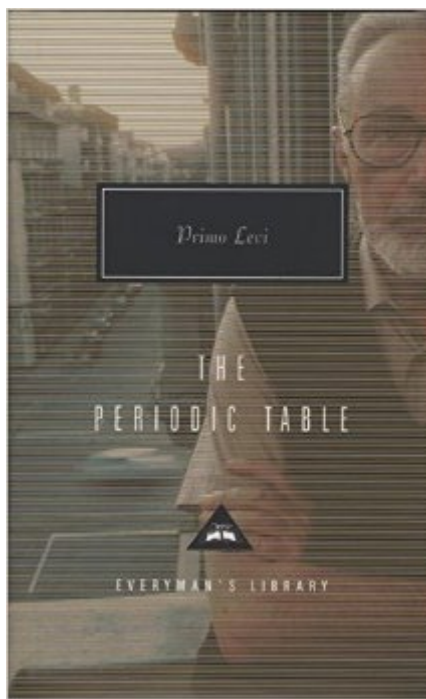


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The Periodic Table



Synopsis

(Book Jacket Status: Jacketed) 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

When I was 14, my high school chemistry teacher gave my class a writing assignment, which really pissed us off. We were in a chemistry class, why did Mr. Ellison expect us to write a short story? It wasn't actually an entire story: the first half was already written for us. It was about the 'adventures' of one atom of carbon. I felt like I was reading a book for small children on molecular chemistry because the writing style was simple, with no extra flourishes and long, scientific phrases. How demeaning to 14 year old me! In any case, I went home and wrote a completely uninspired ending

to the carbon-atom fairy tale. If I remember correctly, the rest of the class did the same thing. Some were better than others, but none of them even began to come close to the original ending. Mr. Ellison took our mediocre stories and, in a bargain where we definitely got the better deal, gave us the end of Primo Levi's *Carbon*, the last chapter of *The Periodic Table*. Nothing had prepared me for it. That simple style that I had so despised the night before was in fact the work of a writer who had stripped off all of those unnecessary phrases that I had been looking for, who had left nothing but the unadorned truth. Struck by this, I went out and bought the book. It consists of 21 chapters, each of which have an element of the periodic table as their themes. But in truth each chapter/story is based on one idea which is explored. Some stories are pure fiction, some are remembrances, and some are meditations. They range from family gatherings to amusing teenage chemistry mistakes to the threads that bind us all together. Levi was not only a gifted chemist and a gifted writer, but someone who had that rare talent of opening his personal philosophies to the reader, and you can't help but feel that you've gotten to know him by the end of the book, which certainly makes the read worth it.

Primo Levi was a gifted writer that happened to practice chemistry. In these short memoirs he tells the story of a chemist, a chemist that is living in Mussolini's Italy, a chemist that is Jewish and survived Auschwitz. Levi has written of Auschwitz previously and only a single chapter in "*The Periodic Table*" directly discusses Auschwitz. To many readers the career of a chemist might seem as exciting as the career of an accountant or a tax attorney, essential to society, but better left to someone else. It hardly seems the subject for a remarkable literary work. Levi paints an intriguing portrait of a chemist, a detective unraveling the secrets of matter, a philosopher searching for meaning. We learn much about the kinds of problems that excite a chemist and how a chemist goes about searching for answers. But we learn more about Levi himself, about life in a Fascist state, and about human relationships in difficult situations. Primo Levi titled each chapter with the name of an element that either plays a role in that particular chapter or exhibits characteristics that are metaphorically descriptive of human relationships portrayed in that chapter. Most chapters revolve about an important biographical event. However, the first chapter, *Argon*, tells a rather quiet (inert) story of the unexciting Levi family history and it might be best to skip chapter one until later. *Hydrogen*, the second chapter, is more exciting, almost explosive. *Zinc*, *Iron*, *Potassium*, *Nickel*, and others follow. Three chapters - *Lead*, *Mercury*, and *Carbon* - are fictional. I was absolutely fascinated by all three. Levi is a great story teller. *Lead* should be read by students of history and *Mercury* likewise. *Carbon* should be mandatory reading for all students of chemistry and biology, probably for

all humanities majors too. I have read "The Periodic Table" several times and it remains one of my favorite books. It melds sadness and humor, offers prose that is almost poetry, and uniquely blends history, chemistry, and memoir. It is widely recognized as an exceptional work of literature.

This book, like all truly great books, can be viewed in many ways. A possible, rewarding one is to view it as the story of an education. Each chapter, named after the periodic table of the elements, tells about the acquisition of an important piece of the mosaic that was Primo Levi. There is the discovery of the "essential language" of science, as opposed to the void rethoric of fascism, the discovery of courage, in the chapter named "Iron", of rigor, in the "potassium". But this is not a didactical book. This is a series of wonderful tales, of exquisite poetry and of life, true life. I didn't read more than five books comparable to this one.

I first read The Periodic Table in a college course on 20th century Italian literature. Since then I have reread it perhaps a half dozen times. Parts of it -- the chapter about Sandro, for instance, and the last chapter -- I have reread many more times than that. It is such a great book -- such a clear-eyed, deeply felt, wide-ranging look at the human cost of Fascism and the Holocaust -- that anything I could possibly say about it would be idiotically trite. All I can really say, in honesty, is that I think it is one of the greatest books ever written. In any language. In any century. On any topic. Having never read it in translation, I have trouble imagining how a translator could capture the poetry and the rich literary resonances of Levi's deceptively simple writing style. It is the kind of writing where you read sentences over again, sometimes aloud, just for their rhythm and sound. However, friends who have read it in English say the translation is excellent. Even if it weren't, it's a book no thinking person should go without reading. It has a beauty and a gripping quality that goes far, far beyond style. Just read it. Unlike most books you hear this about, it REALLY WILL CHANGE YOUR LIFE.

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