



Memory Theater

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From this renowned philosopher comes a debut work of fiction, at once a brilliant précis of the history of philosophy, a semiautobiographical meditation on the absurd relationship between knowledge and memory, and a very funny story

A French philosopher dies during a savage summer heat wave. Boxes carrying his unpublished papers mysteriously appear in Simon Critchley's office. Rooting through them, Critchley discovers a brilliant text on the ancient art of memory and a cache of astrological charts predicting the deaths of various philosophers. Among them is a chart for Critchley himself, laying out in great detail the course of his life and eventual demise. While waiting for his friend's prediction to come through, Critchley receives the missing, final box, which contains a maquette of Giulio Camillo's sixteenth-century Venetian memory theater, a space supposed to contain the sum of all knowledge. With nothing left to hope for, Critchley devotes himself to one final project before his death—the building of a structure to house his collective memories and document the remnants of his entire life.

Memory Theater Details

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Enes says

Kurgu mu, gerçek mi bilmem, oturun, okuyun, belle?iniz sanc?s?n gibi bir kitap.

Joanna says

Smart, funny, frightening at times.

Jericho Eames says

It was a really short novella and I finished it quickly enough. It was a pretty interesting concept, the memory theater that is. I liked how absurd it feels and it's not exactly a big idea to swallow as well.

Andrew says

Interesting and worthwhile. I think the book's greatest success is managing to represent the way in which an intellectual's life is populated by the books and ideas he (in this case) loves; it lets us in to see the deep fondness he has for thoughts and their thinkers. There are echoes of Eco (heh), Bernhard, and Sebald here, definitely the European intellectual thinking about his place in history and his inheritance and legacy. It's rewarding, even if it leaves an impression of thinness, and its obscurity at the end feels slightly self-important. Overall, I recommend it.

Mina-Louise Berggren says

It's been almost a week since I finished this, and this book is making me re-evaluate how I'm rating books here. Memory Theatre was a quick read, sometimes beautiful-- but ultimately not a book that moved me or left any lasting impact. As a person I tend to feel strongly for or against something, and am rarely neutral, if I am it's usually because I don't know enough about a subject. This book, I guess, felt like a lukewarm shower. So changing it from 4 to 3 stars.

Stenwjohnson says

Philosopher Simon Critchley was born in England, but his debut novel "Memory Theater" looks and smells continental. At first glance, it will remind most readers of a slim, epigrammatic work by Derrida. In the same

spirit, it tackles topics of risible enormity: Death, memory, and the idea of a collective historical unconscious.

On closer examination, the real lodestar of the metafictional "Memory Theater" appears to be the fiction of Jorge Luis Borges, with its playful evocation of esoteric theories and documents. Simon Critchley, or rather a fictionalized version of the author with the same name, discovers a series of boxes that belonged to Michel Haar, a dead philosophy professor. Critchley first uncovers a range of texts related to the idea of the "memory theater," a physical space designed to evoke recollections through visual shorthand. The concept has a long and esoteric history, and Haar theorizes wildly on its applications, even employing Hegel's "Phenomenology of Spirit" as a kind of textual memory theater to connect with a quasi-mystical universal consciousness.

Opening other boxes, Critchley then finds a series of "memory maps," biographical compendiums that predict several philosophers' dates and causes of death, including his own. The discovery inspires Critchley to build his own memory theater before he dies, guided by a model of Giulio Camillo's design for a 16th century theater. Mayhem ensues.

The novel's technique is relatively straightforward. Critchley (ahem, the "real" author) uses Haar's texts as a means to introduce the idea of the memory theater, which then expands into a riff that combines fiction, memoir and other texts. There are moments of maddening narrative unreliability, such as a section (not my original observation, by the way) where Critchley inaccurately discusses a Swedish acquaintance's recollection of the lyrics of a 1978 Eurovision song contest entry. Whether other deliberate inaccuracies exist (and what the intent of those distortions might be) is virtually unknowable; not even the most erudite reader will be able to determine the full accuracy of Critchley's granular esoterica.

