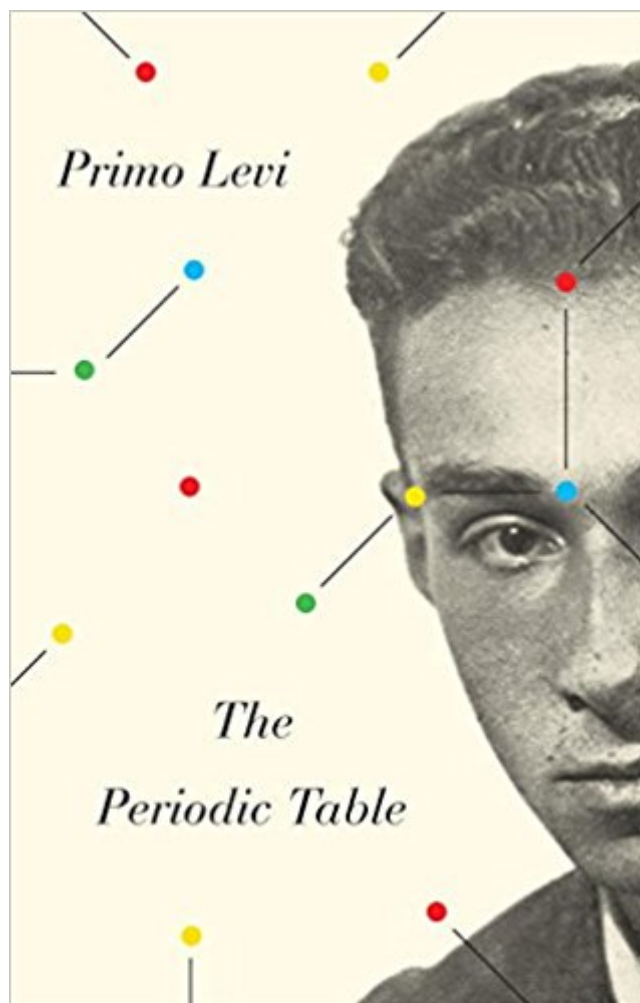


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The Periodic Table



Synopsis

The Periodic Table is largely a memoir of the years before and after Primo Levi's transportation from his native Italy to Auschwitz as an anti-Fascist partisan and a Jew. It recounts, in clear, precise, unfailingly beautiful prose, the story of the Piedmontese Jewish community from which Levi came, of his years as a student and young chemist at the inception of the Second World War, and of his investigations into the nature of the material world. As such, it provides crucial links and backgrounds, both personal and intellectual, in the tremendous project of remembrance that is Levi's gift to posterity. But far from being a prologue to his experience of the Holocaust, Levi's masterpiece represents his most impassioned response to the events that engulfed him. The Periodic Table celebrates the pleasures of love and friendship and the search for meaning, and stands as a monument to those things in us that are capable of resisting and enduring in the face of tyranny.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Writer Primo Levi (1919-1987), an Italian Jew, did not come to the wide attention of the English-reading audience until the last years of his life. A survivor of the Holocaust and imprisonment in Auschwitz, Levi is considered to be one of the century's most compelling voices, and The Periodic Table is his most famous book. Springboarding from his training as a chemist, Levi uses the elements as metaphors to create a cycle of linked, somewhat autobiographical tales, including stories of the Piedmontese Jewish community he came from, and of his response to the Holocaust. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

“I immersed myself in *The Periodic Table* gladly and gratefully. There is nothing superfluous here, everything this book contains is essential. It is wonderful pure, and beautifully translated. I was deeply impressed.” —Saul Bellow
“The best introduction to the psychological world of one of the most important and gifted writers of our time.” —Italo Calvino
“A work of healing, of tranquil, even buoyant imagination.” —*The New York Times Book Review*
“Brilliant, grave and oddly sunny; certainly a masterpiece.” —*Los Angeles Times*
“Every chapter is full of surprises, insights, high humor, and language that often rises to poetry.” —*The New Yorker*
“One of the most important Italian writers.” —Umberto Eco
With a new Introduction by Neal Ascherson
From the Hardcover edition.

