

Albert Camus Book by Book



“He who despairs
over an event
is a coward,
but
he who
holds hope for
the human condition
is a fool.”

Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (1951)

ALBERT CAMUS (1913-1960)—A FRENCH NOVELIST, essayist, and playwright—created literature drawn from his experiences growing up in the North African French colony of Algeria, living in wartime France, and witnessing the rise of communism and challenges to colonialism. In his works, he explored the human condition’s terrible plight in a world he felt was largely devoid of reason and morality; he returned again and again to these existential themes. He also developed his idea of the “absurd” or the absence of universal logic, in a seemingly indifferent universe. In his famous essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Camus tried to reconcile this notion of the absurd and humankind’s acceptance of “the total absence of hope, which has nothing to do with despair, a continuous refusal, which must not be confused with renouncement—and a conscious dissatisfaction.” (See *The Myth of Sisyphus*, page 29)

Yet Camus refused to philosophize overtly in his novels, believing that, “a novel is never anything but a philosophy put into images.” Written in simple, clear, and short sentences (in French), his classic novels *The Stranger* (1942) and *The Plague* (1947) confront the alienation, disillusionment, and resulting

nihilism people faced after World War II. At the same time, Camus, a liberal humanist who subscribed neither to Christian nor Marxist dogma, struggled with the existentialist creed that says if God doesn’t exist, neither does morality. As a result, his works embrace some moral sensibility and ultimately offer hope about the human condition. “To observe that life is absurd is not an end,” he wrote about Jean-Paul Sartre’s novel *Nausea*, “but a beginning.”

Camus was born near Mondovi, Algeria, on November 7, 1913, to a French-Spanish family. When his father was killed in World War I’s Battle of the Marne, his mother, an illiterate charwoman, moved his family to the poor Belcourt section of Algiers. Camus’s background greatly influenced his interest in philosophy, political activism, and leftist intellectualism. In 1923 he won a scholarship to the lycée in Algiers, where he studied until 1932. A bout of tuberculosis

WHERE TO START

Readers may have tackled **THE STRANGER** and **THE PLAGUE** in high school. Both are worth rereading for their exploration of how people find meaning in a senseless, ostensibly purposeless world. For more overt philosophical statements, try **THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS** or, if you’re brave, **THE REBEL**, which encompasses all of Camus’s philosophical musings.

in 1930 halted his athletic activities and forced him to focus on academics. He attended the University of Algiers, where he studied philosophy and supported himself with odd jobs. In 1934, as an anti-Fascist reacting to the Spanish Civil War, he joined the Algerian Communist party. But the plight of the working class, rather than strict

adherence to Marxist-Leninist principles, concerned Camus most—and he was ousted for being a Trotskyist.

Camus's love for the theater started around 1935, when he and other left-wing Algerian intellectuals founded the Theatre de l'Equipe (Worker's Theatre), which presented socialist plays to Algiers' working population. Although the government banned the shows for political reasons, the company survived until 1939. After graduating from the university in 1936, Camus left the theater (and eventually his heroin-addicted wife) for a journalism career. He published his first book of essays, *L'envers et L'endroit*, in 1937.

A year later, he took a job as a political and social reporter with the left-wing newspaper *Alger-Républicain*, where he documented the lives of poor Arabs. Camus later published a collection of essays on the ethnic discrimination they faced. Camus married again in 1940 and started working for *Paris-Soir* magazine in Paris. In 1943, still in France, he joined a clandestine resistance cell known as "Combat," which was also the name of its underground paper. He adopted a false identity, befriended Sartre, and

together they edited the paper for four years. During this time he formalized his philosophy of the sanctity of human life, though Fascism and war put it deeply into question. He also worked on his masterpieces, *The Stranger*, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and *The Plague* during the late war years.

Although these works established Camus's international reputation, he never left theater far behind. Like his novels, his plays explore humankind's attempt to realize and understand the "absurd" nature of life. *Caligula* (1938), *Cross Purpose* (1944), and *The Just Assassins* (1949) explore these themes. Camus also adapted other dramatic works, including William Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun* (1956) and Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* (1959). In 1951 he published *The Rebel*, a philosophical analysis of revolution and a sharp critique of communism; his friendship with Sartre ended as a result of their fundamental difference of philosophical opinion.

Camus, who had written in 1958 that, "I continue to be convinced that my work hasn't even begun," died in a car accident while returning to Paris on January 4, 1960.