Like the oracular continental philosophy that it imitates, "Memory Theater" requires the blind faith of the reader, and withers somewhat in the face of serious inquiry. In particular, its concept of "memory" is maddeningly fluid. The book's status as fiction relieves it somewhat from the burdens of airtight argumentation, but that same freedom allows it play unfairly with the curious reader, who will be mystified by fanciful moments where argumentation all but evaporates.

Some readers will be impressed by Critchley's ability to compile and comment on esoteric subjects. But I can't agree with Jonathan Lethem's blurb that praises Critchley as a figure of "startling brilliance." This is engaging and competent metafiction, nothing more.

jeremy says

a slim, apparently somewhat autobiographical novella from philosopher simon critchley (see also *nyt's* "the stone"), *memory theater* is an enigmatic, enjoyable foray into memory and mortality. perhaps not unlike something one would expect from enrique vila-matas (or even a more mild-mannered césar aira), critchley's brief work entwines the history of philosophy with the cryptic leavings of his late colleague. critchley's erudition melds easily with an inviting humor, leaving the reader charmed and inquisitive (about both the idea of a memory theater and the philosophical issues raised in the text).

i was dying. that much was certain. the rest is fiction.

Gabriel Congdon says

Ooo-la-la,

None of you suckers had heard about this baby. Don't worry I got the novellas of french philosophers covered!

I'm going to go out on a limb here and tentatively recommend this bad boy to the philosophers: Adage and Maxie (the narrator talks a lot about this Hegel fella)

Then I'll give it a thumbs up and nod to next tier, the group I call Readers and Crafters: The Dewster, Megalot, Lease

Then I'd float it onto the aloof circle: Ally, Triin with two i's, and The-uh Thea. (David, he's on another level. I don't got to worry about David)

I certainly enjoyed myself. I might vortex on the couch and skim some of the bumpier parts. I'm thinkin about, well, I guess I won't go into it, but once you've read it, I'm thinkin about doing it.

It's like a hundred pages.

????? ?????????? says

[illegible]

James says

Irritating and pretentious. Also describes the demise of the dinosaurs as having taken place 15 million years ago, rather than 65 million. I wonder if Critchley's book on David Bowie thinks Bowie was born in 1998.

Alice Heiserman says

This was a wonderfully weird book that dropped in names of philosophers with brief summations of their ideas much like one would at a cocktail party--not too heavy but titillating. I read this short novella in one evening and wound up unable to sleep due to the excitement of the ideas. We know the author is playing with us due to the mixing of genres--novel, essay, autobiography, brief biographies--but the idea of knowing

the date of one's death presents a fascinating dramatic scene preceded by a mysteriously delivered series of boxes filled with another philosopher's notes and strange astrological maps. Even the notes about the persons mentioned in the text are filled with a sly humor.

P says

What a bizarre little thing. What opens on the philosophy of memory (base knowledge of Hegel would be helpful) morphs into. . .something else. An attempt to explain/understand memory, a trip into madness, an attempt to face your own death/life?

A little bonkers, and probably all the better for it.

Harold Eckett says

Full of humor and deep philosophical history, The Memory Theater is a quick one-sit read for anyone looking to laugh, think and remember their past.

Timothy Urban says

Odd, brain-stretching, funny in places and quite different from anything I've read before. I wish I could find more books that are, like this, pleasing reads but at the same time not trying to conform to any obvious literary conventions.

Jonathan Norton says

Critchley is quite interesting when he's just giving us a potted version of what Frances Yates and others had to say. As a creative writer, his weakness (as he realises in himself) is that he is not a poet, and he lapses into cliché, triteness, and the tone of a rather desperate ageing trendy, several times in this quite short book. The project of the "memory theatre" for his life is dead-on-arrival from its appearance, so I couldn't possibly care at its formal failure. The tricky business about mystery boxes and found manuscripts is now very stale and mouldy, and Simon is utterly perfunctory in unveiling it. The photos are nice, though. Do you notice they're in reverse order, to show the building seemingly being deconstructed, paralleling his idea about Hegel's "Phenomenology"? Clever stuff.