Primo Levi, similar to Elie Wiesel, is so closely associated in my mind with The Holocaust, and Holocaust literature, that I was surprised to find that in *THE PERIODIC TABLE*, Levi rarely touches on it directly. And yet, as a memoir of his life as a chemist both before and after Auschwitz, the entire book is freighted with the knowledge of his time in the camps; similar, perhaps, to a biography of a man born with a serious birth defect, and how this background knowledge forces the reader to reevaluate the simple tasks of living that he'd previously taken for granted. Simultaneously, as a part of Levi's entire oeuvre, I also had the feeling that *THE PERIODIC TABLE* was a statement, an affirmation by Levi, who HAD become associated so closely with The Holocaust, saying, in effect, 'I am not Auschwitz. I am a chemist.' Regardless, as others have noted, *THE PERIODIC TABLE* is a collection of stories--some true and some fiction, and each tied to one of the elements of the Periodic Table by some detail in the story. For instance, the first chapter, titled 'Argon', contains a brief explanation of the group of gases that Argon belongs to--The Noble Gases: "There are the so-called inert gases...They bear curious Greek names of erudite derivation which mean 'the New,' 'the Hidden,' 'the Inactive,' and 'the Alien.' They are indeed so inert, so satisfied with their condition, that they do not interfere in any chemical reaction, do not combine with any other element, and for precisely this reason have gone undetected for centuries." Levi then goes on to interweave anecdotes about the Jewish community he knew growing up as a child in Italy, and one quickly picks up on the association between the Noble gases and this community. Most of the rest of the stories are not quite so allegorically tied to the elemental heading, though there always remains a hint of it. The early chapters I thought were dense and philosophical, which surprised me for some reason, though I either grew accustomed to Levi's style, or the stories became more straightforward

as the book went on. I also found that after the initial pages, I thought the book captivating--which, again, given the episodic nature of the stories, was surprising. The long and the short of it is that, although I expected to enjoy the book, I enjoyed it for none of the reasons I suspected I would. It is not an easy book to categorize. Part fiction, part memoir; little direct mention of The Holocaust, and yet the book is entirely infused with it--I hesitate to call it unique, but I do think it stands apart. A very intriguing book.

No, this book will not teach you what you missed in Chem 101. It is instead a stirring memoir of an Italian Jew, a chemist, who survived the years of Italian Fascism and the subsequent Nazi occupation, by the force of his creativity and sensitivity to the harrowing events that befell him. The memoir feels like a set of short stories. Each chapter is named for a chemical element. The use of this device was incredibly creative. In one case, Chapter 2 Hydrogen, the author recounts his teenage adventure with a friend, that generated hydrogen from water. In another chapter, Iron, the author describes his best friend and their mountain adventures. The friend seemed to have the qualities of Iron. Just as the elements have personalities- that is, they share, steal or give up electrons to form bonds with other elements, people also have personalities- resilient, affiliative, inert- and Dr. Levi draws parallels between these chemical and human personalities. And what stories he has to tell. A romance that might have been. Surviving a death camp by making flints for cigarette lighters. Uncovering a Nazi in a postwar business relationship. 3 amazing chapters which are wholly works of fantasy- not biography at all. The last chapter is a chemical story, the story of one element without a human subtext, the most important element to life on earth. The book is a tour de force, and a tribute to the fascination of scientific inquiry and experiment.

Fascinating short stories about Levi's life before the concentration camps, weaving his way of thinking about life (as a chemist) like a bridge between pre-war and post-war Europe.

What can a little Midwest housewife write about Primo Levi? These autobiographical chapters, each bearing the name of a chemical element as a title, and interspersed with short stories, are written with a deft yet delicate touch, referring to but not dwelling on the horror Levi's experience as an inmate of Auschwitz. Touching in a completely unsentimental way, beautiful, really.

Primo Levi was a clever young man and he wanted you to know that. His use of members of the Periodic Table as a device to illuminate his characters is sometimes an overreach, sometimes silly

and sometimes well honed. That he had intense experiences and met many people worthy of a good story, is not in dispute. As a writer and as a character in his own stories, he made me wish I'd known him as a friend.

"You got a new book? What is it?" my roommate asked. "It's called 'The Periodic Table,' by Primo Levi. He was an Italian Jew who went through Auschwitz." I had just gotten the book in the mail; that was all I knew about it. Later, she interrupted my reading. "You keep laughing. That book is supposed to be funny?" I knew why she was surprised. Levi led a serious, sometimes troubled life, but "The Periodic Table" isn't limited to seriousness. It's fascinating and often funny to read his stories about his early obsession with matter (and the trouble it caused), his fiction inspired by alchemists and elements, and his anecdotes from a professional double life as a chemist and writer.

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