

**Chapter 1 : Primo Levi reading marks International Holocaust Remembrance Day - Trinity News and Events**

*Reading the Holocaust challenges that bafflement and the demoralization that attends it. Searching, eloquent, and elegantly written, Inga Clendinnen's book is an uncompromising attempt to extract the comprehensible--the practical, human reality--from the unthinkable.*

Este libro es crudo e indignante, sobre todo por la actitud de los acusados, pero necesario. Las cinco estrellas son viscerales. Peter Weiss brings us one of the most revealing and simultaneously unbiased views of the Auschwitz extermination camp. This play, created with actual words spoken during the Frankfurt War Crimes trials, mentions horrific happenings in the camp with over a million of confirmed killings. Your blood will literally chill in your veins. Horrible but unforgettable, it ends on an extremely powerful, and possibly the most scary note: I truly have no words. Taking breaks while reading this was honestly necessary, otherwise I would have thrown up or just rolled up in a ball and cried which I also did. Having said that I am so grateful that I have read it. An eye-opener that this is, it honestly makes me want to do anything possible in order to not let any war happen ever. Apr 08, A. Most of the accused had successfully re-integrated into German society. Many founded successful businesses on the plunder from the camp. Weiss, inspired by Brechtian dramatic conventions, strips the trial down to its barest, most essential features. The play is composed of extracted testimony from witnesses and defendants, along with examination and cross-examination by prosecutors and the defense counsel. While the nine witness characters are amalgams of hundreds of individuals brought forth to testify to the atrocities perpetrated at Auschwitz, the 18 defendants are all named and allowed to speak for themselves without fictionalization. The play is dreadfully efficient in its aim of letting the facts speak for themselves without rhetorical manipulation or theatrical flair. The lines are sparse, delivered without punctuation or literary emphasis. The testimony of the unnamed witnesses achieve a kind of hypnotic dirge, often blending together into a flat, matter-of-fact horror. The numb dread of the witness testimony is only interrupted by the sickening rationalizations, deflections, and denials of the defendants and their defense counsel. In one of his final works, Theodor Adorno argued that it would have been more moral to summarily execute Nazi war criminals than put them on trial: I get the rage behind it, but to call that rage moral always seemed difficult to affirm. Reading *The Investigation* helped to clarify the point. It would have been more moral than the farce of allowing them to see the inside of a courtroom. What they did could not be adequately represented in any juridical context. In one of the most shocking moments in the trial, it is revealed that a state prosecutor was sent to Auschwitz to investigate what was actually going on there. The prosecutor was tipped off when, after inspecting the amount of gold composed of melted down fillings leaving the camp, he realized that each piece had to contain the fillings of thousands of people. After surveying the camp, he charged a few underlings. No other legal recourse was available. There is something uniquely horrible about a defense attorney cross-examining a holocaust survivor in an attempt to characterize the victim and all those who only left the camps in a plume of smoke as complicit in their own extermination. And they do so with some frequency. So the application of a legal apparatus to a group of men who systematically suspended it in order to murder 12 million people is hard to stomach. It feels unjust to indulge them in their testimony, to give them a platform to deny their crimes. In a particularly telling moment in the trial, Defendant 9 is worked into a position where he must admit to killing some people. The scene unfolds as follow: That means at least dead Defendant 9: Sanitary Officer Klehr [Defendant 9] was involved in the killing of at least 16, prisoners Defendant 9: The flippant rejection of being accused of killing 16, people. Lie them stomach down on the ground and shoot them in the neck.

*Clendinnen's small book is a good antidote to mystifiers of the Holocaust like Saul Friedlander and Elie Wiesel. Her "just the facts" attitude is refreshing and paradoxically leads to more comprehension of larger issues (although I think she is too easy on Hannah Arendt and too tough on Viktor Frankl.).*

