



Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew

Mr. John Felstiner

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Paul Celan was a German-speaking, East European Jew. His writing exposes and illumines the wounds that Nazi destructiveness left on language. John Felstiner's book is a critical biography of Celan. It offers new translations of well-known and little-known poems including a chapter on Celan's famous "Deathfugue" - plus his speeches, prose fiction and letters. The book also presents photos of the poet and his circle. Drawing on interviews with Celan's family and friends and his personal library in Normandy and Paris, as well as German commentary, Felstiner tells the poet's story: his birth in 1920 in Romania, the overnight loss of his parents in a Nazi deportation, his experience of forced labour and Soviet occupation during the war, and then his difficult exile in Paris. The life's work of Paul Celan emerges through readings of his poems within their personal and historical matrix. At the same time Felstiner finds insights by opening up the very process of translating Celan's poems To present this poetry and the strain of Jewishness it displays, Felstiner uncovers Celan's sources in the Bible and Judaic mysticism, his affinities with Kafka, Heine, Holderlin, Rilke and Nelly Sachs, his fascination with Heidegger and Buber, his translations of Shakespeare, Dickinson, Mandelshtram, Apollinaire. First and last, Felstiner explores the achievement of a poet surviving in his mother tongue, the German language that had passed, Celan said, "through the thousand darkneses of deathbringing speech."

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