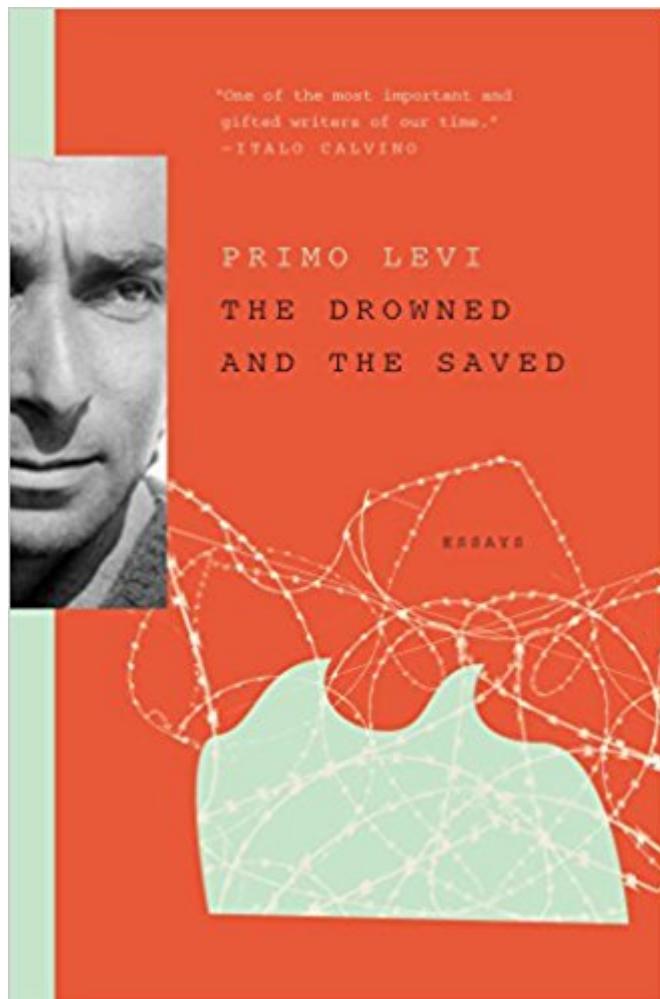


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The Drowned And The Saved



Synopsis

In his final book before his death, Primo Levi returns once more to his time at Auschwitz in a moving meditation on memory, resiliency, and the struggle to comprehend unimaginable tragedy. Drawing on history, philosophy, and his own personal experiences, Levi asks if we have already begun to forget about the Holocaust. His last book before his death, Levi returns to the subject that would define his reputation as a writer and a witness. Levi breaks his book into eight essays, ranging from topics like the unreliability of memory to how violence twists both the victim and the victimizer. He shares how difficult it is for him to tell his experiences with his children and friends. He also debunks the myth that most of the Germans were in the dark about the Final Solution or that Jews never attempted to escape the camps. As the Holocaust recedes into the past and fewer and fewer survivors are left to tell their stories, *The Drowned and the Saved* is a vital first-person testament. Along with Elie Wiesel and Hannah Arendt, Primo Levi is remembered as one of the most powerful and perceptive writers on the Holocaust and the Jewish experience during World War II. This is an essential book both for students and literary readers. Reading Primo Levi is a lesson in the resiliency of the human spirit.

Book Information

Paperback: 208 pages

Publisher: Simon & Schuster; Reissue edition (June 20, 2017)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1501167634

ISBN-13: 978-1501167638

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.6 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.1 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars 46 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #130,775 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #53 in Books > History > Historical Study & Educational Resources > Essays #84 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Ideologies & Doctrines > Fascism #257 in Books > History > World > Jewish > Holocaust

Customer Reviews

This book, published months after Italian writer Primo Levi's suicide in 1987, is a small but powerful look at Auschwitz, the hell where Levi was imprisoned during World War II. The book was his third on the subject, following *Survival in Auschwitz* (1947) and *The Reawakening* (1963). Removed from

the experience by time and age, Levi chose to serve more as an observer of the camp than the passionate young man of his previous work. He writes of "useless violence" inflicted by the guards on prisoners and then concludes the book with a discussion of the Germans who have written to him about their complicity in the event. In all, he tries to make sense of something that--as he knew--made no sense at all. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Renowned Italian author Levi, an Auschwitz survivor, finished this contemplation of the Holocaust before his death in 1987. Observing a general loss of understanding about Nazi Germany as time passes and eyewitnesses die, he asks, "How much of the concentration camp world is dead? . . . What can each of us do so that in this world pregnant with threats at least this threat will be nullified?" Levi's answer is a thoughtful analysis of the process that was the camps, and his chilling conclusions about the conditions that created them are uncomfortably relevant to current events. Highly recommended. Starr E. Smith, Georgetown Univ. Lib., Washington, D.C. Copyright 1987 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A truly sobering book. It is hard to read for long periods of time -- a break is needed just to clear one's head a bit before re-entering that time and place. Levi feared the lessons of the holocaust were being attenuated over time and the fact that this book is hard to get is ironic confirmation of that fear. This is the last book he wrote. The realism and specificity he includes are almost numbing, but they are not gratuitous, which is the book's great strength: the insights he draws from them and the exhortations that come from those insights are personal and persuasive. I would wish this book had wider circulation -- a hard but very valuable and emotional experience "listening" to Levi unburden his heart.

