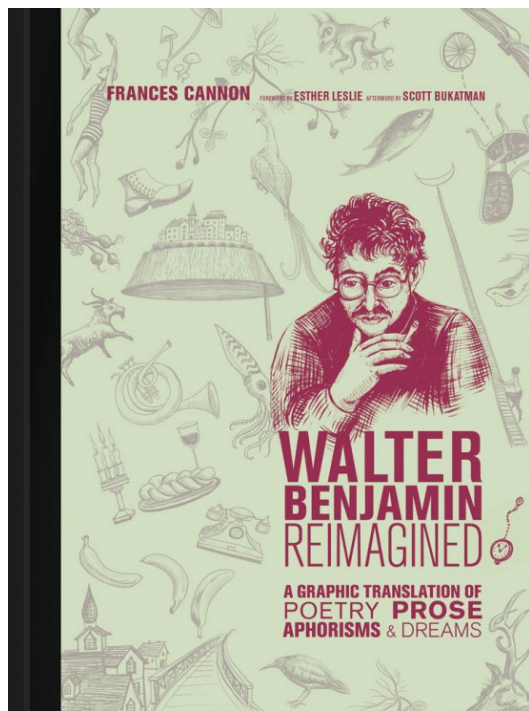


Walter Benjamin Reimagined: A Graphic Translation of Poetry, Prose, Aphorisms, & Dreams

by Frances Cannon. MIT Press, May 2019. 184 p. ill. ISBN 9780262039963 (h/c), \$24.95.

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“Unpacking My Library,” one of the six chapters in this original and genre-bending book immediately draws in book lovers and librarians. The owner of the library is Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), one of the preeminent intellectuals of the early twentieth century. His writings include the topics of political philosophy, popular culture, urban studies, art, and literature. Frances Cannon, artist and author known for her graphic essays, has collected short fragments of Benjamin’s writings and reimagines them as points of departure, mixing her calligraphic renderings of these quotes into drawings suggested by the words. The illustrations combine objective realism with surrealism, transforming into imaginative and fantastic images, including portraits of Benjamin sprinkled throughout the book.

Intersecting lines of image and text combine to form a collage, meshing into a new interpretation of the visual qualities of Benjamin’s thoughts. Each page presents a separate set of quotes and drawings, which can be read or seen in any sequence. As Cannon herself states, “my project has been to render his words in hybrid form: a visual echo of his work.” Benjamin’s phrases that are part of the illustrations are abstract and subjective. The general effect is well stated by Benjamin: “Mystery of dust motes playing in the sunlight.”

Cannon’s blending of disassociated words and images invites readers into their own experiences of literary and visual flânerie. One of the chapters, “A Stroll Through the Arcades,” is a visual/verbal consideration of Benjamin’s quintessential work, *The Arcades Project*, offering

images of flâneurs of both genders and meditations on how the modern urban experience, Paris in this case, induces boredom and alienation. Charles Baudelaire, the infamous 19th century French poet, had a fascination for the flâneur, the quintessential stroller of the Parisian boulevards, endlessly walking while seeing all at a superficial level, taking that experience in as floating yet interconnected fragments. Benjamin's many fields of expertise include the writings of Baudelaire and his modern urban experience and he is considered one of the most preeminent scholars of Baudelaire and of modern cultural aesthetics.

As influential as Benjamin is to contemporary thought, he can come across as overly dense and opaque. Cannon preserves the unique flavor of Benjamin without trivializing his labyrinthine thought processes. This complex thinker emerges as prone to quirks of fantasy and even humor, and by the end of the book, we see him as surprisingly accessible, humanized, and humane.

This novel and engaging book will attract Benjamin enthusiasts, scholars of critical theory and philosophy, and followers of graphic literature and artists' books. The intended audience ranges from advanced undergraduates and academic readers to advanced general readers. Recommended, especially as it is the unique graphic and illustrated study of Benjamin.