Overview of Camus's Work

REVOLT IN THE ASTURIAS (RÉVOLTE DANS LES ASTURIES) (1936)

Written in conjunction with members of his Algerian theater group, *Revolt* was a play about the 1934 Spanish miners' strike.

BETWIXT AND BETWEEN (L'ENVERS ET L'ENDOIT) (1937)

This collection of essays introduces Camus's concern with alienation, love, despair, and the "absurd."

CALIGULA (WRITTEN 1938)

Caligula, one of Camus's most important plays, features a young Roman emperor whose life loses meaning after his sister dies. He goes on a senseless, indiscriminate killing spree—leading to his own death.

NUPTIALS (NOCES) (1939)

These four essays examine the role of landscape in human life.

* THE STRANGER (L'ÉTRANGER, ALSO TRANSLATED AS THE OUTSIDER) (1942)

* THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS (LE MYTHE DE SISYPHE) (1942)

CROSS PURPOSE (LE MALENTENDU) (1944)

In Camus's second play, a man returns home after an absence of 20 years.

Posing as a stranger at his mother's and sister's inn, he becomes victim to their criminal chicanery.

LETTERS TO A GERMAN FRIEND (LETTRES À UN AMI ALLEMAND) (1945)

These letters reject the idea of nihilism and discuss rebellion and justice.

* THE PLAGUE (LA PESTE) (1947)

THE STATE OF SIEGE (1948)

A play inspired, for the most part, by *The Plague*.

THE JUST ASSASSINS (LES JUSTES) (1949)

A play about a group of Russian terrorists, relating to the larger theme of revolt.

* THE REBEL (L'HOMME RÉVOLTÉ) (1951)

NOW II: CHRONICLES, 1948-1953 (ACTUELLES: CHRONIQUES 1948-1953) (1953)

A selection of Camus's journalistic articles from this period.

THE FALL (LA CHUTE) (1956)

This novel offers a counterpart to *The Stranger*, which features an indifferent protagonist. The lawyer-hero of *The Fall*, set in Amsterdam, has lost his way in the world and dwells on his past experiences—like witnessing a woman's suicide and doing nothing to save her.

EXILE AND THE KINGDOM (L'ÉXIL ET LE ROYAUME) (1957)

These six short stories, from "An Adulterous Woman" to "The Renegade," touch on people's revelatory moments within a larger, repressive society.

THE RENEGADE (LE RENEGAT) (1958)

In this interior monologue, a tongueless former missionary schemes against his replacement.

RESISTANCE, REBELLION, AND DEATH (1961)

This collection of essays addresses topics that consumed Camus his entire life: Fascist Spain, colonial struggles in Algeria, and capital punishment, as well as freedom, revolt, and justice in general.

A HAPPY DEATH (LA MORT HEUREUSE) (EARLY VERSION OF THE STRANGER, PUBLISHED POSTHUMOUSLY IN 1970)

After killing a man in cold blood, an Algerian clerk must deal with exile and eventual death.

THE FIRST MAN (LE PREMIER HOMME) (INCOMPLETE, PUBLISHED POSTHUMOUSLY IN 1995)

This partially completed novel, set in Algeria, features a boy's search for a father he never knew—based, perhaps, on Camus's own childhood.

Michel Gallimard—the driver and Camus’s publisher and close friend—was also killed. Camus was frequently quoted saying that dying in a car accident seemed to be the most senseless of all deaths.

Existentialism and Activism

PHILOSOPHERS SØREN KIERKEGAARD, GEORG WILHELM Friedrich Hegel, Edmund Husserl, and Martin Heidegger first articulated the idea of Existentialism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It gained popularity in the mid-1900s, with Sartre, Simone Beauvoir (Sartre’s lover), and Camus. Existentialism emphasizes individualism, freedom, subjectivity, and the idea that no higher meaning governs our existence. Human life, in turn, lacks redemptive or moral purpose. Most existentialists were atheists like Camus who acknowledged that, without a God, morality had no basis. After all, if nothing matters, why not act on every impulse?

Many scholars call *The Stranger* an existential novel. Yet Camus rejected the moniker, preferring to call himself an “absurdist” and general humanist despite existential elements in his fiction. Camus certainly believed that life defied logical explanation. But, he considered life worth defending—and not devoid of ethics, either. Unlike other existentialists, he imbued his characters with faith and human dignity. Many of his characters, including Meursault in *The Stranger*, realize the absurd and eventually revolt against it. Camus did not view the world with moral apathy; even if the universe lacked higher meaning, there was no cause for despair.

