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Book Club in a Box



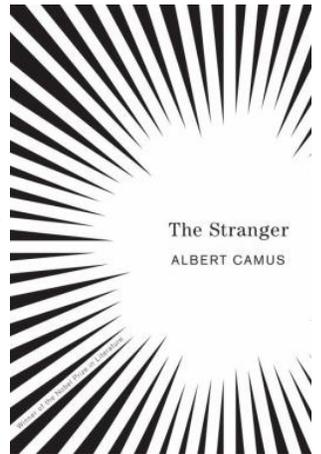
WHITTIER PUBLIC LIBRARY

THE STRANGER

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About the Book

The Outsider or The Stranger (French: L'Étranger) is a novel by Albert Camus published in 1942. Its theme and outlook are often cited as exemplars of Camus's philosophy of the absurd and existentialism. The titular character is Meursault, an indifferent Algerian who, after attending his mother's funeral, apathetically kills an Arab man whom he recognizes in French Algiers. The story is divided into two parts: Meursault's first-person narrative view before and after the murder, respectively. In January 1955, Camus said, "I summarized The Stranger a long time ago, with a remark I admit was highly paradoxical: 'In our society any man who does not weep at his mother's funeral runs the risk of being sentenced to death.' I only meant that the hero of my book is condemned because he does not play the game."



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About the Author



Born in 1913 in Algeria, Albert Camus was a French novelist, dramatist, and essayist. He was deeply affected by the plight of the French during the Nazi occupation of World War II, who were subject to the military's arbitrary whims. He explored the existential human condition in such works as L'Etranger (The Outsider, 1942) and Le Mythe de Sisyphe (The Myth of Sisyphus, 1942), which propagated the philosophical notion of the "absurd" that was being given dramatic expression by other Theatre of the Absurd dramatists of the 1950s and 1960s. Camus also wrote a number of plays, including Caligula (1944). Much of his work was translated into English. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957. Camus died in an automobile accident in 1960.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the weather, and in particular, the sun, affect Meursault's mood and behavior? Why do you suppose it has any effect at all? Can Meursault truly believe that the scorching sun is a valid excuse for murdering the Arab?
2. The Stranger is divided into two parts – what is the effect of such a structure? Do you see any structure created – outside of the two parts – that is marked by the three deaths of the text?
3. Camus was a self-proclaimed "absurdist." Based on The Stranger and Meursault's beliefs in The Stranger, how would you define "the absurd"? What role do concepts like "detachment," "alienation," "acceptance," and "society" play? How is absurdity reflected in (a) the events in Meursault's life, (b) the relationships Meursault finds himself in, and (c) the attitudes with which Meursault faces, and subsequently rejects, the world?
4. How does Meursault change as an individual from the beginning of the book to the very end? How do we see these changes? Are Meursault's thoughts and feelings about death, for example, noticeably different by the end of the text? What about religion? Women?
5. So, we've got all these relationships going on here: Meursault and Maman, Meursault and Marie, Salamano and his dog, Maman and Perez, Meursault and Raymond, and Raymond and his mistress. Which would you say is the most loving? Deep? Loyal? Casual? Sexual? Complex? Rooted in friendship and companionship? Indifferent? Uninteresting? Shallow? Sad? Other adjective?
6. In what sense does Meursault triumph at the end of The Stranger? (This was what Camus intended, but you're welcome to argue that, in fact, Meursault doesn't triumph at all.) Does Meursault overcome society's judgment, and thereby, its shackles? Or is it more important that he rebelled against conformity? And what's up with him wishing for a large crowd of hating spectators at his execution?

Further Reading

The Brothers Karamazov by Fyodor Dostoevsky

Dead Souls by Nicolai Gogol

Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad

Lolita by Vladimir Nabokov

Madame Bovary by Gustave Flaubert

Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett