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THE REMARKABLE LIFE OF A REMARKABLE BOOK: A BOOK REVIEW OF "LOOKING FOR THE STRANGER"

By
Michael B. Friedman
Adjunct Associate Professor
Columbia University School of Social Work

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[Looking for The Stranger: Albert Camus and the Life of a Literary Classic](#) by Alice Kaplan is a wonderful book that I couldn't put down except to sleep briefly from time-to-time. Just the reverse of how I usually read books, with the rare exception of some spy thrillers and murder mysteries. Hard to believe that this very well researched non-fiction account of the life of a book could be so engaging. But it was.

The basic concept is fascinating—a biography of a book, not of its author but of the book. It may seem strange at first. Is it just a gimmick to write yet another account of Albert Camus? No, this really is a biography of the book, "L'Étranger".*

Kaplan is certainly right. Books—in fact anything published or released to the public—do have lives of their own. Yes, the life of a book is intertwined with the life of its author, especially while it is being written. But once it is published, it is out of the author's control. What it says and what it means get worked over by its readers and critics, sometimes in ways that please the author, sometimes in ways that are infuriating. Whichever, the author no longer owns the book.

There's also an interesting sense in which books—especially fiction—have lives of their own even while they are being written. Characters, places, and situations sometimes emerge completely uninvited into the imaginations of their authors and then refuse to bow to their authors' wishes. They make their own story. Kaplan documents this in her account of the slow writing of

* I prefer to use its French title to avoid disputes about whether it should be translated "The Stranger" as in the United States or "The Outsider" as in Great Britain.)

L'Étranger and the gradual emergence of the main character who then drove the story.

Most books, of course, live briefly and in obscurity. David Hume once commented that his first book, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, “fell stillborn from the press.”** Not uncommon, I’m afraid.

Clearly, some books not only live beyond the meaning and imagining of their authors but have a tremendous impact. *L'Étranger* is one of those. It has been viewed as a virtual anthem of “existentialism”—even though Camus denied ever being an existentialist. It is commonly viewed as articulating the belief that life is absurd, which in fact was not Camus’s belief. (More on that later.) And, as Kaplan documents, shortly after, or perhaps even before, *L'Étranger* was published and gained great admiration in the intellectual world, Camus himself had moved on to another way of experiencing human life, which he called “*révolte*”.

It is fascinating to think that the book made Camus—at least the public Camus—as much as Camus made the book.

Beyond the concept of a biography of a book, I was also fascinated by Kaplan’s account of the process of its publication.

Remarkably, it was accepted for publication and slotted into a prominent position among new publications by Gallimard, a leading French publisher, even before anyone at Gallimard had read it. That happened because Camus had a very close relationship with a mentor, Pascal Pia, who had close ties with Gallimard and who told them to publish it. Camus also had developed a relationship of mutual admiration with Andre Malraux, who was at that time perhaps the most important author on Gallimard’s list and who also recommended publication.

Imagine what might have happened to a strange, thin novel from a new author if it had been sent cold to Gallimard. It is certainly possible, even likely, that *L'Étranger* would never have seen the light of day if Camus had not had connections with the pinnacle of the French literary world.

It is also remarkable, it seems to me, that it was published at all during the Nazi occupation of France, when Camus was—secretly, of course—active in the French Resistance. (Fortunately, Wikileaks did not exist.)

Kaplan’s account of how Gallimard survived under Nazi control is also fascinating, and deeply troubling. The Gallimards were not Nazis, but they

** Of course, *The Treatise* was resurrected and has had a very long life on philosophy reading lists if not in actual reading by college students.

decided to compromise with the fact of Nazi rule in order to continue publishing. They fired the Jewish editor of their main literary journal and replaced him with a Nazi (albeit a Nazi with good literary taste) so as to win the trust of the Nazi overseers.

Moral questions abound. Were they collaborators who should have been among those tried and punished after the war? Were they just pragmatists who did what they had to do to survive? Was the value of the work they published so great as to absolve them of whatever wrongs they committed in the name of art?

Earlier I commented that the widespread, almost universal view, which Kaplan appears to accept, that Camus believed that life is absurd is wrong. Kaplan is probably right that that is the view that emerged in the public life of the book and its philosophical partner *The Myth of Sisyphus*. But it was not Camus's view.

It is an easy mistake to make because Camus calls the core experience on which his thinking is based "the absurd" (*l'absurde*). But for him the absurd is not an idea or a belief; it is an experience—an experience that arises from facing the fact that we cannot **know** whether life has a meaning and if so what it is. We want to know, we demand to know, but the world is silent.***

It may seem nitpicking to differentiate between the claim that life **is** meaningless or absurd and the claim that we cannot **know** whether life has meaning. But the difference was very important to Camus, who believed that we have to answer the question of the value of life in philosophical darkness. That is different from trying to answer the question while being certain that life has no meaning. And I think that Camus's sense that we have to struggle with the silence of the world is significant when we try to grasp Meursault's motivation for murder, a question that has led to countless speculations, as Kaplan notes.

So, I think that Kaplan could have been a bit more precise about Camus's philosophical thought. But that really is nitpicking in the context of the biography of the book and not its author. This nit aside, let me repeat what I said at the beginning. Alice Kaplan's biography of *L'Étranger* is a wonderful book, a great read for anyone interested in Camus or in the lives of books.

*** Many writers about Camus have noted that his mother was deaf and mostly mute—silent. And they have interpreted Camus's sense of the silence of the world as an outgrowth of his own experience as a child. Perhaps, but it is equally valid to see Camus' views as an outgrowth of Husserl's philosophy of phenomenology. Following Kant, Husserl argued that since we cannot know things as they are in themselves, we should give up trying and instead explore the details of experience.