, too eager to please, in a way, than it ought to be. There's too much of the caf in it, gossip and glib chatting, and too little deep probing into existentialist thought, with only a rare, truly profound consideration of why, in its complexity and richness, it still matters.

A New York Times "Ten Best Books of 2016" From the best-selling author of *How to Live*, a spirited account of one of the twentieth 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 cafes 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 Caf* 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.

The apricot cocktails in her subtitle and her sometimes breezy tone I like to imagine them in a big, busy caf of the mind, probably a Parisian one seem to promise an undemanding, gossipy romp. Instead, [Bakewell] judges and explains the ways in which each writer responded to the moral and political crises of the 1930s and after, and her book asks demanding questions about the ways in which people think about themselves and their relations with others. She shapes her answers in the form of biographical narratives, because her central theme is that the large impersonal ideas pursued by much modern philosophy are less profound and illuminating than the varied and conflicting truths found in stories of individual lives. Those stories, in this book, include impressively lucid descriptions of what these thinkers thought and what they said in their writings and caf arguments. Bakewell is often annoyed but never defeated by Heideggers obscurity, and some of her most exciting pages are the engaged, unsimplifying accounts she offers of complex philosophies, even ones that finally repel her. One of many persuasive surprises in Bakewells book is her suggestion that Heideggers prose sometimes resembles Gertrude Steins in its deliberate linguistic strangeness, a resemblance that goes deeper than style. An unspoken theme of Bakewells book is the variety of ways in which academic philosophy can be distorted by power relations. Some of her characters, notably Merleau-Ponty, were immune to the temptations that came with the status of European professorship. Others, like Husserl and Heidegger, demanded obeisance. Bakewell has a special affection for philosophers who stayed free of the academy, especially Sartre and Beauvoir. Sarah Bakewells previous book was an engaging biography of Montaigne that was also a subtle exposition of Montaignes writings. Its audacious title was *How to Live*, and her new book deserves to be read as a further study in the same enlivening theme. --The New York Times Book

At the Existentialist Caf is a bracingly fresh look at once-antiquated ideas and the milieu in which they flourished. Ms. Bakewells approach is enticing and unusual: She is not an omniscient author acting as critic, biographer or tour guide. This book is full of winning small details. Some may find the description of Camus as a simple, cheerful soul, as surprising as Sartres apparently charming Donald Duck imitation. When reading Sartre on freedom, Beauvoir on the subtle mechanisms of oppression, Kierkegaard on anxiety, Camus on rebellion, Heidegger on technology or Merleau-Ponty on cognitive science, Ms. Bakewell writes, one sometimes feels one is reading the latest news. Janet Maslin, *The New York Times*

Ms. Bakewells jaunty, colloquial style very successfully brought the ideas of Michel de Montaigne to a wide and general audience in her best-selling *How to Live*. The existentialists and their subtle differences from the phenomenologists in the context of World War II and its aftermath are a much greater challenge, which she meets with equal elan. "The Wall Street Journal

This lively history of the existentialist movement makes a strong, if sometimes disorienting, case for the inextricability of philosophy and biography, embedding dense concepts such as being, nothingness, and bad faith in the colorful lives and milieus of those who debated them. Though the book is in many ways a group study, dotted with cameo appearances by Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and others, it focusses on Heidegger and Sartre. Heidegger appears as oracular, hermetic, and Nazi-tainted; Sartre as intellectually promiscuous and Soviet-sympathizing. Their divergent characters and checkered reputations lend credence to Bakewells view that ideas are interesting, but people are vastly more so. *The New Yorker*

Brisk and perceptive. A fresh, invigorating look into complex minds and a unique time and place. Kirkus (starred review)

"Bakewell brilliantly explains 20th-century existentialism through the extraordinary careers of the philosophers who devoted their lives and work to 'the task of responsible alertness' and 'questions of human identity, purpose, and freedom.' Through vivid characterizations and a clear distillation of dense philosophical concepts, Bakewell embeds the story of existentialism in the 'story of a whole European century,' dramatizing its central debates of authenticity, rebellion, freedom, and responsibility." *Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

Bakewell follows her celebrated study of Montaigne with a lively appraisal of existentialism and its leading thinkers. With coverage of friendship, travel, argument, tragedy, drugs, Paris, and, of course, lots of sex, Bakewells biographical approach pays off. The result is an engaging story about a group of passionate thinkers, and a reminder of their continued relevance. *Booklist* (starred review)

Sweeping and dazzlingly rich... This wonderfully readable account of one of the 20th centurys major intellectual movements offers a cornucopia of biographical detail and insights that show its relevance for our own time. *BookPage*

"Tremendous... rigorous and clarifying... Highly recommended for anyone who thinks." *Library Journal* (starred review)

In her instructive and entertaining study of these thinkers and their hangers-on, Sarah Bakewell credits the existentialist movement, broadly defined, with providing inspiration to feminism, gay rights, anti-racism, anti-colonialism and other radical causes. A few cocktails can, it seems, lead to unexpected things. *The Economist*

At the Existentialist Cafe: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails may come dressed in a seductive title, but Sarah Bakewells book about the people and ideas behind the existentialist movement is both breezy and brainy. Bakewell demonstrated her ability to plumb big ideas for real-life relevance in

