



Simone Weil (Critical Lives)

Palle Yourgrau

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Simone Weil, legendary French philosopher, mystic and political activist who died in England in 1943 at the age of thirty-four, belongs to a select group of thinkers: as with St Augustine, Pascal and Nietzsche, so with Weil a single phrase can permanently change one's life. In this book, Palle Yourgrau follows Weil on her life's journey, from her philosophical studies at the École Normale Supérieure, to her years as a Marxist labour organizer, her explosive encounter with Leon Trotsky, her abortive attempt to fight against Franco in the Spanish Civil War, her mystical experience in the town of Assisi. We see how Weil's struggle to make sense of a world consumed by despotism and war culminated in her monumental attempt, following St Augustine, to re-imagine Christianity along Platonistic lines, to find a bridge between human suffering and divine perfection.

How seriously, however, should Weil's ideas be taken? They were admired by Albert Camus and T. S. Eliot, yet Susan Sontag wrote famously that 'I can't imagine more than a handful of the tens of thousands of readers she has won . . . really share her ideas.' If this is really true, Palle Yourgrau must count as one of the handful. Though he brings to life the pathos of Weil's tragi-comic journey, Yourgrau devotes equal attention to the question of truth. He shines a bright light on the paradox of Simone Weil: at once a kind of modern saint, and a *bête noire*, a Jew accused of having abandoned her own people in their hour of greatest need. The result is a critical biography that is in places as disturbing as Weil's own writings, an account that confronts head-on her controversial critique of the Hebrew Bible, as well as her radical rejection of the received wisdom that the Resurrection lies at the heart of Christianity.

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