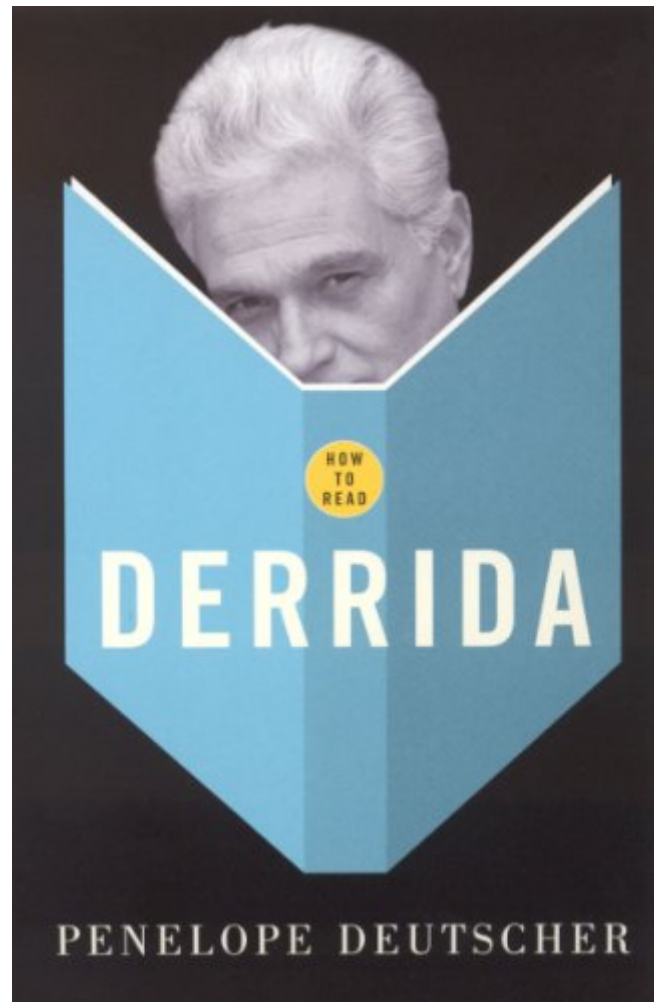


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How To Read Derrida



Synopsis

'Deconstruction is not neutral. It intervenes' Jacques DerridaAn idiosyncratic and highly controversial French philosopher, Jacques Derrida inspired profound changes in disciplines as diverse as law, anthropology, literature and architecture. In Derrida's view, texts and contexts are woven with inconsistencies and blindspots that provide us with a chance to think in new ways about, among other things, language, community, identity and forgiveness. Derrida's suggestions for 'how to read' lead to a new vision of ethics and a new concept of responsibility. Penelope Deutscher discusses extracts from the full range of Derrida's work, including *Of Grammatology*, *Dissemination*, *Limited Inc*, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Europe*, *Monolingualism of the Other*, *Given Time* and *Force of Law*.

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Customer Reviews

A reader is not entirely the same as an introduction or a beginner's guide. It selects key passages from an author, and "brings the reader face-to-face with the writing itself in the company of an expert guide". Thus Penelope Deutscher explains -- or perhaps one should say explicates -- key passages

of Derrida. This she does very well -- and while it is not easy reading, it is not inscrutable if one is prepared to concentrate. In the main, Deutscher would seem to have chosen crucial extracts of Derrida. These are passages which should be read and understood. She takes little for granted, and explains all that needs to be explained to the reader -- lucidly and intelligently. In fact she effectively communicates the striking de(con)structive power of his work. She further draws comparisons between Derrida's early and late work, and highlights a few issues that were problematic to Derrida himself. There were two things that I missed in this book. Firstly, I would have welcomed a more thorough comparison between Derrida's post-structuralism and the structuralism or (more broadly) modernism that went before. Secondly, Derrida's ideas were highly controversial, and there was little hint of this in Deutscher's commentary. However, for what it is worth, this is a book well written, and it does much to deepen one's insight into Derrida.

Even though I've a good grasp of other difficult continental philosophers (important influences on Derrida) such as Hegel and Heidegger, I still felt a barrier to 'getting' deconstruction. This book helps to clarify the gist of textual deconstruction and Derrida's implicit political motives. I've come to the conclusion that much of the 'barrier' to understanding Derrida has to do with problems in his (anti-)philosophy, which come to light, for instance, by comparing his work with that of Deleuze who also develops a "philosophy of difference," yet without avoiding the question of substance which contemporary thought must address anew. I had read other 'introducing..' type books, but most of them simplify the material too much. For the diligent, focused reader, this book yields a good middle way to comprehension between Derrida's daunting original texts and other introductory books.

Penelope Deutscher is one of the few masters of Derrida, and yet she packs into 100 pages for beginning readers, lucid insight into the notoriously abstract Continental philosopher (aren't they all), Jacques Derrida. Deutscher begins by describing deconstruction in chapter one. Ultimately, deconstruction is a process of taking on one-sided arguments which argue in favor of a privileged "ideal" perspective (whether in philosophy, religion, public policy, genetics, etc.) breaking down the privileged term or approach, taking it apart and exposing its weakness in order to reveal a more realistic, complex, integrated and comprehensive position (i.e., not the false accusations of nihilism or just negation). The second chapter "Reading as Intervention" outlines four outcomes of reading deconstructively: 1. Identification of contradictions, inconsistencies 2. Changing a text by making it more foreign, enabling a change of understanding what we have believed in the past 3. New ways of

conceiving the onus of responsibility, new implication of ethics⁴. New possibilities for transformation through their relationship with 'impossibility' (a favored term by Derrida) And on she goes through chapters on Differance, Undecidables, Culture, Context of Communication, Mourning and Hospitality, Giving and Forgiving, Justice and the Law, Perfectibility. Enjoy.

This is a very clearly written and confident exposition of Derrida's main ideas. Written by a true believer in deconstruction, so it does avoid tackling inconsistencies in Derrida's thought, and is sometimes gushing in its praise. I found his notion of the 'impossibility' of interpersonal acts such as gift-giving and forgiveness to be especially weak, since these concepts are assumed to imply some kind of Platonic 'purity' of meaning that is then self-cancelling. This exposes the dependence of deconstruction on the very metaphysical certainties it claims to counter. For example, in concepts such as 'democracy-to-come' the myth of some 'original' truth is simply replaced with a 'barely possible' utopian ideal which is then forever delayed.

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