Camus’s novels, in a greater sense, mirrored his personal and political philosophy. Through the 1950s, despite his break with the French intellectual elite, he became a great advocate for human rights. He supported UNESCO, but resigned when the UN accepted Franco-led Spain. In 1953, like other leftists, he criticized Soviet methods to crush worker’s rights; he did the same in Hungary a few years later. But French-occupied Algeria posed an ethical dilemma for him. As a *pied-noir* (“black foot,” or former French colonist of North Africa), he allied himself both with the Algerians and French, supporting a “Federation of Peoples” where Muslims and *pied-noirs* would share power and Algeria would become a self-governing commonwealth. Camus also worked with imprisoned Algerians facing the death penalty. In fact, his writings condemning capital punishment and supporting pacifism, including his essay *Réflexions Sur la Guillotine* (1957), helped earned him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1957. Camus claimed he would have awarded the prize to André Malraux, author of *The Temptation of the West* (1926) and *The Conquerors* (1928). But in his short life, Camus left haunting, timely works. His reputation as “the conscience of our century” perhaps applies even more today than it did a half century ago. “We refuse to despair of mankind,” Camus wrote. “Without having the unreasonable ambition to save men, we still want to serve them.”

MAJOR WORKS

The Stranger (1942; in English, 1946)



Camus started *The Stranger* (also translated as *The Outsider*), the first of his “absurdist” novels, in Algeria before the war. In it he rejected classic French fiction that analyzed the psychological motives of characters and instead introduced the existential Meursault, a doomed, disaffected protagonist. Representing the ambiguous morals of the wartime era, Meursault recognizes the futility of human existence but perseveres. Through themes of anonymity, alienation, and spiritual doubt, Camus explored what he called “the nakedness of man faced with the absurd.”

THE STORY: The novel opens with the famous first line, “Mother died today.” Meursault, a young Algerian, travels to her burial site, but remains strangely disaffected by her death. “It occurred to me,” he says, “that anyway one more Sunday was over, that Mother was buried now, that I was going back to work, and that, really, nothing had changed.” He feels nothing for his girlfriend or his job as a clerk, either. The days dip into constant indifference until he commits an unpremeditated crime: he shoots an Arab on the beach—partly in self-defense, partly because it was hot and he had a headache. Condemned to die, Meursault faces charges of murder and his deficient character—and he must face human emotion, consciousness, reality, and the “gentle indifference of the world” for the first time.

“An entertaining little story. It is well written and well told. But I can’t quite see it as a ‘conte philosophique,’ a piece of literature with profound implications, as Camus’s admirers do.” EDMUND WILSON, NEW YORKER, 4/13/46

“The Outsider is disappointing. It will be read as a partial expression of the total mind-stuff of a serious, too widely engaged artist.” RAYNER HEPPENSTALL, NEW STATESMAN & NATION, 6/29/46

“The Stranger is required reading for those who want first-hand evidence of the most curious literary manifestation of the last decade, and casual readers, whether or not they accept Camus’s moral messages, will be rewarded by a well-developed psychological narrative, told in conventional, effective prose.” JEX MARTIN, BOOK WEEK, 4/14/46

BOTTOM LINE: “Nothing, nothing mattered, and I knew why,” says an imprisoned Meursault. *The Stranger* is one of the most thought provoking novels about human existence and meaning.

The Myth of Sisyphus (1942; in English, 1955)



Camus published this “absurdist” essay in 1942, while he was working for the French Resistance during World War II in Paris. In it, he theorizes the larger issues that plagued Meursault in *The Stranger*: lack of faith, acceptance of the absurd, and “the total absence of hope ...” Camus asks

EXISTENTIALISM IS NOT DEAD—YET

EXISTENTIALISM DIDN'T DIE with twentieth-century writers like Camus or Sartre. In the 1950s and '60s, it reappeared in popular fiction. Jack Kerouac and other Beat writers couched existentialist themes in their psychedelic journeys. Other existentialist pieces have become canonical. Herman Hesse, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Franz Kafka, Henrik Ibsen, Samuel Beckett, and Jerzy Kosinski, among others, embraced existentialist themes in their fiction. Here are a few of the more accessible existentialist classics:



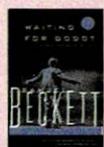
CRIME AND PUNISHMENT | FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY (1866): Raskolnikov, a poor student living in prerevolutionary St. Petersburg, believes himself to be above morality. But, when he commits a senseless murder, his conscience steps in.



