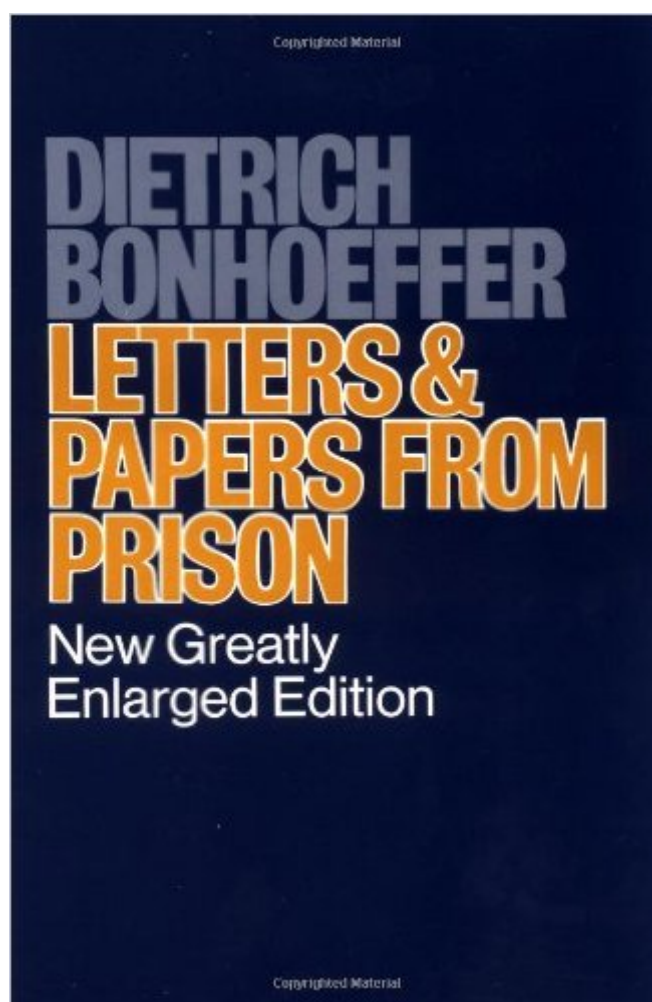


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Letters And Papers From Prison



Synopsis

One of the great classics of prison literature, *Letters and Papers from Prison* effectively serves as the last will and testament of the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a young German pastor who was executed by the Nazis in 1945 for his part in the "officers' plot" to assassinate Adolf Hitler. This expanded version of *Letters and Papers from Prison* shifts the emphasis of earlier editions of Bonhoeffer's theological reflections to the private sphere of his life. His letters appear in greater detail and show his daily concerns. Letters from Bonhoeffer's parents, siblings, and other relatives have also been added, in addition to previously inaccessible letters and legal papers referring to his trial. Acute and subtle, warm and perceptive, yet also profoundly moving, the documents collectively tell a very human story of loss, of courage, and of hope. Bonhoeffer's story seems as vitally relevant, as politically prophetic, and as theologically significant today, as it did yesterday.

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Customer Reviews

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* show the reader the thoughts of a man who wrote with immense insight under circumstances fraught with the deepest despair. Prior to the war, Bonhoeffer had established himself as a visionary, if somewhat moderate, young Christian theologian. His imprisonment by the Nazis in the wake of the failure of the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler gave rise to this series of letters, ranging from the trivial to the most profound, reflecting the thoughts and ideas of a man whose ideas continued to evolve, even as hope dwindled. It is

tempting to see Bonhoeffer as a sort of modern Christian saint "set-piece" of a man, or a Spielberg movie waiting to be made. Such an interpretation of the man would trivialize the flesh and blood reality of his life, as these letters demonstrate. Collections of letters typically suffer from one of two defects--either they are inanely trivial and gossippy, or they spend far too much time on being "literary" for posterity, and not enough time giving real insight into the writer. Bonhoeffer's letters avoid both of these traps. Although the letters collection is not overly burdened by the confessional, letters to his parents and fiancée help us understand in very human terms the horror of imprisonment by the Nazis, notwithstanding their careful phrasing to avoid the censor's pen. The letters do contain some of the intentionally "literary"--Bonhoeffer writes poetry which is reasonably spare and connective and sometimes writes for the hypothetical future reader. But the real tour de force is Bonhoeffer's analysis of the evolution of his theological thought in light of the changes wrought by modernity and made apparent to him through his experiences.

From April 1943 to April 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a prisoner of the Gestapo. Suspected of participating in a plot against Hitler, he was eventually executed in the closing days of World War II. This book is a collection of letters he wrote from prison to his family, his fiancée Maria, and his dearest friend Eberhard. Bonhoeffer was in his late 30s when he was arrested. He was a Lutheran theologian, who had publicly questioned the rise of fascism and anti-Semitism in Germany and was systematically silenced by Hitler's government, unable finally to publish any of his writings or to preach in any pulpit. Along with other members of his family, Bonhoeffer secretly participated in an effort led by officers of Army Intelligence to undermine the war effort. Attempting to build a case against him, the Gestapo kept him a prisoner, awaiting trial. Incriminating evidence did not emerge until after the July 1944 attempt on Hitler's life. And at this point the letters stop, as Bonhoeffer was transported to another prison and eventually to a series of concentration camps. The letters in this volume describe in detail the routines of prison life. And they offer a glimpse of life lived by ordinary civilians during months of aerial bombardments, as the fabric of daily life slowly crumbles. They also reveal the thoughts and emotions of a man whose faith in God and trust in survival are put to the severest test. While he is remembered by those who knew him in his last months as a fiercely brave, courageous, and selfless man, we see in the letters his inner turmoil, his fear, loneliness, and sense of isolation in a world his theology never imagined. Included in the collection are polite and cheerful love letters to the young Maria von Wedemeyer, to whom he has proposed marriage.

In late 1942, theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "... the power of some needs the folly of others. It

is not that [intellectual capacities] become stunted or destroyed, but rather that the upsurge of power makes such an overwhelming impression that men are deprived of their independent judgment, and -- more or less unconsciously -- give up trying to assess the new state of affairs for themselves. The fact that the fool is often stubborn must not mislead us into thinking that he is independent. One feels in fact, when talking to him, that one is dealing, not with the man himself, but with slogans, catchwords, and the like, which have taken hold of him. ... folly can be overcome, not by instruction, but only by an act of liberation... a person's inward liberation to live a responsible life before God is the only real cure for folly."Folly and Bonhoeffer were on a collision course. During his long imprisonment by the Nazi regime, Bonhoeffer corresponded with members of his family. Many of these letters were collected, and later published, by Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer's niece's husband. The letters between Bonhoeffer and Bethge, his intellectual and spiritual confidant, are the most insightful in terms of revealing the intellectual Bonhoeffer. Although his life hangs in the balance, Bonhoeffer only occasionally speaks of his own welfare, and then apologetically and only in passing. With Bethge, and to a lesser extent with his father and others, he prefers directing his thoughts to a great breadth of interests -- art, history, music, philosophy, physics, psychology, sociology, theology. With all correspondents, Bonhoeffer expresses constant concern for their welfare, as well as for the welfare of his fellow prisoners and even his Nazi guards.

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