

## Author Profile: ALBERT CAMUS

Albert Camus, the author of one of tonight's books, died on January 4, 1960, when he was only 46. He was a passenger in a car driven by his friend and publisher, Michel Gallimand. The car left the road at a high rate of speed and smashed into a tree outside a small village in southern France. Camus had in his pocket the train ticket which he had planned to use to join his family until, at the last minute, Gallimand offered him a ride in his car instead.

In the month that Camus died, the Algerian French war – a war which Camus had spent much of his adult life trying to prevent – entered its sixth year. Only two months before, de Gaulle had made his second "self-determination" speech, and the Algerian Europeans were thrown into transports of rage and despair at what they called his intent to "sell out Algeria."

The war would rage for nearly two more years, in many ways its most savage, but in reality the remaining struggle was little more than a pre-ordained postscript. The outcome of this last of the grand-style "colonial wars," which brought death to at least one million Muslim Algerians (out of a population of nine million), and at its height engaged over 500,000 French soldiers, was already decided.

Camus himself was a European pied noir (or black foot because so many of them wore French black army boots), born in 1913 in a small town on the Northeast coast of Algeria. His mother was an illiterate charwoman, his father a day laborer who was killed less than a year after Camus' birth at the Battle of the Marne, the first major battle of World War I.

With no money, mother and infant son had to move in with Camus' grandmother. His mother, after her husband's death, essentially stopped speaking and expressed little or no affection to her son, recognizing his presence only when he was being slapped or whipped by his grandmother.

The family lived in a poor neighborhood of Algiers in a small apartment with no plumbing, no electricity, and one toilet shared by the three other families in the

building. He lived there from infancy to high school with his grandmother, mother, brother, and uncle.

The narrow streets outside were thick with small shops, workshops, and tenements. Knots of children played stickball while dodging pedestrians, street vendors, stray dogs, and squawking chickens.

Camus attended the local elementary school, where a teacher, Louis Germain, took notice of the young boy because of his intelligence and intensity. He managed to persuade Camus' grandmother and mother to allow him to take an examination that would provide an academic scholarship for the lycee, or French high school. Without Germain's forceful intervention, Camus would have been apprenticed to a local workshop and his wage used to help support the family.

Because of Germain, Camus felt for the first time in his life that "he existed and that he was judged worthy to discover the world." Camus passed the exam, and his life changed forever.

At the high school, Camus continued to be a first-rate student as well as an excellent athlete until he began coughing blood and discovered he had tuberculosis. But he continued his studies and advanced to the University of Algiers, where he wrote his thesis on Plotinus and St. Augustine, graduating with a degree in philosophy.

He left Algeria for the mainland in 1940<sup>age 26</sup> with the manuscript for his first novel in his suitcase; his ambition was to be a journalist. In 1943, with France under Nazi occupation, he joined the staff of the underground newspaper "Combat," and had his first two books published: tonight's book, The Stranger, plus a book of philosophical essays, The Myth of Sisyphus.

The words perhaps most often associated with Camus are the opening lines to these Sisyphus essays – "There is just one truly important philosophical question: suicide. To decide whether life is worth living is to answer the fundamental question of philosophy."



But upon reading the essays themselves, it is clear that Camus adopts the perspective, not of suicide, but of the pursuit of meaning in life, and that only with a lack of meaning do we face the reality of our absurd condition.

By the end of World War II, Camus was no longer just a journalist. He was editor of what was now France's most prestigious newspaper, "Combat," and one of the country's most prominent intellectuals.

He used his position to make his readers aware of how the experiences of the war had galvanized nationalism in Algeria's Arab and Berber populations, and how brutal French administration was fueling a coming disaster. The food rationing system was stark – European pied noirs were entitled to 300 grams of bread per day; Arabs and Berbers fewer than 150 grams. A nationalist demonstration in 1945 that resulted in the loss of 100 European lives was met with violent retribution – 15,000 Arabs and Berbers were killed, 150 for every European life.

Camus continually insisted on recognizing the universal quality of human dignity – and that France, for more than a century, had failed to apply its democratic principles to Algeria's native population. His writing in "Combat" underscored a prosaic truth: the ideal of the French republic extended no further than the European havens in Algeria.

He watched in anguish the escalation of the continuing cycle of atrocity and reprisal in Algeria which began in 1954 when the F.L.N., the Algerian independence organization, began what became a nearly 8-year war for independence from French rule. Camus tried to convince both sides that a start to peace could be made by placing a limitation on the murderous war through a truce, outlawing all attacks on civilian non-combatants, but without success. The bloody snowball continued to roll, out of control, until de Gaulle finally admitted defeat in 1962.

Personally, Camus was a handsome man whom women fell for – the Don Draper of existentialism. He was married and divorced twice and had a series of affairs during both marriages.