THE METAMORPHOSIS | FRANZ KAFKA (1915): When Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning to find himself morphed into a gigantic bug, he finds the situation quite absurd—and also quite absolute.



STEPPENWOLF | HERMANN HESSE (1929): Harry Haller, experiencing a midlife crisis, must choose between a life of contemplation, or one of action. The entrance of the carefree Hermine creates a surreal story about the human spirit and its ultimate liberation.



WAITING FOR GODOT | SAMUEL BECKETT (1952): A famous critic described this play, written by one of the great "absurdist" playwrights, as one "in which nothing happens, twice." Two tramps wait for Godot to come save them, hazily pass the time when he fails to appear, then give up hope.



THE PAINTED BIRD | JERZY KOSINSKI (1965): Kosinski's semi-autobiographical novel about a young Polish boy's ordeals during World War II questions how simple survival and individual will become moral imperatives in the face of terror.

a series of crucial questions in his essay. Is life worth living if it lacks meaning? And, if it lacks purpose, does it have value? And, if it has no value, than what is the basis of morality? Camus tried to answer these questions, but produced few satisfactory answers.

THE PREMISE: "There is only one really serious philosophical question," the essay opens, "and that is suicide. Deciding whether or not life is worth living is to answer the fundamental question in philosophy. All other questions follow from that." Using the Greek myth of Sisyphus as a parable, Camus addresses how to derive meaning from human existence in the face of "nothingness." Sisyphus, as punishment for challenging the gods, was condemned through all eternity to push a huge boulder up a hill every day, just

to watch it roll down again. The tragedy is that Sisyphus realizes his plight and holds no illusion that his endeavor will ever succeed. But, in Camus's view, Sisyphus prefers self-knowledge to death, which makes him an "absurd" hero who, in enduring the punishment, becomes victorious. Thus, facing the absurdity of life is how to triumph over suicide.

"Camus's scrupulous logic and aphoristic style create a kind of poetry of thought which give a fine expression to the atheism and the despair. But, as his acknowledgment that, *The Myth of Sisyphus* is 'personal' suggests, his philosophy will not succeed in taking most readers beyond them." JACOB KORG, NATION, 12/10/55

"*The Myth of Sisyphus* should be read side by side with Camus's novel, *The Stranger*. Each work explains the other. ... It is a difficult ideal of life, and maybe too narrow and thwarting a one; but it is also one that we cannot help but admire." WILLIAM BARRETT, SATURDAY REVIEW, 10/8/55

BOTTOM LINE: If you realize that life has no meaning, why read on? Because there may be some value in recognizing nothingness. As Camus writes, "the absurd enlightens me on this point: there is no future."

The Plague (1947; in English, 1948)



Published in French in 1947, *The Plague* again deals with existential despair—and hope. Dr. Rieux, the novel's town doctor, offers a different vision of humankind than that presented in *The Stranger*. He refuses to despair, choosing, instead, to fight suffering and death. Like Sisyphus, he's an "absurd" hero for he, too, continues to perform his duty no matter how insignificant it seems. Defiance, in this case, leads to humanity. *The Plague* also deals with issues of imprisonment, freedom, and human resilience by asking whether Oran's citizens were ever truly free.

THE STORY: A bubonic epidemic kills off the population in the large port city of Oran, Algeria. As hysteria grips the citizens, authorities kill the disease-carrying rats and place the city under quarantine. The outbreak tests the conflict between individual self-interest and collective responsibility. Some residents plan an escape to be reunited with their loved ones in other cities; others embrace the feeling of communal suffering. Eventually, "the plague had swallowed up everything and everyone. No longer were there individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and the emotions shared by all." The novel ends with the haunting observation that although the plague can vanish for years at a time, it never truly disappears.

"It is one of those very rare combinations, an intellectual book that is also a good novel. It can, and should be, read with the attention concentrated solely on the extraordinary events of the book, the fine descriptions of the hot ugly streets, of the horrible manifestations of the disease itself, of the tramcars

'clanking through the warm darkness' with their grisly load of passengers for the crematoria. There are things in this book which no reader will ever forget." ROBERT KEE, SPECTATOR, 9/3/48

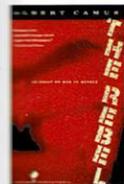
"Because *The Plague* is a novel of man as a member of a group rather than as an individual intent on a private career, it is an unfamiliar literary tradition. But it will, I think, become a marker on the landscape of contemporary fiction." MILTON RUGOFF, NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE WEEKLY BOOK REVIEW, 8/1/48