How to Live, her 2010 biography of Michel de Montaigne. She brings the same lively intelligence to her latest work. Here Bakewell traces a fascinating sort of philosophical relay of ever-mutating concepts: perception, being, authenticity, responsibility against a backdrop of political upheavals. Her book explores the roots of existentialism and its impact in the 20th century in much the way Carl Schorske's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Fin de Siècle Vienna* explored the birth of modern art and culture in late-19th-century Vienna [and] lucidly breaks down dense philosophical texts while avoiding the pitfalls of over-simplification. At the Existentialist Cafe is most riveting in its report of the World War II years. During the occupation, existentialists who believed above all in freedom and responsibility were engaged and committed to the Resistance in their actions and their literature. Among a panoply of riches, Bakewell offers fascinating anecdotes, including the heroics involved in saving Husserl's papers during the war. Her chronicle of many lives cut short reveals an astonishing number of fatal heart attacks among existentialists including Boris Vian, Richard Wright, Merleau-Ponty and Arendt leaving readers to wonder if philosophy isn't a heartbreaking enterprise after all. Bakewell surely doesn't think so. Even when existentialists reached too far, wrote too much, revised too little, made grandiose claims, or otherwise disgraced themselves, it must be said that they remained in touch with the density of life, and that they asked the important questions. Give me that any day, she declares in this rousing call to robust intellectual engagement. These days, the word 'existentialism' brings to mind black turtlenecks, French cigarettes, and a distinctly European sense of despair. But as Sarah Bakewell describes them in this vivid, vital group biography, existentialists like Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus were courageous free thinkers in an age of fascism, totalitarianism, and conformity. *The Boston Globe*: A vivid and warmly engaging intellectual history. *The Los Angeles Times*: Bakewell has made weighty, complex philosophical ideas feel exhilarating for that she should be praised, and read. *The San Francisco Chronicle*: Although biography provides the narrative momentum of *At the Existentialist Cafe*, much of the meat comes from the philosophy. Bakewell has a knack for crystallising key ideas by identifying choice original quotations and combining them with her own words. Perhaps the aphorism that best captures the book is one of Bakewell's own: 'Thinking should be generous and have a good appetite.' Her hunger is infectious. *Financial Times*: [*At the Existentialist Cafe*] offers fascinating insights into the cultural impact of existentialism on the English-speaking world. Existentialism, in all its incarnations, is really about making choices. How to live? How to be free? How to be an 'authentic' human being? In her summing-up, Bakewell makes the case that these questions remain as important today as they ever were. *The Guardian* (US): Bakewell writes with a sunny disposition and light touch. She combines confident handling of difficult philosophical concepts with a highly enjoyable writing style. I can't think of a better introduction to modern intellectual history. *Newsday*: Bakewell's *How to Live* [was] a remarkably erudite and accessible study of the life of Montaigne. At first skeptical, I was soon warmed over by the author's preternaturally smooth style. *At the Existentialist Cafe* does precisely the same for Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, and Martin Heidegger. *Flavorwire*: This tender, incisive and fair account of the existentialists ends with their successive deaths, leaving me with the same sense of nostalgia and loss as one feels after reading a great epic novel. *The Telegraph*: [*At the Existentialist Cafe*] is packed with out-of-the-way knowledge and has a cast of weird characters such as only a gathering of philosophers could supply. It is written with affection. Even the horrible Heidegger is seen as human in his absurdity. *The Sunday Times*: [E]ngaging and wide-ranging. *Prospect Magazine*: [*At the Existentialist Cafe*] is a wonderfully readable combination of biography, philosophy, history, cultural analysis and personal reflection. *The Independent*: *At the Existentialist Cafe* will prove to be one of the best books on philosophy you will read this year. *The Wichita Eagle*: [An] invigorating book. *Tablet*: "Irresistible." *Buffalo News*: "Don't let the breezy title put you off. *At the Existentialist Cafe*, Sarah Bakewell's group portrait of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Beauvoir, and the other 'Continental' philosophers who flourished before and after World War II, is a work of deep intelligence and sympathy, reminding us how exciting those thinkers can be. And it's a page-turner. I was so sorry to finish the last chapter that I almost almost ran over to the Strand to see what they had by Merleau-Ponty." *Lorin Stein*, *Paris Daily*: *At the Existentialist Cafe: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails* combines the exhilaration of initial discovery with the more considered evaluations of a mature thinker. The result is a warm and challenging work of intellectual history that retains something of existentialism's glamor without ever sacrificing its vigorous interrogation. It also re-centers existentialism as a viable method of philosophically engaging with contemporaneity. Even if the context has shifted slightly, the question it asks remains just as relevant now as in the post-war years: what shall we make of a shattered world? *The Brooklyn Rail*: "It's not often that you miss your bus stop because you're so engrossed in reading a book about existentialism, but I did exactly that while immersed in Sarah Bakewell's *At the Existentialist Cafe*. The story of Sartre, Beauvoir, Camus, Heidegger et al is strange, fun and compelling reading. If it doesn't win awards, I will eat my proof copy." *Katy Guest*, *The Independent* on Sunday: About the Author: Sarah Bakewell was a bookseller and a curator of early printed books at the Wellcome Library before publishing her highly acclaimed biographies *The Smart Set*, *The English Dane*, and the best-selling *How to Live: A Life of Montaigne*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Biography. In addition to writing, she now teaches in the Masters of Studies in Creative Writing at Kellogg College, University of Oxford. She lives in London.