Those who met him said he reminded them of Humphrey Bogart, but more attractive. Looking at the well-known photographic portrait of Camus by Cartier-

Bresson – trench coat collar up, hair swept back, cigarette in his mouth, a long appealing face and warm eyes – you can see why many women would think of him as a star, and not as a philosophical author.

Camus continues to be read because of the universality of his concerns. He remains a man whose life stands as witness to a desperate heroism. His fierce condemnation of France's treatment of Arabs and Berbers, his denunciation of Vichy France's anti-Semitic legislation (the Nazis did not have to round up the French Jews for deportation and extermination; the French police did it for them), his continued effort to negotiate a civilian truce in war-torn Algeria – these all reflect the acts of a man who sought to mesh his life with his convictions. He felt they were an essential part of our efforts to define a life worth living.

Albert Camus won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1957. The award was given "for his important literary production, which ... illuminates the problem of the human condition in our time."

Camus' view of the human condition and all its conflicts was inextricably tied to his bond with Algeria. It is perhaps best captured by this quote from one of his essays:

"Algeria is land and sun. Algeria is a mother, cruel and yet adored, suffering and passionate, hard and nourishing. She is proof of the mix of good and evil, the inseparable dialectic of love and hate, the fusion of opposites that constitute mankind."



### Author Profile: KAMEL DAOUD

The author of our companion book to The Stranger, The Mersault Investigation, was born in Mesra, Algeria, on June 17, 1970. Kamel Daoud was eldest of six children. His father, Mohamed, was the only member of the extended family who could read, and he taught his son the alphabet and shared with him his small French library.

Kamel, as a teen-ager, considered himself a devout Muslim and in high school, with his djellaba and turban, he was recruited by his geography teacher for membership in a clandestine Islamic cell. He grew a beard, handed out leaflets, and became the Imam of his high school.

Kamel also regularly attended the camps and athletic clubs where the young militants of Algeria's emerging Islamic movement were indoctrinated. But then, suddenly, at the age of 18, he quit the movement. Recalling his feelings at the time, Kamel says, "I felt I had the right to live and to rebel ... And I was tired ... I no longer felt anything."

He went on to study French literature at the University of Oran and began to write poetry and fiction. This was the period that marked the beginning of the Algerian civil war, when Islamic guerillas attempted to overthrow the military-based secular government. The war began in January of 1992, when the army voided election results which would have given power to fundamentalist Islamic political parties. Islamists formed guerilla armies and began to wage what became a ten-year war, claiming an estimated 200,000 victims.

The experience of living through this decade of bloodshed and turmoil appears to have given Daoud the great theme for his writings – that of the Algerian condition – torn between religious piety and liberal individualism.

After college Daoud went to work for the local Oran daily, a French language newspaper, to which he contributed a regular column called "My Opinion, Your Opinion." While other journalists complained of the danger they faced from Islamists, Daoud rented a donkey and went out to interview them.

Both journalists when young,  
Both opposed corrupt and  
oppressive establishment, extremist power  
They did not take sides

He became an outspoken critic of contemporary Algerian society and rejected both what he saw as misguided nationalism and an Islam which denied self-expression and intellectual freedom.

The fearlessness of any Algerian writer who defended the cause of individual liberty was not without a price, since to be an honest Algerian writer was to be a target of political violence. More than 70 journalists were murdered by Islamist rebels during the ten-year civil war.

With the publication of tonight's book, Mersault, Daoud became a particular target. Islamist fundamentalists said he should be put on trial for insulting Islam and publically executed.

That Daoud speaks only for himself may be what even his more moderate critics find most unsettling about him. He is on no one's side. To his critics, he should be on Algeria's side alone.

age 46

In March of 2016, Kamel Daoud gave up his newspaper work because of the row in France and Algeria over a piece he wrote in Le Monde concerning the New Year's Eve mass molestation of women in Cologne, Germany. Criticized from all sides for his article, which blamed Arab-Muslim culture for the immigrants' behavior, Daoud says he will now focus on writing fiction. His Oran base is an apartment in a gated community on the outskirts of the city. His wife left him because he is no longer a practicing Muslim and she had become increasingly more devout.

When describing the path his life has taken, Daoud often refers to his childhood in Mesra in northwest Algeria. The Daouds, he says, "were sure of their faith, so they didn't feel they had to continually defend it, unlike Islamists today." In school, he learned "only a black-and-white tale of infallible mujahedeen battling evil French settlers." At home, though, his grandparents told him about the Catholic priest who fed the family in times of shortage; about French soldiers who deserted their posts rather than torture and kill.

Not unlike Albert Camus, Kamel Daoud sees Algeria as "proof of the mix of good and evil, the inseparable dialectic of love and hate, the fusion of opposites that constitute mankind."