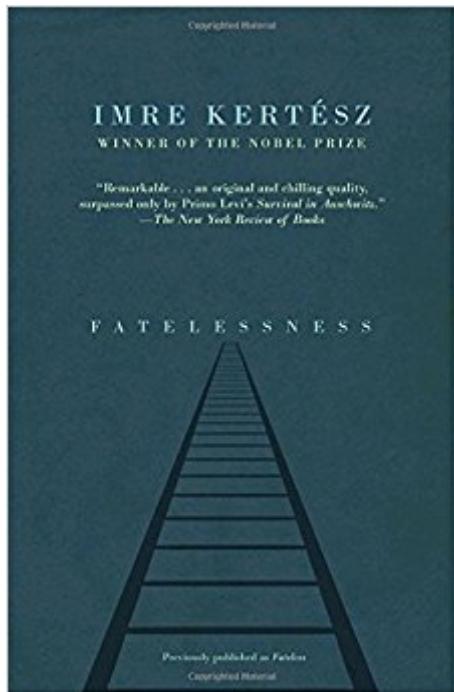


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Fatelessness



Synopsis

At the age of 14 Georg Koves is plucked from his home in a Jewish section of Budapest and without any particular malice, placed on a train to Auschwitz. He does not understand the reason for his fate. He doesn't particularly think of himself as Jewish. And his fellow prisoners, who decry his lack of Yiddish, keep telling him, "You are no Jew." In the lowest circle of the Holocaust, Georg remains an outsider. The genius of Imre Kertesz's unblinking novel lies in its refusal to mitigate the strangeness of its events, not least of which is Georg's dogmatic insistence on making sense of what he witnesses "or pretending that what he witnesses makes sense. Haunting, evocative, and all the more horrifying for its rigorous avoidance of sentiment, *Fatelessness* is a masterpiece in the traditions of Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, and Tadeusz Borowski.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Kertesz (*Kaddish for an Unborn Child*), who, as a youth, spent a year as a prisoner in Auschwitz, has crafted a superb, haunting novel that follows Gyorgy Koves, a 14-year old Hungarian Jew, during the year he is imprisoned in Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Fighting to retain his equilibrium when his world turns upside down, Gyorgy rationalizes that certain events are "probably natural" or "probably a mistake." Gradual starvation and what he experiences as grinding boredom become a way of life for him, yet Gyorgy describes both Buchenwald and its guards as "beautiful

"Remarkable . . . an original and chilling quality, surpassed only by Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* . . . The New York Review of Books" In his writing Imre Kertesz explores the possibility

of continuing to live and think as an individual in an era in which the subjection of human beings to social forces has become increasingly complete... upholds the fragile experience of the individual against the barbaric arbitrariness of history. --The Swedish Academy, The Nobel Prize in Literature 2002 [S]hould be savored slowly . . . Only through exploring its subtlety and detail will the reader come to appreciate such an ornate and honest testimony to the human spirit. "The Washington Times

After György Károly goes through intake processing at Auschwitz, as a prelude to being sent along to Buchenwald, he records the disparate treatments meted out to the two groups into which all arriving Hungarian Jews had been segregated immediately after their release from the railroad cars. Those who were physically fit, like himself, had been sent from the station to the baths, where they had been told to place their clothes on a numbered hook and to remember the number (leading them to believe they would reclaim those clothes after the showers) and where every third prisoner was handed a piece of soap with instructions to share it with two others. Meanwhile, those who were judged unfit for work, including many women and small children, went through much the same procedure: "They too had proceeded from the station to the baths. They too had been informed about the hooks, the numbers, and the washing procedure, just the same as us. * * * Then they too had entered the bathroom itself, with the same pipes and showerheads, so I heard, only out of these came, not water, but gas." That's one aspect of FATELESSNESS: a prosaic yet detailed and memorable account of the operations of the Nazi concentration/extermination camps, told from the perspective of fourteen-year-old György, who was rounded up during a dragnet conducted in Budapest in the spring of 1944. Another aspect of FATELESSNESS is György's speculations, or reflections, on the perpetrators, the choreographers of the concentration camps. For example, as regards the baths: "After all, people would have had to meet to discuss this, put their heads together so to say, even if they were not exactly students but mature adults, quite possibly--indeed, in all likelihood--gentlemen in imposing suits, decorations on their chests, cigars in their mouths, presumably all in high command * * *. One of them comes up with the gas, another immediately follows with the bathhouse, a third with the soap, * * * and so on. Some of the ideas may have provoked more prolonged discussion and amendment, whereas others would have been immediately hailed with delight * * *." Yet a third aspect of the novel concerns the effect of it all on the survivors of the concentration camps. György's thoughts on this subject are somewhat unorthodox, maybe even heretical. They are the antithesis of the conventional wisdom (as of fifty years ago) that "you must put the horrors behind you" and they are inextricably bound up with the