I read this after seeing the film "Son of Saul" which I found disturbing in a way that other Holocaust films were not. Levi's book is an amazing, thought-provoking attempt to understand what can never be understood. He teaches the reader about the complexity of the horrors that the prisoners endured, especially those who were given the most horrific tasks in the camps. I am now better equipped to answer the outrageous views of those who today believe the Jews were weaklings who went "like sheep to the slaughter."

"The Drowned and the Saved" is the final book of Primo Levi (1919-1987), a Jewish-Italian chemist who survived the death camp of Auschwitz, and turned to authorship in his later years. This book is

a group of a half-dozen related essays, each exploring a specific aspect of Levi's view of the Holocaust's causes and effects. He begins with the concept of "good faith", wondering whether believing a lie excuses it. He notes that oppressors lie to save themselves from believing they are evil, and victims lie to save themselves from believing they suffer. He explores the moral zone between black and white, noting that anybody can be a tough killer or a foolish victim: we are all tyrants and victims in our own way. He examines survivor's guilt, and reflects on the roles of luck versus blessing in life, and discusses the ways humans need communication to survive, including the way victims bend language to disguise their intentions, and tyrants twist it to cause confusion among their victims. He tries to distinguish between rationalized evil and collective madness. He believes the spirit and mind can be injured just as the body can, and wonders how a person's perspective plays a role in their survival and psychological health. He describes the various stereotypes people hold when they imagine the stories of those who lived through WWII, e.g., the romantic hero, the evil Nazi, the prisoner who always plots escape, and so on, but explains why they are rough and inaccurate. Each chapter is like a conversation with an intelligent and qualified author. It is thoughtful, and a pleasure to read. It reflects on psychological and historical themes which are important not only to our understanding of the Holocaust, but also more generally human nature. (It appears to be a rumination on subjects discussed in his other books, collected and summarized briefly here.) It is for this reason that the book is successful. It considers the Holocaust in particular, but its themes are actually deeper and more universal. "Letters from Germans", the penultimate chapter, is the book's most powerful, noticeably demonstrating the tension between his memory of that time period, and the memory of various Germans, in their own words. He especially berates those who believe they are doing the right thing by speaking out in shame and guilt over their past, perhaps attacking them a bit harshly, but certainly with justification. The last chapter, "Conclusion", is its weakest. In the opinion of this reviewer, it over-generalizes, and tries to apply retrospective analysis to the world's future. It also calls for unwarranted conclusions, unrelated to the preceding chapters, and perhaps contradicts itself. Luckily it is brief, and does not detract from the excellence of the prior explorations. (For example, he says war is unnecessary, and mankind can settle all conflicts around a table, but only as long as we are in good faith. He then calls Hitler a buffoon, implying he cannot be taken in good faith. He next says we need not have good faith to negotiate if we are all equally in fear of war, but this sounds like he is saying war is necessary after all, even if only to remind us there are punishments for negotiation in bad faith!) Despite its conclusion (which many readers will probably enjoy, despite this reviewer's belief it over-reaches), the book is an intelligent and even-handed, but personal assessment of the Holocaust, written in an

engaging and intelligent style, with brevity and wit. At 200 pages, it is easy to read. Packed with philosophy and insight, it is worth the investment.

I don't always agree with his conclusions, but Primo Levi's insights are amazing. While it is impossible to comprehend the enormity and barbarity of the holocaust, reading "The Drowned and the Saved" seems to me a brief glimpse through a door that is open ever so slightly.

There are many first hand accounts of life in the German camps of Auschwitz, Treblinka, still more secondhand histories. For sheer unblinking depiction of the brutality of daily life of the camps, there are few accounts as shocking as Tadeusz Borowski's This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen. But simple description, witnessing if you will, is not Primo Levi's purpose, or at least not his only purpose in writing the books The Drowned and the Saved and If This is a Man. In these books we have as close as we can come to the view of an alien who has been landed in Auschwitz with no other experience of human behavior save perhaps what he has read in history books and is now trying to make sense of his observations.

In his final book, Primo Levi returns to the Lagers and the occupation to deliver a series of ruminations on life, love, hardship, pain, brutality, and the essential mystery of living. Thoughtful, humane and exceedingly intelligent, Levi looks back, considers the fate of friends, foes, nations, letter-writers and everything else and reflects on just how man got to be how we are. As a Philosophy graduate I am especially grateful to Levi for bringing a fresh, powerful, and deep perspective to the horrors of WWII. Thank you for your remembrance.

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