Reading the Holocaust Inga Clendinnen. Cambridge University Press, Photographs, notes, bibliography, and index. A forthright sort, she writes that Elie Wiesel mistakenly "assumes the natural dominance of the metaphysical over the historical" when he writes that "The universality of the Holocaust must be realised in its uniqueness. Remove the Jews from the Holocaust, and the Event loses its mystery" p. She wants to describe what happened from the perspective of both perpetrators and victims, in fewer than pages. Nor do the above desiderata represent her total ambitions. Reading the Holocaust, the back cover of the paper edition tells us, will "dispel" what she calls the Gorgon effect: What resulted from her initial investigation was the discovery that "I could learn who ordered what, how many died in what region, by what method. Forceful interpretations of motives were offered. But I still could not comprehend it" p. It occurred to her the problem was "[that] my reading of the Holocaust had been no more than dutiful; that I had refused full imaginative engagement" p. When illness compelled her to end university employment, she used the recovery period "to do some concentrated reading and thinking in an area not my own" p. She finally insisted on three principal self-imposed conditions before she set pen to paper. First, albeit manifestly impossible for her to read everything written about the Holocaust, she would read as widely as possible. Second, she would seek to deal mainly with "human connections," meaning how perpetrators and victims affected each other, how victims affected each other, and how perpetrators affected each other. And third, she would "write as a general reader who also happens to be a historian" p. At this point I was tempted to put her book aside. Few of us lack for acquaintances who have quirky opinions about the Holocaust, and fewer still have friends with something original to say. And, truth be told, a half-century after the events, once you get past now-standard arguments in now-standard works, how much originality in interpretation can be expected? Because out of some seven million Jews Nazis intended to gas or to murder some other way, fewer than one million survived, and out of the group that survived, relatively few as in any group had the intellectual capabilities, the emotional resources, and the opportunities to closely observe what was happening. Clendinnen devotes much of this book to descriptions of writings by survivors who not only observed but eloquently described. For her and, I readily admit, for me, Primo Levi exemplifies the highest levels of moral and intellectual standards. Captured while a partisan, he was deported to Auschwitz, where his training as a chemist and his habits of watching, analyzing, and identifying led to his determination to live and bear witness. Did his sense of mission help keep Levi alive? Clendinnen believes that it surely provided him with great psychological benefit having close friends in the camp also helped, but she has no illusion that having a mission was what kept him alive. Luck made the difference. Every Jew had a will to live, but tragically, very, very few Jews had luck. As always, the overriding question for individuals seeking enlightenment on the Holocaust is, Why? Why did human beings behave that way toward other human beings whom they had never before seen and who had no intention of doing them harm? Shortly after he arrived in Auschwitz, desperate for water, Levi reached for an icicle from a window pane. A guard snatched it away from him. Levi asked why he could not have it. The response was, "Hier ist kein Warum" "There is no Why here. Previously, conquerors had wanted to systematically annihilate whole peoples or enslave them. They failed because the means to do either simply did not exist. The rulers of Nazi Germany, however, grasped that industrialization had now arrived at a point from which they could achieve such awful ambitions. They further believed that their propaganda would enable them to justify what they did. Russians and Poles would be killed casually, because they were sub-humans, but Jews--in Nazi minds, enemies of humankind--could be murdered the same way automobiles or radios are manufactured, via rationalized procedures. In this instance, the "product" had to be prepared for death. It never fails to depress me that, as Clendinnen writes, "the discipline which destroyed [inmates] as sentient beings was largely in the hands of prisoners" p. After the war, Jewish and non-Jewish survivors alike testified it was gratuitous assaults

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by fellow-prisoners that most destroyed hope. The SS had contacts only with kapos, who aped the SS whenever possible and insured that despair would finish off the weak, the confused, and the helpless. What the SS and kapos impressed on the overwhelming majority of victims--but not on Levi--was that they were unworthy of life. Arbitrary murder, indescribable torture, and senseless brutality were not happenstance occurrences. They were aspects of an overall plan intended to destroy any sense of order, decency, or loyalty among inmates, so that individualism and self-respect would be crushed, and the weak, the confused, and the helpless would be abandoned. That was the Why that preceded the last step, to the gas chamber. Could any people have withstood such an onslaught? Clendinnen notes that Soviet prisoners-of-war--men trained as soldiers--did not behave differently from Jews. As for Germans, during the post-war period now known as Year Zero, they fought each other for scraps of food and cigarette butts. In Berlin, orphaned children ran after trains, screaming for food. Primo Levi, *If This is a Man*, trans. Library of Congress call number: Holocaust, Jewish -- Personal narratives -- History and criticism Holocaust, Jewish , in literature Citation: This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission questions, please contact hbooks h-net.

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