title of the novel. I won't say more, because Imre Kertész's philosophical/psychological response to the Holocaust should be read as he presents it. By the way, Imre Kertész, as a fourteen-year-old Jewish boy in Budapest, was rounded up and sent to Auschwitz, then Buchenwald, then Zeitz, and then back to Buchenwald, just like György Károly. But Kertész contends that *FATELESSNESS* is not autobiographical, that it is indeed a work of fiction. To me, it is the fictional counterpart to Primo Levi's classic memoir of a year in Auschwitz, "If This Is a Man". The power of both works inheres in the understated, matter-of-fact quality of their narratives. And in both, there are neither heroes nor victims, but only survivors and the dead. Though simply written, *FATELESSNESS* is not a simple book. It may bewilder some readers and it may anger some Jews. But it deserves to be read. It is, as incongruous as this may sound for "Holocaust literature", a small jewel of a novel.

One of the most remarkable first person singular novels I have read. Remarkable because the subject, a 14 year old Hungarian boy, speaks his experiential truth about being shepherded and transported into the concentration camps of Nazi Germany but still responds to the beauty and advantages of life as it is lived - colours, order, friends. For example, the benefit of getting on the train to Auschwitz early as the early trains have "only" 60 people to a boxcar whereas the later ones are expected to have 80. At the destination station under his feet "was the customary crushed stone; and then an immaculate white asphalt road (which) disappeared into infinity." (p61) And the observation that nowhere is a kind of ordered life-style, a kind of exemplary behaviour, even an ethic, as important as in captivity. (p100) And then the experience of freedom where the old lady on a tram turns away from him in apparent disgust at his appearance, but old Mr Steiner "gave me a hug just as I was, in my hat, striped prisoner's coat, and all sweaty." p 184. SHOW me a more heartbreakingly powerful sentence in literature! There is also the questioning of his experience - did you SEE with your own eyes the gassing? No. So you're basing your statement on rumour and gossip? Yes. I have never understood REAL hunger until I read this novel. Our young hero is upset on the day of his liberation because he misses out on his scheduled soup ration! A remarkable and memorable read, that is at once gripping, involving, and emotionally powerful.

Fatelessness takes its readers on a devastating ride through the hell of life in Nazi death camps. The most intriguing aspect of this particular tale, in contrast to others before and after, is the chance to view such a miserable experience through the eyes of a fifteen year old boy. His understanding of the events as they unfold before him is painful to witness and is underscored by his innocence and

youth. The novel is masterfully written and reads like a report. There is little in the way of sentimentality and the narrative is hardly (if at all) slanted to arouse a visceral reaction from the reader. We are only offered descriptions of what the boy sees and feels. All conclusions are left to be arrived at on our own. A fantastic read and one I highly recommend.

I was deeply affected by Kertesz's semi-autobiographical Holocaust tale. His use of the naive young narrator to describe the inexplicable and horrific details of concentration camp life was an act of literary genius, and perhaps, all too likely, the feelings and reactions many unsuspecting victims experienced at the time. After reading a fair amount about the Holocaust, it's been quite a while since I've experienced much in the way of shock over the very worst that mankind can do to one another. But, by experiencing the events through young Gyorgy's eyes, I am shocked once again by all that he sees. In spite of it all, he still sounds a note of hope in the experience of life itself. A truly great book.

Not only a remarkable book by a Nobel prize-winner, but also an remarkable movie. It is not often that the movie does justice to a great book. Each is a work of art; each compliment the other; and both will leave you speechless and on your knees. The last two pages of the book, and the final scene of the movie where the young man muses, are like nothing you've ever read or heard. The language will leave you breathless. Nothing has reached so deeply into the human condition and the search for happiness more. And I was able to order the book from bay-city-books free, for only postage!

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Fatelessness

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