"*The Plague* is parable and sermon, and should be considered as such. ... [Camus's morality] seems to me to be of so much urgency that we would be wrong to ask how much significance people may attach to it tomorrow." STEPHEN SPENDER, NEW YORK TIMES, 8/1/48

"... the actual writing has grandeur because it is so calm and detached. ... True, the battle against the forces of darkness and ignorance must go on; but it seems to me that the author takes away from the validity and bite of his philosophical argument by shocking us in advance with an unnecessarily gruesome setting." RICHARD MCLAUGHLIN, SATURDAY REVIEW OF LITERATURE, 7/31/48

BOTTOM LINE: As one character notes, "what we learn in time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise." Camus created an existential novel filled with self-realization and ultimate hope.

The Rebel (1951; in English, 1954)



In 1949, Camus fell ill with tuberculosis again, and spent his seclusion writing and publishing political essays. In 1951, he published *The Rebel*—a collection of his thoughts on rebellion that started with an essay, "Remarque sur la révolté," or "Commentary on Revolt" (1945).

The Rebel attacked communism, Hegel's notion of power, Marxism, and nihilism. Not surprisingly, it led to his split with Sartre and other leftist French intellectuals, who labeled it as treason. While *The Myth of Sisyphus* is more polished, *The Rebel*—a bestseller in its time—more fully explicates Camus's beliefs.

THE ESSAY: Camus starts with the idea that revolt begins when a single person refuses an immoral choice—a civil servant, an existential hero, refuses an order on the grounds that it does not lie within society's best interests. Revolt, in this case, is not "revolution," but a more peaceful process that could produce social change. Camus then explores how this urge to revolt has played out in various revolutions, from socialism to communism. He concludes that the noble impulse to revolt only results in tyranny.

"*The Rebel* is a piece of reasoning in the great tradition of French logic. There is no trace of sentimentality, of rhetoric or of cant. ... But what, above all, is so exhilarating about Camus's essay is that here is the voice of a man of unshakable decency." C.J. ROLO, ATLANTIC, 3/54

FROM CAMUS'S NOBEL SPEECH

"Because [the writer's] task is to unite the greatest possible number of people, his art must not compromise with lies and servitude which, wherever they rule, breed solitude. Whatever our personal weaknesses may be, the nobility of our craft will always be rooted in two commitments, difficult to maintain: the refusal to lie about what one knows and the resistance to oppression. ... Specifically, in view of my powers and my state of being, it was a commitment to bear, together with all those who were living through the same history, the misery and the hope we shared. These men, who were born at the beginning of the First World War, who were twenty when Hitler came to power and the first revolutionary trials were beginning, who were then confronted as a completion of their education with the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, the world of concentration camps, a Europe of torture and prisons—these men must today rear their sons and create their works in a world threatened by nuclear destruction. Nobody, I think, can ask them to be optimists. And I even think that we should understand—without ceasing to fight it—the error of those who in an excess of despair have asserted their right to dishonour and have rushed into the nihilism of the era. But the fact remains that most of us, in my country and in Europe, have refused this nihilism and have engaged upon a quest for legitimacy. ... Each generation doubtless feels called upon to reform the world. Mine knows that it will not reform it, but its task is perhaps even greater. It consists in preventing the world from destroying itself."

—Stockholm, December 10, 1957

"His championship of human values against all the insidious totalitarianisms is deeply moving, but the delight in paradox that leads him to describe Nietzschean nihilism as 'absolute affirmation' keeps the book's level of intelligibility to a minimum, and his conclusion, that each man's salvation must lie in his refusal to become a god, probably does not solve the problems of any large proportion of his readers." NEW YORKER 1/23/54

"As a 'work of logic,' it is unworthy of serious consideration. M. Camus's account of Marxism, for instance, is competent but jejune. ... There are, of course, a number of penetrating remarks, but the book is full of generalisations." R.H.S. CROSSMAN, NEW STATESMAN & NATION, 1/16/54

"His essay may be called the logbook of the intellectual's pilgrimage to paradise on earth, the biography of that European rebellion which was born with the French Revolution. ... [But] the author, true to an honestly admitted self-restriction, has eliminated religious rebellion, which probably was the most inclusive of all." MANES SPERBER, NEW YORK TIMES, 1/10/54

BOTTOM LINE: "What is a rebel? A man who says no," writes Camus. *The Rebel* provides reflection on revolt as the starting place for peaceful social transformation (or tyranny) and a summation of Camus's philosophy. ■